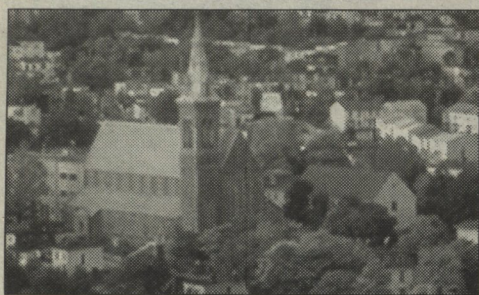


Seat Sale

St. John's, Newfoundland: Kindness in Times of Terror

by Christine GORDON

Seat Sale will be a recurring column combining the wonderful worlds of travel writing and personal narrative. This Issue: a double feature. Vincent Lavers! Christine Gordon! Lucky you! -Ed.



The September 11th terrorist attack in the United States was a historic event which will have people remembering where they were and what they were doing when they first heard of the event, like the Kennedy assassination and the O.J. Simpson trial. The sickening realization of what had occurred, and the devastating aftermath that transformed New York City into a warzone are not easily forgotten. Yet, in all the violence and horror, I was fortunate enough to witness something incredible – an act of kindness that unified an entire province and showed the generosity of Newfoundlanders.

I write about this particular province because, due to the chaos of air travel, I happened to be stranded in Newfoundland while all this was happening. I had no idea what was occurring on Prince Edward Island at this time, but I do know with vivid remembrance, what happened on the “Rock.” What I saw made me proud to have been born there and blessed with the “kindness” that these people seem to possess in abundance. Newfoundlanders have typically been associated with generosity. The aftermath of the attack on the United States once again proved that the hearts of Newfoundlands are most undoubtedly their greatest attribute and may one day find its place in *The Guinness Book of Records* as being twice the

size of the average person.

During my extended “holiday,” I saw many acts of kindness that seemed to unify the province into a place of refuge. Immediately after the attack, calls for help appeared on the local television and radio stations. Not only were the people of Newfoundland being asked to donate blood, but because of the influx of people (27 planes were diverted to St. John's airport and the population of Gander nearly doubled when Canadian and American airspace was closed and over 13,000 unexpected visitors descended upon the province) food, blankets and other provisions were needed. People were being asked to open their homes to those stranded due to the tragedy. I listened wide-eyed with amazement when, about an hour after the first call for help was placed, the same tv and radio announcers who had asked for donations, now implored people to withhold further donations as crisis centres were being bombarded with food, blankets and clothes. Blood banks had lineups that extended out into the street.

The Mile One Stadium in downtown St. John's became the holding centre for some 4,500 passengers as they awaited temporary shelter. Schools and churches had no reservations in shutting down their regular services to accommodate these people. I was able to witness first hand the efforts of such an operation since my friend's father, Aubrey Vincent (who so kindly took me in as part of their “stranded outreach program”), is part of the Salvation Army's crisis team at Mount Pearl citadel.

When the first phone call for help came around 11 p.m. on Sept

11th, Mr. Vincent immediately took action in setting up the church to receive these newly landed “immigrants.” He, along with other members of the community organization, worked long into the night settling people, figuring out sleeping arrangements, organizing rides to a local school for showers and setting up a schedule for church members to cook meals for them. As well as taking care of their physical needs, the crisis team saw to their emotional needs – taking the time to talk to them. Games were brought in for the children, as well as a TV so that people could follow the events of the attack. The flight that most of these people were on was heading to the US from Paris, so many on board were Americans. Not only were they personally connected to the tragedy, but many suffered from the frustration of being stuck in a foreign country and not able to help. Trying to track down relatives became a priority and the church offered its phone immediately. The human factor surpassed any financial concerns these volunteers may have had.

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To make their stay as comfortable as possible, volunteers from various organizations (including students from Memorial University) took it upon themselves to show “the stranded” around the city. Tours and shopping sprees were organized to try to alleviate the stress of those that had nothing and nowhere to go. Many hotels and restaurants offered free meals to the passengers. Due to security concerns, stranded travellers people were not allowed to bring any belongings with them, arriving with as little as a purse. Mr. Vincent told me of one woman who was forced to sleep in leather pants because she had no other change of clothing. When the showers became full, or too busy, Mr. Vincent drove some of these people to his house and let them shower there.

One of the passengers, Edith Bajema, who unexpectedly found herself in St. John's while travelling from London to Ohio, remarked on the kindness of these Newfoundland strangers: “We have found grace, compassion, kindness unlooked for and an eager and generous hospitality we never imagined possible.” Bajema was astonished at the extent of the generosity and understanding of their situation. She recounted her experience upon first arriving at the Mile One Stadium: “...we were met by organized messengers, translators of six different languages, even a sign-language expert. They led us through an orderly army of volunteers who registered us, plied us with fresh fruit and sandwiches and pastries, bottled water and juice and coffee, and toothpaste [and toothbrushes, good ones!], soap, Aspirin, and other necessities. Medical help was available. Chaplains were there to pray with us. Free phone lines had been installed. Stuffed animals were handed out to children and to any adult who looked as though they could use that kind of comfort. And everywhere, there was concern and compassion.”