



Abductee bears no hatred for captors

BY **CHRIS HOUSTON**
Special to The Bancroft Times

AS CANADIAN AID workers, Steve Dennis and Sara McHattie have witnessed humanity at its most violent worst and its compassionate best. When they recently visited Bancroft from Italy, we chatted over dinner about Steve’s kidnapping in Kenya and how he holds no ill will towards his abductors. Steve’s wife, Sara, has worked in several conflict zones too and has seen the consequences of war, and responses to it, many times over. Hearing Sara and Steve’s experiences and perspectives on fear and hope was a far more educational, emotional and inspiring experience than I expected.

In 2007, Sara worked with Oxfam near refugee camps in the landlocked nation of Chad. Three years prior, people fleeing the War in Darfur had filled the camps in the country’s Eastern part. As the violent rebellion in Chad escalated, hundreds of thousands of Chadians were forced away from their homes and towards the refugee communities. The Darfur refugees immediately supported the internally displaced Chadians, inviting them into their homes and sharing their food. Despite Western media’s focus on the work of international aid workers, it is local communities and humanitarians who carry out most aid work.

Sara believes that peaceful communities thrive when different communities and cultures live together. She talks about the riots in Kenya after the December 2007 election, and how towns with only two tribes tended to have much more violence than towns with many communities living together. She speaks of the great cultural diversity in Rome and other ancient metropolises. She believes that diversity and respect for others have been at the core of so many centres of learning and thriving cultures.

With a background in conflict resolution, Steve believes in dialogue as the key to solving conflicts. Keen readers will note my first column was about polarization and how that inhibits dialogue.

“I would love it if the Canadian Peace Museum was somehow linked with schools,” says Steve. He wants the education system to focus more on the importance of respectful disagreement and empathetic listening. “These two parts are essential; not that you have to agree with the other side, but if you are motivated to find agreement, peace, you have to deeply understand what things you disagree on and focus attention there.” I’ve heard similar hopes from Lisa Dostaler from Bird’s Creek Primary School. Sara, who now works for the World Food Programme, also agrees. At work, she tries to create consensus between governments, academics and aid agencies on how to define and measure global hunger levels. She noticed her team lacked training in conflict resolution, compromise, and consensus-building. After she organized lessons on these topics, their ability to build consensus improved.

Steve decries the scant global peace efforts compared to the vast sums spent on armaments and warfare. During his studies, he learned that there are more people in the United States Armed Forces’ marching bands than there are in their foreign service building and maintaining peaceful global dialogue. In his many interactions with military personnel, he notes that regular forces rarely understand the concerns of the people they are fighting against. It’s easier to kill people when you don’t need to think about their humanity.

Steve has collaborated with soldiers in Afghanistan and has done aid work in Kenya, Sri Lanka, the Ivory Coast, Somalia, Malawi, Turkey, Liberia, and South Sudan.

Sara has also worked in Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique, Guyana, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic. She speaks of her time in Lebanon – another place where she perceives that peace is maintained and sometimes put at risk by the various Christian, Muslim and Druze communities living in close proximity.

In addition to Oxfam and the World Food Program, Sara has worked for the Food and Agriculture Organization and the European Commission. She recalls arriving in Afghanistan and “seeing blast film on the window of my bedroom in Kabul, and realising that there were people out there who wanted to kill me – not as an individual, but for what I represented as a foreigner.”

One of Sara’s most startling experiences was in the Central African Republic: after an early morning jog in the purportedly safe part of town, she found out that a call had been put out amongst rebels to abduct foreign white women. In many volatile environments, foreign aid workers seriously risk being abducted for ransom. In mid-2012, a life-changing crisis suddenly upended Steve and Sara’s lives.

In June 2012, Steve and a team of colleagues toured Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya, in a three-vehicle convoy. Halfway through the field visit, armed men opened fire. Abdi Ali

one of the three drivers was killed. Steve was hit in the leg. Three other staff were shot and survived. Armed kidnappers grabbed Steve, along with three others and rushed them away. Vehicle problems soon forced the eight captors and four hostages to embark on a long, painful foot journey towards Somalia. “Being shot is the most painful thing – until adrenaline and cortisol kicked in and the pain went away. It came back 45 minutes later,” Steve recounts. That pain would only get worse in the days of walking ahead.

The journey towards Somalia only occurred at night, when it was cooler and easier to move without being observed. In the scorching daytime heat of the desert, the captors hid themselves and the hostages under bushes for shade and visual obscuration from potential trackers. Sadly for Steve, the primary food source was a peanut paste – bad news for a guy with an anaphylactic allergy to peanuts. A colleague’s chocolate bar kept Steve going, but the shortage of water presented a more urgent life safety risk to the four terrified abductees.

Steve had suffered a severe leg injury, but his wallet lessened the bullet’s impact. Another colleague was also shot in the leg and his injury was worse. The leader of the gang tried to reassure him that he would recover by showing them his own four healed gunshot wounds. Struggling with a language barrier, the abductors also tried their best to explain that they aimed to get money, not harm the four hostages.

As they marched, the Somali abductors were kind, and when one unwittingly dropped a scarf, Steve picked it up and gave it to the man. (All abductors were men, in case you wondered.) Instinctively, Steve tried to build a friendship with the gang, in the hope that it would reduce the risk of deadly outcomes - he feared being stolen by another violent gang. Hostage theft presented a horrifying risk to the abductees, due to the dangers of being hit by crossfire in the inevitable gunfight or being deliberately killed by whichever group lost the battle.

After three exhausting nights of walking, gunfire suddenly erupted. Unbeknownst to Steve, they were being rescued by a hired Somali militia. At the time, the violence was terrifying. The second-oldest member of the gang, a 23-year-old man was hit in a hail of bullets and died on the spot. Others escaped, leaving the four aid workers in the hands of the young militia who transported them to the safety of a nearby military base before they were flown by helicopter to Nairobi. Reflecting on the events, Steve finds the death of one of his abductors one of the most difficult legacies of the entire ordeal.

When speaking about the men who abducted him, Steve bore them no malice. “We definitely had different opinions about where I should go that day” he laughed, “but I could understand they were hungry and needy and this was a money thing for them. To this day, I don’t feel any animosity for them, but if someone killed me in Somalia thinking that I was an instrument of this government or that government, they would have read the situation wrong, and I’d be really sad about that.”

Steve is aware that his abduction was ultimately a money-making endeavour made by people trying to survive in a failing state, devastated by foreign interference, drought, famine and protracted conflict resulting in economic and humanitarian crises. Still, his rationalisation is both more pragmatic and empathetic than I expected and I find it surprising at first, and after reflection, uplifting. If someone who is abducted and shot can bear no ill will to their captor, there is hope that people with less extreme points of tension can find common ground.

When I ask Steve what peace means to him, he speaks of the importance of laughter, of people building homes and passing them on to their children, and of kids attending school. We reflect on how lucky we are to be born in peaceful countries and how unfortunate it is for people born into conflict. I think of the luck of birth.

Steve talks about how educational, employment and peace-building programs, where present, can leave people with better income-generating options than piracy and abductions. Echoing local musician and educator Abe Drennan whom I spoke to a few weeks ago, Steve speaks of the importance of listening. It strikes me that two people who have experienced powerful learning journeys ended their stories of peace with a plea for more listening.

I met Steve and Sara in Bancroft’s oldest and best bar, the Bancroft Brew Pub. I do appreciate the good atmosphere in the Brew Pub which is lively, but not too loud as to inhibit a good conversation. You can’t beat a good story, over good burgers, with locally made beer, in a good bar in peaceful Bancroft.

Steve Dennis works as a recovery coach to support aid workers who have experienced trauma www.stevedennis.ca

Chris Houston is the president of the Canadian Peace Museum charity that is fundraising to open a museum in Bancroft. You can read more at www.canadianpeacemuseum.ca

The Principles of an Economic Charter of Rights

Restoring universities to the original mission

ABOUT A MONTH from now, hundreds of thousands of students in cap and gown will attend graduation ceremonies on university campuses across Canada.

The students will graduate with a lot of knowledge regarding topics such as philosophy, sociology and political science.

The one topic they won’t have explored, however, might be the most important one of all – and that’s the question of what constitutes an ideal society.

The Greek philosopher Plato founded the Academy around 2,400 years ago, regarded by many as the first university in the West. At the top of the curriculum at Plato’s Academy was the subject of what constitutes an ideal society.

Plato’s ideal state included features such as justice, harmony and the greater good of society.

But what about our society? What do we believe are the essential building blocks for creating a more civilized society, one that brings the greatest amount of freedom, peace and prosperity to its citizens?

Universities are the ideal place to explore these sorts of issues. After all, advancing knowledge and exploring new ideas are a fundamental part of a university’s DNA.

Over the years, I’ve had dealings with many universities around the world. I’ve funded research centres related to entrepreneurship and technological innovation and given guest lectures on campuses in Canada, the US and Europe.

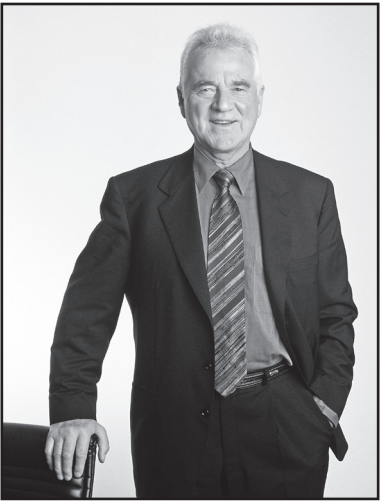
But until recently, it never occurred to me to consider what was the overriding purpose of a university. In conceiving and drafting the framework of an ideal society, universities should look at all aspects – everything from the arts and sports to business and medicine. They should also consider the ideal structure of government – one that ensures individual liberty and places certain checks on the power of elected officials.

One of the ways we currently do that is through our charter of democratic rights and freedoms. But what about other rights, including, most importantly, economic rights? Why has no society ever enshrined an economic charter of rights,

and what should those rights be?

My belief is that economic charters of rights will help create economic democracies, and economic democracies – where the greatest number of people enjoy the greatest amount of wealth – are the foundation for democracy itself. I also believe that an economic charter of rights would be one of the cornerstones of any ideal society.

The composition of an ideal society isn’t just something for ancient philosophers to ponder. It’s a noble quest that we should likewise pursue – and our universities should be leading the way.



FRANK STRONACH
The Principles of an Economic Charter of Rights

Universities can get the ball rolling by inviting some of the world’s best minds and accomplished people to talk about the framework necessary for building an ideal society. They should convene symposia and open forums and begin mapping out a blueprint for what that society would look like and what we need to construct it. And they should create new faculties solely dedicated to this topic.

That doesn’t mean throwing out many of the features that have made our society a magnet for people from around the world. Instead, it’s a chance to

make our society greater yet – to add new elements that would enrich the lives of its citizens while shoring up many of the shortcomings that are currently holding us back.

The ancient Greeks thought the creation of an ideal society was a noble pursuit and ended up building one of the greatest civilizations the world has ever seen.

We should also take up the same challenge. A society that stops striving for greatness is a decaying society.

To learn more about how an economic charter could improve our society, contact info@economiccharter.ca.

Author Bio
Frank Stronach is the founder of Magna International Inc., one of Canada’s largest global companies, and the Stronach Foundation for Economic Rights (www.economiccharter.ca).

Frank Stronach is the founder of Magna International Inc., one of Canada’s largest global companies, and was inducted into the Automotive Hall of Fame.



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