

Servas Canada

Newsletter 12 - February 2006

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1. Canada – US Servas Summer Gathering - Vancouver 2005

Under glorious summer skies - and no rain!! - the first-ever Canada-US Servas gathering took place the first weekend of August. Participants enjoyed the coastal campus of the University of British Columbia as much as they enjoyed the get-together. The theme was "Servas - Making the Connection", with other major focus on youth in Servas and the role of peace in Servas.

Despite a full agenda with all the inherent stimulating discussion, there was plenty of time for fun social interactions and recreational activities. One extremely interesting activity was an eye-opening visit to Vancouver's in Downtown East Side, a very run-down area of the city. The group met at the UBC Learning Exchange (www.learningexchange.ubc.ca) office in the heart of the area with UBC representatives, graduates-now-employees and volunteer undergrads, who are running a social centre there. We learned about all the housing projects for the homeless, the cooking, budget-planning, computer and other courses offered, zesty soup kitchens, etc. and did a self-guided tour in and around the neighbourhood.

The population is very mixed and the problems are overwhelming but with the past mayor's support and collaboration with local constructive groups of caring citizens, there is a visible improvement in living conditions and morale. And a sense of pride can be discerned among today's residents as they see people coming into the area with hands-on help.

Members of both USA and Canadian Servas Boards were at the conference and were able to meet face to face to discuss their respective modus operandi and explore ways of working more closely together in the future. Servas members from both sides of the border are encouraged to travel across it, to visit counterparts and discover our closest neighbours. From the experience in Vancouver, neither species bites!

A very stimulating workshop was moderated by Pablo Chufeni, the Servas International Youth representative and an active community worker in his home country, Argentina. He

demonstrated very forcefully the importance of nonverbal communication in human relationships, illustrating a useful tool that he and others are using in language training. Pablo is gradually building up a network of one-on-one language exchange programs with say, a young Chilean coming to Québec to learn French or a young person from Washington D.C, going to Argentina to learn Spanish. If any of you are intrigued and wonder if your young kids could benefit from such exchanges, please send a note to canada@servas.org and we'll hook you up with Pablo to find out more.

Pablo has also spearheaded an exciting international youth gathering called Patagonia '06, being held in southern Argentina in January 2006. For more information, please go to the web site (designed by Iain Snee, a Vancouver volunteer!) at <http://www3.telus.net/SC/SERVAS/index.htm>.

The youth activities organized by Julie Dotsch, youth coordinator of the Board of Servas Canada, and Pablo included creating a banner to gather words in English, French and Spanish that lead to peace or define peace, e.g. harmony, and words that prevent peace, e.g. hatred. Then they either "protected" the positive word with an outline of their hand (signifying their commitment to protect, e.g. harmony) or they painted their handprint to cover up the (showing their commitment to eliminating, e.g. "hatred"). They presented the banner to the attendees who added their own ideas to their poster in a similar fashion. It was a unifying colourful statement of the fundamental aim of all members of Servas - to build peace worldwide. They also came up with a long list of recommendations such as encouraging youth visits in our own countries; expanding and organizing the independent youth program; and promoting Servas as a safe and peace-building way to travel. To increase our numbers, we must emphasize that Servas is an intergenerational program and encourage hosts to change their listing to make them more appealing to youth.

If you have any ideas on the Youth Program, do get in touch with Julie at canada@servas.org. All suggestions and commitments are welcome.

Throughout the weekend, attendees had the pleasure of contemplating the Middle East Peace quilts made by Vancouver host Elizabeth Shefrin, who bases her designs on ideas about peace that were furnished by people witnessing and suffering from the on-going conflict in the Middle East. Elizabeth takes these quilts all across North America in response to requests. All she asks is the transportation cost, which can be minimized if local groups join together to have her visit their region. Contact her at simaeliz@smartt.com for more information

2. Servas Hosting Experiences

From hosts Terry and Gerd, Vancouver Island area hosts

We recommend being sure to remember to ask travellers ahead of time of their dietary problems/ restrictions. I was reminded of this when our first Servas traveler of 2005 sat down at my welcoming dinner and announced 'I am a vegetarian'. The last ones of 2004 announced at the first dinner, 'We are on no-carbohydrate diet'. Over the years I have had this experience many times. (...) I do my best to be hospitable and flexible - but I need to know ahead of time! I, like most Servas Canada hosts, expect to cook breakfast and supper for our guests. Unfortunately, our last guest got a can of cold tuna instead of goulash!

From traveler Richard, taken from SI Oct 2005 Monthly Newsletter

We never, ever wear 'outside' shoes in our home, and delight in educating the occasional traveler who walks in with street shoes. How silly it would be of us to expect them to know, or get upset if they don't. There are many, many prohibited (and permitted) behaviours that are strange to us, but taken as givens where they are practiced. Observe, ask, and learn - it is all part of learning how to tolerate the diversity that enriches the world (or drives us apart - your choice).

From traveler Dan Schoeffler, taken from SI Oct. 2005 Monthly Newsletter

Here are some things I've found in my travels:

For some people it's not OK (or it is OK) to:

- Show them the soles of your feet
- Wear your shoes in their house
- Hand them things with your left hand (because that's the hand they wipe themselves with)
- Take their photograph
- Eat with your fingers
- Burp at the table
- Talk about religion and politics.

Anyone have any stories about what you've learned from people from different cultures?

Lastly, from a long-time Servas Canada Board member, Michael Johnson,

As wonderful as it is to travel, the faces, not places, are what I remember most. This summer, my wife and I, and her parents, headed for La Belle Province.

On the second day we crossed the Saguenay River by ferry, and reached Benny and Gita's home. They have been my friends for many years, long before Benny joined the Servas Canada Board. At the breakfast table next day, we watched the whales surfacing, at least one every minute: Beluga, Fin and Minke. Being an Elderhostel instructor and author of a book on this town, Benny knows everything about Tadoussac, the whales and other marine life, and is delighted to share his knowledge.

Reluctantly leaving, we spent a night at a B&B, resting up for another engaging Servas visit with a family outside Quebec City. Their 3-year-old was captivated by my mother-in-law who is fluent in French. Living in the suburbs, they had never had Servas visitors before, although their home was only 10 minutes from the walled city.

Carole, our next warm host, outside Montreal, has been a friend for years, mostly by phone and email, so it was great to have some time for hugging and "catching up." A talented artist, Carole was delighted to look through my father-in-law's paintings and chose two as gifts.

Having a car, we always looked for hosts far from the centre. Our final hosts, 40 km. north of Kingston, had been visitor-less for three years, despite having a large property on a lake. The area was so beautiful that we spent an entire day doing a "one-hour trip," which our hosts suggested. We never got to Kingston!

Servas provided us all with some very fond memories and truly lived up to our motto, opening their doors and our minds, while warming our hearts.

Have you taken advantage of the opportunity to travel within Canada by simply referring to your host listing? Please send in your comments and stories about travel within Canada to canada@servas.org for inclusion in future newsletters

3. Yearly Donation

Every year, Servas Canada makes a donation equal to 3% of its annual income to an organization that the Peace Secretary has recommended to the Board as a peace-dedicated undertaking. Peace can take the form of healing victims of natural disasters, for example, so one year a donation was sent to Médecins sans frontières, which is proving to the world what human beings can do to relieve suffering for others anywhere in the world. Another year it was to the Toronto-based Inter Pares, which works with counterpart organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Canada to promote and support citizen action for a better world. We especially favour Canadian organizations.

This year, the Board has approved a donation to Change for Children, a small NGO in Edmonton which supports grassroots community-based development projects throughout Latin America. They are currently assisting the hurricane victims in Guatemala. If you want more information, the contact is <http://www.changeforchildren.org/>.

Do you have suggestions for the donation in 2006? Send our Peace Secretary, Sylvia Krogh, your suggestion before the end of next year to Canada@servas.org.

4. Travelling in North America

In Canada: Hosts require no Letter of Introduction and pay no fee (refer to your host listing for authentication); non-hosts need a Letter of Introduction with a Maple Leaf sticker and pay a \$25 fee.

In USA: Letter of Introduction needed and a \$50 fee (\$25 for hosts) just like traveling in any other country.

5. Do you fancy a winter scape?

Canadian couple welcomes Servas members to Costa Rica Jan. to April 2006. Contact jojo@golden.net Carl and Joanna.

6. Ever read the Servas monthly news?

You can find it on www.siexco.org, middle right-hand column. The aim of this newsletter

idea is to have a more alive communication to keep people up to date every month with SI news. It informs you about what is happening here and now, what is coming up soon and provides a chance for more members to take part with their sharing of their experiences. A hard copy, sent out once a year, is a summary of the year's main SI activities.

At this same site you will find many other Servas-related items, including:

- news from other countries or continents
- ideas on how you can volunteer to help on a Servas committee (there is an immediate need for help related to the web site and technical support for Servas - see the bottom left, under Host List Coordinator Materials, on this web site for details)
- travel tools and ideas
- news about the Servas International organization, including the next conference just outside Rome, Italy, in April 2006
- links to free software to allow you to use your computer to make long distance calls, download a free word processor, etc.

7. Servas Canada contact information

For any information about Servas Canada, go to our web site (<http://canada.servas.org/>). It will refer you to a wide range of interesting topics and informative web sites of Servas organizations and activities throughout the world. And the contact email iscanada@servas.org,

(This newsletter was compiled by Leslie Regnier and edited by Penny Pattison.)