

Friendship Force bears goodwill to all

By Margaret Reist

They call themselves the goodwill ambassadors. They number some 54,000 nationwide, and an additional 52,000 people who act as hosts to foreign ambassadors. Their goal: friendship, an exchange of cultures and improved relations between countries on a personal level.

They are not experts in foreign affairs. In fact, most are not involved in government at all. They are doctors, lawyers, teachers, blue collar workers and children. They range from 9 to 80-years-old.

They are members of an international organization called the Friendship Force, created in 1977 by former President Carter.

"I think what he (Carter) wanted to accomplish was having people from other countries know us on a different level," said Jane Steele, vice president of the Lincoln Friendship Force and the adviser on activities, communications and membership.

Gauging from personal experience, Steele said she thinks that has been accomplished. Comments from people she met on an exchange to Germany support her statement.

"The boys said they were very thankful for meeting us and that it gave them a whole new view of America," Steele said. "I just can't say how great I feel the program is."

The Friendship Force has members in 44 states and 38 countries. Last year six new countries joined the program — China, Taiwan, New Zealand, Egypt, Poland and Ecuador. As of 1984, Sweden, Nigeria, Hungary, Thailand and India have become members of the Friendship Force, Steele said.

After a trip is organized, interviews are held for anyone interested in participating in the exchanges or missions. Trips to countries that do not send groups to the United States — like Russia and Poland — are called missions, Steele said.

Anyone is eligible to go, she said, as long as he or she is willing to give a good impression of the United States and of himself.

The national organization now is trying to set up a program with interested universities allowing college students to get credit for going on exchanges, she said, but it is still in the planning stages.

Interviewers for the exchange are members of the club, Steele said, usually those who have gone on several exchanges before and know what to look for. They take into consideration the individual and aspects of the country and the trip that would not suit the person. For instance, an older person would not do well on a trip where there is a lot of hiking, Steele said.

After people are chosen, the information is sent to Atlanta, Ga., the headquarters of the club. They match the future ambassadors with families that have the same basic interests.

People are not told where they will be going, Steele said, to ensure that they are truly interested in meeting people, and not just in going to a certain place.

Colleen Fussell, who works with handicapped children in a federal program through the University of Nebraska Medical Center, went on a trip to England in 1980 with her two children, then nine and 13. For her, not having to choose the country they would visit was an advantage.

"England was one place I never had any desire to go but now I'd like to go back and spend a year," she said.

K. Roy Bailey, a retired United Methodist Church minister, and his wife Mildred also went on the exchange to England. They already had spent time in England and would not have chosen the same country twice, he said. But he said he is a firm believer in the program and understands why they do it that way.

"It's a fabulous program," Bailey said. "It's a friendship force rather than a military force. That's the best part of it."

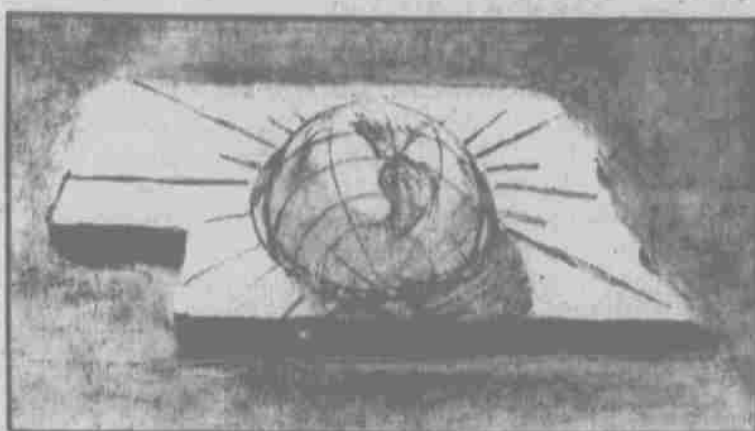
The Lincoln Friendship Force was organized in 1980, although Lincolinites had been able to go on friendship exchanges before that, through a club in Omaha.

Four exchanges have been originated by the Lincoln Club, Steele said, and two more are being organized for May and October.

Interviews for the trips are taking place the first part of February, Steele said. One exchange usually consists of 40 to 80 people, she said. Both trips will cost approximately \$1,795, she said.

Not all members of the club travel, Steele said. Instead, they act as hosts to groups from other countries. Steele said she encourages people to be hosts, especially before they go on an exchange themselves.

The club, now numbering 180 members, is expanding to outstate Nebraska as well, Steele said, with satellite offices throughout the state. The first



Tom Lauder/Daily Nebraskan

satellite office is opening this week in Grand Island, Steele said.

The club has in-town activities in addition to the exchanges, mostly friendly get-togethers or reunions of past trips, Steele said. The club also includes a Speaker's Bureau that organizes slide shows and speakers for interested groups.

The exchanges or missions last for two to three weeks, Steele said, and the first week is always with a family. The second week ambassadors go on a

guided tour, or sometimes stay with another family if they wish, or go off on their own — what they do depends on the trip to some extent, Steele said. Often a third week is optional for individual travel. Fussell said she found staying with families the biggest advantage to the exchange.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's one of the best ways to go," Fussell said. "Personally, I wouldn't like to go with package tours. The people were just so friendly. When you travel on tours you don't get to meet people."

Steele said she is adventurous and loves to travel. She has been to 17 different countries (four of them with the Friendship Force). She said seeing and learning about the different cultures is one of the best parts of the experience.

From her trip to Korea with the Friendship Force, Steele recalled watching the traffic.

"It's interesting to see even the traffic," she said. "In Korea they're so polite. They don't drive with their headlights on, so they won't hurt other drivers' eyes. They just drive with their parking lights on."

"You just can't realize what everything's like until you're there," Steele said.

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