

BRANDON SUN

SUN WEEKEND

Brandon Sun - PRINT EDITION

Sun Weekend with Judy Bartel

By: Diane Nelson

Saturday, Feb. 1, 2014 | Comments: 0



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Now retired, Judy Bartel worked as a student advisor and student services director at Assiniboine Community College for 25 years. She was on the board of The Marquis Project and, a few years ago, became that organization's executive director. But even before her time at Marquis, she was interested in the world's different cultures, as well as exploring all the unique joys the planet — and its diverse inhabitants — had to offer. So it was only natural that she'd become involved with the Brandon and area chapter of The Friendship Force, an international organization that welcomes travelling tourists to Westman and other regions, and also facilitates visits by members to a variety of countries where they get to experience local cultures up close and personal. (COLIN CORNEAU / BRANDON SUN)

You're an avid motorcyclist, right?

I bought my first motorcycle when I was 30. I travelled by myself through the U.S. and Canada. And then, since I met my partner, Bert, we've travelled (by motorcycle) again mostly through Western Canada and the U.S. We went down to Mexico last year.

Are you into regular cycling, too, or am I imagining that?

No — I like it. We had an instructor at ACC from Australia through an exchange program, and when she left here, that was when my real travelling started, because she is an avid traveller. And ever since she left here in 1998, we've met, probably every 18 months or so, someplace in the world. So one of her emails said, 'Some other friends from Australia and I are going to Spain — we're going to bicycle the Camino to Santiago de Compostela.' So I went on that, and that was what got me kind of interested in bicycling.

That impresses me, because I don't do ANYTHING physical. I should, but I don't. And you walk a lot, too, don't you?

Yes — walk, hike, bike, ski. Because Brandon is so amenable to that. In fact, I was just having this conversation last weekend with Bert (who lives in Winnipeg) about whether I should move to Winnipeg. And — no! There's just so many reasons to stay here.

I couldn't agree more! But you've done a lot of travelling to other countries, too, right?

I've gone to India and Nepal, Thailand, China and Indonesia. I've been to Africa a couple of times, to Tanzania — once with the college back in the '80s — and once sort of with The Marquis Project. But really, I've done more on my own. The interest in getting out there and the interest in other people and other cultures has always been there.

So The Friendship Force seems like almost a natural thing for you to be involved in because it facilitates that kind of exposure to travel and other

cultures, yes?

Yes. And actually, I've been involved with another organization called Servas for about 30 years, probably. And it's individual travel-and-hosting thing. And I haven't really travelled with Servas but I've hosted for many years. I've also been on a list for Warm Showers, which is a hosting list for bicycle travellers from all over the world. So then when I heard that Friendship Force was starting, or that they were thinking of getting a chapter in Brandon, then that was a natural.

When did the Brandon Chapter form?

I think October 2009 we had the first meeting. It was small to start with, but now there's about 40 members. And it's Brandon and area, so there's people down to Boissevain and around the Souris area.

So people come from all over the world. And it's kind of funny — when I was telling somebody about Friendship Force — what little I knew about it at that point — they said it sounded like sort of organized couch surfing!

Well, it is, in a way. There's a difference, though. Couch surfing is just about finding a place to stay. Cheap travel — that's the main thrust. I mean, obviously it's not only that, because a lot of people are doing that because they like to host. So you might stay with a couch-surfing host and get taken to tourist sites or whatever. But there's no obligation to even provide meals or anything like that.

Whereas with Servas, the focus really is on peace and understanding and getting to know people from other places. And Friendship Force is similar to that. It's not so much the peace focus but definitely understanding and getting to know people from other places. It — Friendship Force — was started by Jimmy Carter back in March of 1977. He was going over to Europe, I believe, and a former missionary, Wayne Smith, challenged Carter not just to hang out in diplomatic settings, but to set up an organization to encourage people of all countries to reach out in friendship when they travelled. Carter agreed, and the Friendship Force was launched publicly at a White House dinner. The aim is that you would get to know and understand people and cultures and therefore, it would be building peace and understanding.

So the focus is to host people in your homes, really get to know them, and we plan a week's worth of activities — generally a pretty full week of activities — that are supposed to highlight the culture of your area. So we have done things like — well, one year we really lucked out and found a powwow! But that's been tough, because we haven't been able to necessarily schedule them (the visits) for when a powwow was going to be on, because that's the best First Nations experience.

One year we had a fellow and his brother come out and fiddle for us and talk a bit about Métis culture. We go to places like the Peace Garden, Spruce Woods, Riding Mountain, we look at museums to some degree. The Green Acres Hutterite Colony is always a really popular activity. They do a fantastic tour and discussion. Another really popular thing is, we go out to a farm — a couple of our members have a farm — the property borders on the Souris River and there's a beautiful picnic spot. So we go down there and get in a wagon pulled behind a tractor and go through the hills and check out the cattle and then go and have a waffle picnic on the banks of the river. The highlight, though, usually is just hanging around with the people — the hosts and the rest of the group.

You mentioned the obligations — you're providing shelter and I presume meals. Is it essentially like someone you know is coming as your guest for X-number of days?

Yes. Usually they're coming for a week — they'll be there for probably six nights or so. We have night hosts who provide basically bed and breakfast, but they usually accompany them on all of these activities and stuff. And then there's a fair number of organized meals — like lunches and dinners where you're out at restaurants or picnics or things like that. We usually try to have one or two nights when — especially because we're trying to bring in some of the people who aren't hosting — there are people in the organization who want to travel and meet people but they don't have the accommodation to host people. So we'll have evenings where we kind of mix and match people. I was a day host and a supper host for one night last time, and so they'd lined up two other couples and their guests to come to my house. So there's time to meet different people.

Do they come usually in large groups of folks? Or is it a couple at a time, or a person at a time?

It's always a group. And the way it works is they pay us about \$130, once we figure out what the activities are going to be, and that's just to pay for the activities that we put on. So we'll use that to pay museum entrance fees, sometimes we're renting a facility for a dinner — we have a welcome dinner and a farewell dinner — and so usually there's some cost involved in that. Basically we put our program together and try to figure out what it costs and that's what we charge them. So it doesn't include the lunches that are hosted in people's places. And there are usually a few dinners out that they'll pay for on their own.

So if you sign up as a host, does that mean that you expect people to reciprocate? Or is that just the hope?

Well, it's not a sort of a one-to-one reciprocity — it's not like you'll come to us and we'll go to you. Every year, we talk amongst ourselves and try to come to some sort of consensus as to where we might like to go. Which, as you can imagine, is a challenge! And then we send that to the head office in Atlanta. And they look at what's available and they do all of the matches for the year.

Sometimes there's reciprocity. Apparently, if a group has come to us and we want to go to that country, they'll try to match it up if possible. And two years ago, we went to Hamburg, Germany and they were coming to Canada the year after, and they were having some trouble getting organized with a group somewhere in Alberta. So they decided that they really wanted to come here, because we'd had a pretty good time there. So we actually put on an extra one that year, which was a bit challenging, because we didn't have that many members.

And this year, you have a group coming from where?

Somerset U.K. We've had groups from Belgium, Chile, Brazil, Australia, and Germany. And it's generally about one group a year. Usually, you take one trip abroad if you can host one group here. And if you don't host at all, you can't go anywhere.

Well, fair enough! And where has the Brandon group been?

Costa Rica, Germany, New Zealand — they went to South Carolina last year. And they're going to Brazil and Argentina, I think, this year. And not everybody goes every time.

I would presume occasionally language would be a barrier.

Yeah — it can be interesting! The people from Brazil would have been the most challenging so far, probably. But most of them spoke some English.

And is it at all weird to have strangers coming into your home?

Well, I've done that for 30 years! And the kind of people who will host through this organization won't have a problem with that. I think the one challenging thing is that how successful it is depends a lot on the match with the host that you've got.

That makes sense. And are there ever problems?

Occasionally there are issues, where it could be different standards for things, for example.

But that all gets sorted out, and that's why there's a management team, I presume.

Yeah. We always have an exchange director for each exchange, whether it's going out or coming in. And they're responsible for dealing with issues that might happen.

I would think a lot of people would find this really interesting. And I, honestly, had not heard about it at all until I had dinner at my friend's, Lynda Nay-Kamann's, place, just after Christmas. And she's a member of the organization. But I think she said you're looking to expand the Friendship Force here in Brandon for people who might be willing to host and might be interested in travelling?

We're always looking for new members. We've got a website — friendshipforcebrandonmanitoba.org — and they could come to a meeting — the meetings are the fourth Wednesday of the month at Margo's Grill on Richmond. Or they can call me at 204-720-7892.

You've explained it all so well. But what do people mostly get out of this?

For some people, they're travelling to just get a warm place to do what they do here. A lot of people want to go and eat the same food and a lot of stuff that they do here. Some people go to see the big sights of the world. And some people want to learn about the people and the cultures they visit. And what this does is really get you into the culture, because you become part of the family. I think that's the real benefit of it, because you really spend time talking with the people. And you get to experience things that you wouldn't otherwise.

Republished from the Brandon Sun print edition February 1, 2014

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