

# A JOURNEY THROUGH THE HEART OF AMERICA



Group Study Exchange is perhaps the most fascinating and the most popular educational programme of the Rotary Foundation. I was fortunate enough to be selected as Team Leader for the Group Study Exchange Team traveling to Rotary District 6740, Eastern Part of the state of Kentucky in USA. Four young professionals were selected as my team members.

A brief introduction of my team members would be worthwhile here- There were three ladies and a gentleman. The gentleman, who was

the youngest of all, was Anindo Roy from Nashik. He was trained as a mechanical engineer, but had recently founded a Resume Writing Firm. Anuradha Totey, from Amravati, was an ophthalmic surgeon. She was an accomplished Kathak dancer and had a flair for compeering. Swati Gokhale, from Nashik was an Obstetrician and Gynecologist. She had won the National Award for bravery as a schoolgirl for saving some people from getting electrocuted. Vaishali Balajiwale, also from Nashik, was a journalist, psychologist and counselor. She hailed from a renowned family of Nashik that owned the Balaji Temple. All these were exceptionally talented persons with outstanding achievements in several fields. They impressed not only the Selection Committee but also our American hosts!



Getting selected was indeed a moment of great joy and satisfaction for all of us, after going through intense preparation for several months. But we soon realized that the harder part lay ahead. GSE is no picnic, to quote the manual. The schedule is demanding and hectic and it is hard indeed to withstand the rigorous schedule.

GSE is also a lesson in teamwork. Five persons have to come together and travel to a foreign land, working in full harmony for a month for the success of the programme. We built ourselves into a real team by staying together in all our GSE related activities, right from the day of selection. We appeared for our US VISAs, got our Overseas Health Insurance, attended the District Conference at Goa, got our Uniforms stitched, bought gifts for host families, compiled presentations, and finally attended the orientation at Nagpur- all together, as one solid team! This gave us an opportunity for

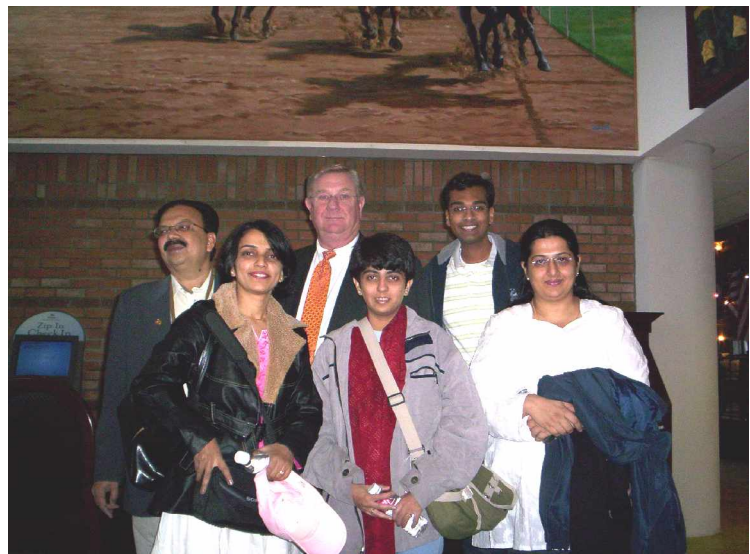


tackling our interpersonal strains and stresses and idiosyncrasies and by the time we boarded the plane for US on 23rd March 2008 we were already feeling like one strong family.

Our journey to USA, as expected, was prolonged and strenuous. We landed in Detroit, Michigan on a cold morning on 23rd March. The airstrip was totally covered with snow. Many of us saw snow for the first time in our life. From Detroit, it was a short flight to

Lexington in Kentucky. We were overwhelmed to find a big reception committee of Rotarians including District Governor Tom Ashford, GSE leader Bill Crawford. GSE members Michael and Jacqueline. District GSE Chair Josephine Richardson and her husband Bill had traveled nearly 200 miles to greet us. We were put up in a luxurious hotel called Hilton Suites.

Our tour started right off, as District Governor Tom himself came up to show us around Lexington and the surrounding countryside. Lexington is located in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky. The state of Kentucky owes her claim to fame as the horse capital of the world to the Bluegrass region. The grass really takes a bluish hue in the morning.



Thousands of acres of beautifully manicured lawns, pretty farmhouses, barns and gently rolling plains make this area one of the most beautiful places on earth. We visited the

Keeneland Race Course which hosts racing events every year in spring and fall. The breed of racehorses produced in Kentucky is known as thoroughbred. They are among the best racing horses in the world. The soil and water in this region are probably responsible for producing sturdy and

healthy horses. There is big money in horse racing as well as horse breeding.

Thoroughbreds are treated like royal princes. They fetch an astronomical price for mating the mares. We had an opportunity to see live mating at the 'Three Chimneys horse farm'.

Next day our coordinator Bob Ross took us to a historic village called 'Shakers' village of the Pleasant Hill'. We also saw the 'Old Kentucky Home state park' displaying an old country estate with nineteenth century ambience. The state song of Kentucky 'My Old Kentucky Home' was composed at this very place by



poet Stephen Foster. We learnt this song by heart and amused our hosts by singing it on several occasions.



One of our most inspiring excursions was to the birthplace of President Abraham Lincoln. The birth memorial is constructed around a symbolic log cabin similar to the one in which Lincoln was born. There is a fascinating museum at this site depicting scenes from Lincoln's life. Americans have great regard for their historical monuments, though the history is only 200 years old; and they go to great lengths to restore the monuments and preserve them in excellent condition.

DG Tom showed us the prestigious project of RC of Lexington. They have constructed a baseball field covered with a special kind of matting for physically challenged children. The project, which cost them a whopping half a million dollars, was taken up in the centennial year of Rotary.



An unexpected bonus for us was an opportunity to listen to our favorite former President APJ Abdul Kalam, who visited University of Kentucky, Lexington on 24 March. He addressed a gathering of nearly 1000 people. Indians settled in and around Kentucky had thronged to listen to their favourite leader.

On 27 March we gave our maiden presentation to R. C. of Lexington. Presentations formed an important part of our mission and we had given considerable thought to it. Our presentation would



usually begin with a dance recital by Anuradha- Ganesh Vandana in Odissi style. Vaishali would follow, giving a glimpse of 'Life around Temples' in India. Next, Swati would present a picture of the 'Rural Health facilities in India' giving a true portrayal of the ground realities. Anindo, in his lively style, would give a presentation about Indian Economy Industry, and Lifestyle. Finally, I would round up with an overview of 'India through the Millenia'. We



used this formula successfully, with minor variations, presenting India to 11 Rotary Clubs, a couple of schools and colleges and to the audience at the District Conference. We had some teething trouble with the audio system and computers at Lexington but we recovered fast, and all our subsequent presentations went off without a hitch.

We bid farewell to Lexington with a heavy heart on 28 March and were transported to Carlisle, hometown of GSE leader Bill Crawford. We passed

the famous sign 'small town with big heart' as we entered Carlisle and true to these words, Carlisle received us wholeheartedly. Here we got the first real taste of rural USA, the Heart of America. We became a part and parcel of this lovely little community over the next 3 days. The experience was to be repeated again and again over the next 3 weeks. Every little town that we visited had some unique attraction of its own, giving it a distinct flavor. But all of them showered the same warmth, hospitality and good cheer upon us.



Carlisle, though a county seat, has a population of just 2000 people. The Carlisle Rotary Club presided over by silver haired Jock Conley was just like one big family and we soon got assimilated in this family. Our team members invaded the Metcalfe family's kitchen and tried their hand at cooking an Indian meal. The result was somewhat imperfect by Indian standards, but our American hosts adored it!

Carlisle had a multitude of beautiful churches belonging to various sects. In fact, entire Eastern Kentucky is known as

'The Bible Belt'. All our hosts were devout Christians and regular churchgoers. We visited a number of churches and had an opportunity to learn a lot about Christianity.

Bill and Alex took us to the Red River Gorge State Park. Here we had our first look at the deep forests and scenic mountains of Eastern Kentucky. We also got a glimpse into the lifestyle of early settlers, who came to Kentucky from Virginia under the leadership of pioneer Daniel Boone. We enjoyed a hearty trek up to a lofty stone formation called Natural Bridge.



Though we loathed to leave Carlisle, the date of departure came. And on 31 March we were placed under the care of AG Meena Mohanty from Richmond. Meena's parents hailed from Orissa and imagine our delight when we sighted some Indian delicacies on the breakfast table!



We were in a privileged position in Richmond as the city Mayor Connie Lawson was a Rotarian. She drove us around in her own private van, neither using an official vehicle nor a chauffeur. In fact, we never saw a chauffeur on this entire trip. All vehicles, powerful cars with automatic transmissions were self-driven by men and women in their late seventies and eighties. There were no domestic

servants either. Our host families performed all manual chores, with us trying to lend a feeble hand at times. It was humbling to watch my host Dr. Frank Miller, Past President of American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology hauling up my heavy suitcase up the stairs of his palatial house in Lexington!

The American work ethic, in my opinion, is the key to the legendary prosperity of this nation. So are other virtues, like discipline, honesty, punctuality, cleanliness and respect for law. Worth



emulating aren't they, for a country like India?

While at Richmond, we were taken to a University town called Berea. This University was one of the first USA to admit Black students. A quote from the Holy Bible carved on a huge dial on the campus proclaims- ' God has made of one blood all peoples of the Earth' The University also has a unique system of offering on-campus jobs to students, in lieu of tuition fees. Students greeted us at the reception centre and one of them, Sam, gave us a lively tour of the campus.

We also saw the Kentucky Horse Park, which has almost everything related to horses. There is a huge museum depicting evolution of the horse the animal and use of horses for martial and sports purposes, and live demonstrations of horse riding and equestrian sports. A veritable Mecca for horse lovers!

My host, David Tincher, turned out to be a musical genius. In fact his entire family was musical. We were soon to learn that Eastern Kentucky has a great musical tradition and is the home of Bluegrass Music and Country Music. I shared our Indian music with David and his wife Julie as they had a great time dancing to the tune of 'Roop Tera Mastana'.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> April we packed our bags for Ashland, on the great river Ohio. Our coordinator Don Maxwell, a seventy five year old veteran, dominated the scene at Ashland. Don, a bachelor, cared



for us like a loving parent. His punctuality, dedication and physical stamina were marvelous. Besides serving in Rotary, he also served on the city council, managed a railway museum and fed nuts to raccoons that came to his doorstep. We met many such fine specimens of Humanity in US. They are what makes the country great.

Don took us to the Carter caves, which has many interesting rock formations and also across the river Ohio to the fascinating Huntington Museum. This area is known as the Tri-state area as the state borders of Kentucky, West Virginia and Ohio meet here. We saw huge barges filled with coal sailing down the river Ohio. We also saw a live concert featuring country music and a cute dance form called tap-dance.

We said goodbye to Don on 6<sup>th</sup> April and were transferred to the custody of James Glass from Pikeville. James Glass turned out to be a Foundation

Alumnus, having led a GSE team to Poland. He had invaluable insight into the programme and went beyond the call of his duty to make our stay at Pikeville memorable. James took us to Jenny Wiley state resort park, to enjoy a break for 2 days, all by ourselves.

Jenny Wiley is a paradise in the mountains of Kentucky. Situated on the banks of an artificial lake



this resort offers wonderful opportunities for outdoor adventures. We had a gala time here, exploring the picturesque hillsides, playing quaint games like Frisbee Golf and- thanks to James Glass- fishing and rifle shooting! We also made a tentative attempt at Indian Cooking.

On the morning of 8<sup>th</sup> April we left Jenny Wiley and entered Pikeville, in the heart of the Appalachian mountains. This little town with a population of 6000 boasts of a Rotary club

with a strength of 115 members and has provided leadership to the District in the form of DGE Rakesh Sachdeva. Pikeville is a town that moves mountains, in a literal sense. The Big Sandy River



used to flow through the town, constantly flooding and creating havoc. So the town just broke up a nearby mountain and diverted the river! It is supposed to be the greatest engineering feat ever, next only to Panama Canal.

Pikeville has excellent medical facilities for a small town and we had very satisfying vocational visits. We were in for some very exciting tours too. At Kellogg's factory we saw the entire assembly line for making a cookie- from raw dough to the final package.

We also saw coal mines in action, natural gas rigs, and airstrips created by slicing off tops of mountains!

Our journey continued deeper into mountains as we left Pikeville for Whitesburg on April 11 bidding farewell to my wonderful hosts Dave and Cathy Denby. Whitesburg had a special attraction for us, this being the hometown of GSE coordinator Josephine. Myself and vaishali made ourselves at home at her picturesque house nestling in a hillside. The mountains got higher at Whitesburg and we got to do some real hard core hiking here in the company of stalwarts like Roy and Barbara. We shared



a wonderful evening of dance and music with our hosts at the country cabin, and each one of us tried our hand -or rather foot -at ball dance. The local radio station put us on air. On the whole, we spent some of the most enjoyable moments of our tour at Whitesburg.

We moved on to Somerset on 14<sup>th</sup> April. The countryside now took a different look as we came out of the mountains. I was overwhelmed to find the

Indian tricolor fluttering at the home of my hosts John and Christie Adams!



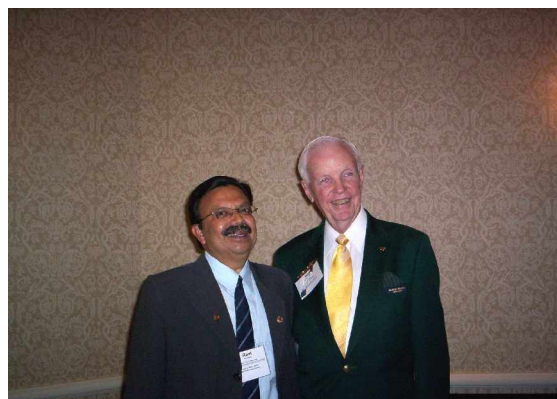
How thoughtful! At Somerset we visited a community college, an institution where they impart practical vocational skills. We saw huge workshops and hangars for repairing aeroplanes, helicopters and automobiles. The scale was awesome and also some interesting departments like cosmetology, nursing assistants and physiotherapy. At Somerset we met another GSE alumnus, Winter Huff, who took it upon herself to show us one of the most scenic spots in Kentucky, the Cumberland Falls famous for 'Moonbow'. We also enjoyed an unforgettable musical evening at Winter and Jim Huff's 'Flintstone' style house and a lavish party at Dr Parson's splendid home which resembled a medieval castle!

The inevitable date of departure came on 17<sup>th</sup> April as John Adams loaded our baggage with meticulous precision on his truck and off we drove to Nashville, Tennessee for attending the joint District Conference. On the way we did get a chance to take a quick look at the most famous natural

wonder of Kentucky, the mammoth cave national park.

Nashville, Tennessee is the capital of country music and the venue for the joint District Conference was a sprawling hotel, aptly named Sheraton Music City.

The conference was a compact affair compared to the Rotary Conferences we have here in India, but the precision and punctuality was amazing. We heard some very fine speakers, but no speaker exceeded the time allocated to him. Neither were there apologies for sessions running late, nor requests to subsequent speakers to cut down their speeches. Our organizers have a lot to learn!



We had the good fortune of getting introduced to RI President Wilfrid Wilkinson. He is the very



picture of simplicity and modesty. We also got the opportunity to get introduced to incoming GSE teams from Japan, Korea and England.. At the conference, we had one more opportunity to meet DG Tom, First Lady Polky, Bill and his wife Joyce and many more prominent Rotarians from the District. We gave our own presentation and it was very well received. With a deep sense of accomplishment we departed for our final destination, Northern Kentucky on 20<sup>th</sup> April.

I reached Bellevue, northern Kentucky with my host PDG Jerry Schneider and his wife Mary Lou. Across the river Ohio, lay the great Metropolitan city of Cincinnati. For the first time on our tour, we saw some skyscrapers and got a distinct big town feel. Northern Kentucky boasts of a fantastic Creation Museum at Florence and a fabulous aquarium at Newport. We gave presentations to three



clubs in this area. A grand farewell was given to us on 22<sup>nd</sup> April, with Team Leader Bill and his members attending. Many warm hugs and tearful farewells were exchanged and we said ' adieu' to RI District 6740 on 23April, each of us proceeding our own way for a personal tour of US!

GSE gave us an opportunity to get a first hand glimpse into the life of an American family. This is truly an experience that

money cannot buy. We shed many misconcepts about American life and were instrumental in spreading some awareness about India too. What is more important- we created bonds of everlasting love and friendship. The story begins, rather than ends here. That is the magic of GSE!



Post Script: All the members of my G.S.E. Team have joined Rotary!