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## HUFFPOST TRAVEL

### Tolerance Is But a Start

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- [Lee Rasch](#) - President, Western Technical College

Western Technical College has been an active participant in the Sister Cities program since La Crosse, Wis. became a Sister City with Dubna, Russia in 1990. Over the years, La Crosse has expanded its involvement and now has seven Sister Cities in Europe, Asia and Africa. Founded by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956, Sister Cities International is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit, which serves as the national membership organization for individual sister cities, counties, and states across the U.S. This network unites tens of thousands of citizen diplomats and volunteers in 545 communities with over 2,100 partnerships in 145 countries on six continents. The most recent delegation visit to Kumbo, Cameroon (the seventh of La Crosse's Sister Cities) was particularly meaningful and timely. As chair of the La Crosse Friends of Cameroon, I had the good fortune to participate in this delegation visit. Western sees real value in the relationship with the Sister Cities program as a means of expanding faculty and community awareness of other cultures. Six students from Cameroon have attended Western in recent years.

Upon arrival in Cameroon, we had a pretty hectic schedule during the ten-day visit. We met with the Cardinal in Douala and attended the New Year's Thanksgiving Mass in Kumbo. We visited two hospitals and the Cardiac Center. We visited six schools, public, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Muslim and visited the Coop Credit Union, the Kumbo Bank, an insurance cooperative, the water treatment facility and two museums (very modest, but interesting in capturing local culture). Of course, we visited the open market. We recognized the sites, the smells, the congestion...and a clear sense that everyone knew the delegation was "in the market". And there were a number of social and cultural gatherings with a lot of singing and dancing.

Of all of the activities, four really stood out. The first was the visit to the Village of Mbuluf. It was a very big event for the villagers and they turned out in droves. There were a lot of children present (singing, dancing, drumming...and watching the strange guests). We ate in an open setting, initially surrounded by several hundred onlookers. This was followed by an exchange of gifts. The most interesting was a presentation on behalf of the traditional leader, the local *Fon*. We were all presented with black hats. A member of our delegation, Tom Strom, was also presented a red feather for his hat, indicating he was being recognized as *Nformi* "the General". Another delegate, Sara Sullivan, was presented with a special cloth which recognized her as the "Mother Queen". I was presented with an old hat, obviously worn. Everyone there recognized this particular hat as the symbol of a tribal leader called "the *Shufai*". This is actually quite a symbolic honor in the traditional community. And there were a number of ritual expectations associated with being designated a *Shufai* (for example, people were expected to bow in my presence, I could no longer shake hands when greeting someone).

Our next visit was to a dairy farm in nearby Tadu. I say nearby, but given the roads, it is a rugged 30-minute drive. We visited a dairy farm cooperative operation that was owned by a husband and wife who studied agriculture in the early 1990s in Wisconsin. The African cattle are hearty but they do not produce much milk. These owners began breeding Wisconsin Holsteins with local cattle to create a healthy herd that produces more milk. We sampled their yogurt...it was delicious. The cooperative involves nearly 600 partner farmers. Most of these farmers are from the Fulani tribe, Muslims who migrated to this land from northern and eastern Africa many years ago. Following the tour, we had lunch on a grassy hilltop surrounded by open valleys and views of nearby villages and Kumbo off in the distance. We sat at tables, Fulanis, Kumbo leaders, the Tertiary Sisters of Saint Francis and the La Crosse delegation, in a beautiful, somewhat surreal open setting. It was also a wonderful reminder that, in this part of the world, Christians and Muslims coexist peacefully and inter-dependently.

We left Tadu to return to Kumbo for the annual horse race event. This is the main annual event in Kumbo attracting more than 5,000 people. The Mayor moved the event from the traditional early December timeframe to early January in order to accommodate the La Crosse delegation. This was no small action. I suppose, in our community, it would be like moving the schedule for Oktoberfest in order to accommodate a group of outside visitors.

The race is quite an event in itself. The riders are young boys aged 9 to 15. They ride atop horses without saddle or any other gear. The event also had a mix of "half time" activities, singers, dancers, dancing/jumping horses called Fantasia, tumbling gymnasts, stunt bicycle riders, and a soccer match. In the mix, the La Crosse delegation was recognized. On behalf of the local Muslim community, I was also selected to receive robes and the designation of *wadjiri*. In the Fulani community, this position is considered second in command. This is quite an honor at any time. Given the world-wide conflicts we face, I felt this was an even greater honor. The symbolism was clear.

We left Kumbo on day nine to travel to Bamenda to meet with the leader of the political opposition SDF party in Cameroon, John Fru Ndi. We had a fascinating two and one-half hour lunch conversation. In 1990, John Fru Ndi lost a close contested election for President of Cameroon. There were charges that his opponent committed vote fraud and in the mix, John Fru Ndi was placed under house arrest. His supporters were pressing him to declare civil war, a pattern that seems all too familiar in other African nations. Instead, he chose democracy. Perhaps in recognition of his call for peace, President Bill Clinton invited him to attend his inauguration in 1992. A vocal leader, John Fru Ndi shared stories about how he continued to advocate for conflict resolution in the years ahead. He talked about his life purpose to "plant mahogany seedlings" (literally and figuratively) with the thought of betterment for future generations in Cameroon. This lunch meeting was a fitting capstone for our visit.

I have much to think about as a result of the trip. The world is facing huge challenges...many stemming from conflicts and misunderstandings between religions and cultures. The Sister Cities program is not "government to government" or even "city to city"...it is really "people to people". This leads to a better understanding among people that is a potential antidote to conflict. Tolerance among different peoples is in itself a good thing. The Sister Cities program reminds us that tolerance is but a start.