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Couple Visits Iran On Mission Of Peace

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Political diplomacy, economic sanctions and even the prospect of military action have all been put on the table recently as western governments discuss how to respond to growing tension with Iran over the suspicion the middle eastern nation may be attempting to build a nuclear bomb.

Sam and Ruth Neff say sanctions and war may be in the front of the minds of politicians, but they have a better idea - go visit Iran. That's just what the Neffs did in April.

Ruth (second from left) and Sam (second from right) Neff pose with some Iranians who invited them to join their picnic in a park in the city of Esfahan. The Neffs led a group on a visit to Iran in April as part of a grassroots peace-keeping strategy. Photo Provided

The couple, who live in Richmond, Ind., but spend time in the summer at their house on Dewart Lake, in Kosciusko County, led a group of 30 other Americans on a two-week trip to Iran on April 14. They toured several major cities and historic sites, shopped in neighborhood bazaars and, more importantly, they met and spent time with Iranians.

Sam, a retired physics professor, said the interaction with people of other cultures, especially those whose governments are in conflict with our own, is the key to a grassroots approach to peace.

"It's sort of working from the ground, up," he said. "It helps people find better ways of communicating, better ways of solving problems other than war."

The trip to Iran was not the first the Neffs have taken with their peace-building objective in mind. They took their first trips during the Cold War in the 1980s to the Soviet Union.

Ruth, a retired nursing professor, said she remembers how she and her husband got the idea. As tension and the arms race escalated between the two world powers, there was also tension in the local high school where some of the Neffs' six children went to school.

"There had been some fighting and there was a meeting of the parents and students to discuss what was to be done," she said. "The kids said, 'Why are you complaining about us when you are pointing nuclear weapons at the Soviet Union and they're pointing them at us?' That got me thinking."

The Neffs joined a sister city program aimed at building interactions between American and Soviet communities. They started a small organization called Neighbors East and West; and finally decided they would join a group of mathematics teachers on an educational exchange trip to visit the place President Ronald Reagan had branded the "Evil Empire."

The Neffs said they weren't nervous about their first trip to the U.S.S.R. But, on their second trip, the couple drove with seven high school students from Luxembourg to Moscow in a Volkswagen bus. Sam said that trip was "more exciting."

"I was more than a bit nervous about bringing them home alive, but that was mostly a reflection of my ability to drive in Europe," Sam said.

The Neffs led a total of 10 trips to the Soviet Union and, after the Iron Curtain fell, they led seven more trips to communist Cuba. Each time, the couple said, they were met with friendliness, hospitality and even a surprising degree of freedom to explore.

"We got nothing but welcoming from all the people we met," said Ruth.

On their most recent trip to Iran, Sam said people were eager to engage them in conversation and to show them the sites of their hometown.

When they found out we were Americans, they would immediately say 'Welcome to our country. Come to my house for dinner,'" he said.

While in Iran, the Neffs met Seyyed Hoseini, the president of the faculty at Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcast University. They agreed to help him recruit for a peace conference, which will be sponsored by the university in November. The workshop is called the First Students Workshop on Peace, Religion and Media. For more information, visit www.religion-media.com/workshop.htm

The Neffs said people they talk to are often surprised to hear they've visited Iran.

"If you talk to the average person right now, that person will say, 'Oh, Iran, they hate us there,' or 'Iran? Didn't they shoot at you?'" said Sam. "The only thing they hear from Iran is how there are people demonstrating and saying, 'Down with the U.S.,' and things like that."

Sam acknowledged that touring Iran may not hold all the answers to the complex political questions facing leaders on both sides of the conflict, but, he said, it's a start.

"We now have about 30 more people who see what Iran is like on the inside," he said. "It's very easy to say, 'Oh yeah, we can attack Iran; we can bomb Iran.' People can say that if it's abstract. But, once you've been there, met the people there, that attitude changes entirely. That's why we take people there."

Sam said the positive interactions are key to changing the perspectives of the Americans on the trip and of those they meet. "That's 30 more chances for Iranians to say, 'I've met an American, and they're nice people.'"

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