

Encouraging and Empowering Adult Third Culture Kids

September 2008 \$5.00

Among Worlds

www.interactionintl.org/amongworlds.asp

The Puzzling Lives of TCKs

**The Gift (and Vow)
of Stability**

Puzzled Pieces

The Voyage

**Evolution of
TCK Awareness**

**Assembling
One Big Puzzle**



Puzzled Lives

THE LONG WAY

In November of 2007, I was fortunate to experience what many “brats” (Military Kids) never have a chance to do: return to their overseas high schools. In my case, the schools were Seoul American High School and Daegu American School in Seoul and in Daegu (formerly Taegu), Korea. I had just finished a two-year, 100-stop tour of my documentary, *BRATS: Our Journey Home*, the first non-fiction film about growing up military, and desperately needed a break. In true brat fashion, I decided to venture into unknown territory – Vietnam (to follow my father’s footsteps with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in 1967-1968) and Thailand (to explore a culture I enjoy and admire).

I’d dreamed of returning to Korea for many years, but never had the opportunity. When my frequent flier ticket offered a stopover in Seoul, I took it. I asked the Department of Defense Dependent Schools’ (DoDDS) District Superintendent’s Office in Korea if they were interested in hosting the film, and they welcomed me with open arms.

The 15-hour flight was long, but manageable. I was lucky enough to snag an empty row, so I slept most of the time. When I arrived at the airport in Seoul, I was flabbergasted: In 30 years, Korea had transformed itself.

I was in Seoul and Daegu from 1973 to 1975, around the same time Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were exacting carnage on their Cambodian countrymen. Not that I was aware of the bloodbath. We only had one television channel – Armed Forces Radio and Television Service – and it only broadcasted a couple hours a day. The only program I remember seeing with any regularity was *Good Times* with actor Esther Rolle and her “dy-no-mite” on-screen son, Jimmy. We (the 10 kids in my ninth-grade class) didn’t care. We were too busy emulating the soldiers who lived a couple blocks away from our school on Camp Walker. While our parents sipped scotch at the Officer’s Club and

the Hilltop, we French-inhaled Kool cigarettes on the golf course to the tunes of Eric Clapton, roamed the fish markets with Parliament-Funkadelic, and made out at the Teen Club to David Gates & Bread. We wore our hip-huggers low and our afros high. We sewed peace signs and black power fists on our jeans and jackets. It didn’t matter if we were black or white – we were equal-opportunity rebels.

When DoDDS Chief of Staff Tony Harris picked me up at the airport, the only things that hadn’t changed were the traffic and the knock-offs. Within 30 minutes I had bought my first “brand-name” purse and observed that the roads were still a free-for-all. By the time we arrived at Yongsan, I had thrown up, twice.

The road to the base was paved, dog carcasses didn’t hang in butcher shop windows anymore, and the building was bigger and brighter, but the kids looked just the same. So did the 30-year-old quonset hut that doubled as the same theater in which I had watched *Five on the Black Hand Side* and every other “B” movie made in the early seventies.

Welcome home!

The next day, I showed the film to a mixed group of teenagers and adults at Seoul American High School, where I had spent three months in the eighth grade. SAHS Principal Robert Sennett (a fellow Military Brat) introduced me. We had a lively discussion afterwards, followed by an upbeat interview with the press, then grabbed a few hours of shut-eye before boarding the bullet train to Daegu/Taegu early the next morning. In a little over an hour and a half (it used to be a five-hour journey), I was finally “home.” It only took 32 years.

Daegu American School Vice Principal Chris Swenson met me at the train station and took me to the new school on Camp George. The road to the base was paved, dog carcasses didn’t hang in butcher shop windows anymore, and the building was bigger and brighter, but the kids looked just the same. So did the 30-year-old quonset hut that doubled as the same theater in which I had watched *Five on the Black Hand Side* and every other “B” movie made in the early seventies.

I was anxious as close to 300 seventh-to-twelfth-graders piled into the theater. I had never shown the film to ‘so many young “brats” before. Would they be bored? Would they relate to the film at all? It’s pretty cerebral, and features adult brats, not kids. As Armed Forces Network set up its cameras to capture the event, I walked to the front of the crowd and never looked back. It was the highlight of the tour. They cheered and laughed at our afros and peace signs, and cried as 40-year-old brat Laird Knight talked about his father returning from Vietnam. Their fathers (and mothers) had been in Iraq and Afghanistan. They understood.

I was talking to a teacher and fellow brat in the lobby when a seventh-grade boy stepped out of the theater. “Do you like it?” I asked. “Are you bored? It’s okay if you are.”

HOME

By Donna Musil

"Oh, no," he replied seriously. "I really like it." He picked up a BRATS postcard from the counter and asked, "Can I have a button for my brother and sister?" He was referring to the "I am a BRAT" buttons we give out at the screenings.

"Sure," I told him. "Take as many as you want."

I watched him take the buttons and return to the theater. My heart was so full. We had touched one soul.

The next day, I realized we had touched more than that. I was invited to speak to a number of classes. The students loved the positive parts of the film, of course - especially the pictures of the old Daegu / Taegu students - but they also empathized with the timeless challenges of being a brat: losing friends, feeling like outsiders in civilian schools, worrying about the war.

Then one young man stood and said, "Thank you. Watching your film made me feel better."

"About what?" I asked.

His friends looked at him and he smiled, sadly. "The alcoholic family in the film?" he said. "That's my family. I didn't know other kids went through that. I didn't know other kids felt that way."

It took me seven years to make BRATS: Our Journey Home. There were days I didn't know whether I would ever finish it. There were nights I cried, worrying about car insurance and electricity bills. That one conversation made it all worthwhile. To affect a child's life, while he's young and can do something about it - no honor, award or television appearance will ever compare to that one moment.

I may never return to Daegu/Taegu, Korea. I may never see Daegu American School again. I hope I do. I hope my trip in November is the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship with a school that

I was anxious as close to 300 seventh-to-twelfth-graders piled into the theater. I had never shown the film to so many young "brats" before. Would they be bored? Would they relate to the film at all?...They cheered and laughed at our afros and peace signs, and cried as 40-year-old brat Laird Knight talked about his father returning from Vietnam. Their fathers (and mothers) had been in Iraq and Afghanistan. They understood.

changed the way I look at the world. But if I don't, if I never step foot on Korean soil again, I can go to my grave knowing I did one good thing. I helped a child know that he was not alone. I can't think of a better way to spend one's life.

~AW~

Donna Musil is an ATCK who has lived in Korea and the United States.

Writer-Director,

BRATS: Our Journey Home
(<http://www.bratsourjourneyhome.com/>)

Printed with Permission - Originally written for Berlin American High School Alumni Association newsletter, January 10, 2008

PHOTOS:

1. Photo Courtesy of Gail Dunagan Morrison & "Pier Charlie" the Cat
2. Photo Courtesy of Joan McCarter Adfrian
3. Photo Courtesy of Dan Levalley Family
4. Photo Courtesy of Gary Gordon and Operation Footlocker
5. All smiles at Daegu American School screening in Korea!
6. BRATS director Donna Musil on location in Wichita

