

"Human Security and Growth Through Cultural Exchange"

A workshop presented by the

Friendship Ambassadors Foundation

DATE: September 10 (Wednesday)

TIME: 1:15 pm – 2:45 pm, **LOCATION:** Conference Room B

SPEAKERS: Szilvia Ágoston - Director of International Projects, FAF Hungary
Maria Mandova – International Program Coordinator, FAF Bulgaria
Louise D'Amore – Executive Director, the International Instituted for Peace Through Tourism

Cultural Exchange as a tool for Human Security and Growth – Practices

Presented by Maria Mandova, Program Assistant, Friendship Ambassadors

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for coming and I hope that this workshop will trigger questions and ideas that would further our understanding of what actually human security means and possible ways of promoting it.

There was an article that I read right before I came to the conference which changed my entire approach to this presentation. It was an outstanding research in the new edition of the National Geographic which argued that there are more slaves, NOT slave-like people, in 2003 than at the peak of the slavery centuries we now study as a horrifying lesson of history and build our modern socio-political theories upon. How is that happening, why is it happening, why most people don't know about it and who is responsible for the 27 million slaves in this minute are all questions our society cannot shy away from anymore. In the light of such tragedies, this gathering becomes not simply very important but imperative and I am proud to be here today and share my thoughts about the potential of cultural exchange as a means of human empowerment and security and a device for cultivating humanitarian activism.

Activism is a state of mind which one acquires after seeing that he/she can make a change; a state of mind which allows us to take the responsibility of who were are and help us define our mission in life as a positive and rewarding experience both for ourselves and those around us. Aiding the humanitarian cause is a special commitment which is the basis of civil society and development and we at FAF see cultural exchange as a vital tool for promoting humanitarian interest and devotion on multiple levels.

More and more the definition of development and the "right way" to elevate poverty, help those in immediate need and educate those who will be in need in 50 years becomes controversial and misleading. What is interesting though is that it all seems to be gravitating around market expansion and the so called trickle-down effect of foreign aid rather than the people who will suffer or enjoy (depending on the point of view) the effects of those "innovations" and investment.

We at Friendship Ambassadors Foundation believe that one of the “right ways” is the one that cultures choose after interacting with each other in a positive way. We see cultural exchange as a vital tool for development and peace-building because it promotes human dignity, communal activeness, informal education and basis for cooperation within the community and among individuals in the different exchanged groups. We believe that cultural exchange help people take pride in who they are BY sharing it with others while allowing themselves to appreciate what the other one has to offer. It is vital because it creates a sense of human and cultural security within a given group as well as promotes respectful attitudes among the interacting groups. Learning is usually the key to success or so they say when we start school but experiencing is the key to understanding and cooperating. FAF enables life-changing experiences through its cultural exchange programmes, which experiences do not fade out after the momentum. I hope to be able to demonstrate this through several examples.

As my colleague Szilvia outlined a while ago, there are three levels of cultural exchange that we facilitate.

The **first one** is when a pre-formed arts group – a choir, orchestra, dance company etc. – go to visit and perform with and for peer-groups in one or more countries.

A good example is the International Festival of Light (FOL) in Bulgaria that FAF created three years ago together with a local non-governmental organization (NGO).

The FOL is an annual traveling arts festival held in June in four major cities in Bulgaria – Plovdiv (a 7, 000 year old city), Sofia (the capital), Veliko Tarnovo (the ancient capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom) and Varna (one of the largest ports on the Black Sea connecting the “East” and the “West” since Byzantine times). The Festival of Light is a venue for non-professional artists to create joint performances, learn about each other on personal and professional level and very importantly – learn to communicate through skills and human understanding rather than just words (language barriers are challenging but also defeasible). The cities themselves have been political, cultural and commercial crossroads for many centuries and therefore have the capacity of telling a compelling story about the layers of Bulgarian culture and people’s lives. Very often conductors or group leaders exchange music with their host organizations, transliterate the language and later on teach their students a flavorful bite of the hosting culture. This is a simple process but a very powerful one because it continues beyond the time frame of the two-week exchange, it is passed on the wide audience and much deeper – into the communities of both exchanged groups through the music /dance /art techniques they then bring to their school and families. It is important to mention that FAF’s programmes are free to the public and subsidized by the Western travelers themselves with help from grants that we write in partnership with the host NGOs. Since the local groups usually cannot afford traveling together with, let’s say the American choir throughout the country, we sponsor the local arts groups in order to make the exchange fulfilling and meaningful through changing the setting of the Festival as well. Such experiences do promote human security and growth for the participants in ways unique to first-hand, positive encounters. They make the host group and culture proud of who they are through their counterparts’ appreciation; this immediately fosters human security and dignity on a personal and communal level through promoting the value of the host talent and heritage. On the other hand, exchanges of the kind are a learning experience for the guest groups who get to look outside the box of pre-conceived ideas and actually experience what is it like to be a Bulgarian, Ghanaian, Hungarian or a Chinese as well as a “Western-er” in a “non-Western” country. Learning also entails seeing the hardships that otherwise are well hidden or distorted by media reports or LACK of such which is a challenge young people want to rise up to and help relieve the best way they can. The ability and desire to tell about the host country in

a positive way or look for ways to go back and do a service project are some of those. On the part of the hosting community the activism is again on the communicational level - committing to change superficial beliefs about the guest culture/country as well as strengthening the will of the host group to open up and reach out to more positive encounters in the future.

Another kind of exchange is private tours, tailored to the specific interest of a given group based on both landscape and social-interest, for example: seasonal, or focusing on smaller villages and service projects or urban areas with larger audiences etc. The private tour groups are often times returning groups who have a specific mission and a vision in mind about what they want to accomplish, whom they want to meet or continue their partnership with. A good example of a service project, one of our returning groups did this summer who have been traveling with FAF since the 80s was a concert and a party in a Children Day Care Center for Cerebral Palsy in Bulgaria (one of the very few, actually). The group donated money, time and energy to those children in need of attention and supplies through that service project.

An additional component of our cultural exchange programs are the companion tours which usually consist of family members and sponsors of the traveling arts ensemble who would have probably never gone to the given country if it were not for the group they are sponsoring. Those trans-generational exchanges expand the scope of the program and are a powerful stereotype breaking and attitudes changing tool because there is a multi-level, reciprocal representation of both societies (audience - to-companions; performing group -to- performing group). The socio-economic impact is greater because the people who usually travel on the companion tour are well-to-do persons. Companion groups enable the arts group to travel when the group doesn't have the funds themselves. Companions are also a valuable business and diplomatic asset for future meetings beyond the exchange.

Level Two of our programs is reciprocal exchange; it is when the previously hosted group becomes a guest group to the group they have hosted before. The company that comes from a different country covers its travel expenses; and the hosting company provides accommodation, meals and programming.

On the first level the flow of information is one-way. On the second level the experience becomes first-hand both ways. Such kind of reciprocity promotes much deeper cultural understanding and environment for reconnection and keeping up the relationship over time. Those usually happen in the form of sister school relationship or personal friendships that are long lasting. The second level not only provides richer and reciprocal experience of the "unknown" but also the different setting of the meeting promotes more genuine cooperation and desire to show what they have learnt together previously, which is, each other's richness, potential and ability to work together.

The practical level of facilitating such programs has become more difficult because of funding and logistical obstacles such as the host group not being able to afford coming to the exchange destination, for example the US, or the difficulty of getting visas nowadays. However, we are looking at ways for creating partnerships in that regard, find donors and promote such events to our best capacity.

The **Third Level** FAF organizes are Multi-lateral exchanges.

They are a very effective type of exchanges because they involve more than two parties in the process of learning and cooperating.

In the summer of 2000, FAF launched a program called the Balkan Youth Reconciliation Seminars Series. It became one of the first events of UNESCO's Year for a Culture of Peace. The program focus was using the arts as a means of reconciliation of the 150 young persons from all over the Balkan who gathered to heal after the bombing of Kosovo. The first session was in Bulgaria, the second – in Hungary and the closing was in Romania. Unlike our other cultural exchanges, this time none of the people were artists which really showed the success of the program and the effectiveness of our art therapy and empowerment techniques.

I met FAF there for the first time as one of the participants. During those three gatherings, we tried to reconcile within ourselves, with each other as well as carry the message of peace to our audience and own communities. The two remarks that I just made that neither of us was a performer is important to understanding the power of the arts. The last session we gathered as a team directed by FAF, Bond Street Theater and Vanevar Caravan to create a theater piece. We took the theme of brotherhood and reconciliation from Shakespeare's *Tempest* and did a theater performance using universal means of communication – singing traditional Balkan songs, dancing and acrobatics (stilt walking, trust exercises). The performance turned out to be wonderful and the audience on the main square of Timisoara was brought to tears but the outcome didn't really matter to us. What did was the process of working together, trusting each other and creating something which was engaging and rewarding. We learned how to trust each other as individuals rather than have second thoughts about our origin, political orientation and ethnicity. At the end of the last session, we all signed a petition saying that we will never go to war with each other in the future.

Promotion of humanitarian activism was a definitely one of the most positive outcomes of the program. BYRSS inspired many young people to start their own NGOs or started to work some existing ones in their country e.g. refugee camps, empowerment and education programs for socially disadvantaged and minority groups in Bosnia, Macedonia, Albania etc, as well as working at FAF's healing programs in other places.

I myself was greatly affected by the Seminars and started working for a NGO supporting minority employment and later on became an intern at FAF and focused on conflict resolution even in my university studies.

The second multi-lateral exchange program that we just completed was called the Road Ahead. It was a professional conference on cultural tourism and sustainable development held in Pamporovo, southern Bulgaria. The program aimed at bringing together the tourism industry together with the cultural institutions and groups and facilitate a constructive dialogue about their partnership potential. The exchanged was on a national level as well as on international through the experts from Hungary, Spain, and the USA FAF brought. The goal was to start a new partnership and come up with concrete ideas about cultural tourism products that will be attractive, environmental friendly, revitalizing for the local cultural heritage and appropriately tailored for the diverse off-the-beaten track travelers.

Such exchange of ideas on a business level help define "people - friendly" and regionally suitable development, promote local initiative, and as Szilvia pointed out, lead to connecting of underdeveloped regions, increase the length of the tourism season and employment opportunities.

In conclusion, we at FAF see that human security and growth begins with the journey of getting to know ourselves in the global context of "the other" and could only be sustained through the appreciation of the wholeness and interconnectedness of "we the peoples".