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On my first visit to America

A tale by

Times of Zambia Features reporter Gethsemane Mwizabi on his first visit to the 'land of the proud and plenty'

By GETHSEMANE MWIZABI

THE America I had known was through books and what Hollywood portrays in movies and magazines.

My knowledge of that diverse but complex society was largely through what they call land of plenty, freedom, peace and justice.

Which is why I could only dream of it by getting lost into music, literature and stories told to me by friends who live and lived there before.

All my life, I envisaged to set my foot on American soil. This dream turned a reality not too long ago.

One sunny Monday afternoon, I picked-up a call from the American Centre in Lusaka, the message was loud and clear: I was heading for America. I was convinced that my nightmares were not just a fantasy or fallacy after all.

They were in fact, a reflection of a distant reality - a reality that finally met my eyes on April 1, 2006.

But before I could go there, lots of preparing on my side needed to be done, since I was headed for a different world.

So I had to go through orientation of what I was to meet in America - people, their culture, diversity and so on.

Madam Dehab Ghebream and Laura Gritz, Mark Maseko, Mathews Mumbi and the rest of the staff at the center, gave me a detailed overview of American life.

After everything, the secretary to the public affairs officer presented me with my air ticket. There I was, that Friday afternoon preparing for departure.

Being my first international outing, time had come for me to grow-up and get acquainted with all there was to know about international travel.

I noticed that I had to make lots of connections before finally touching down in Washington DC.

From Lusaka, I went to Johannesburg, then to Atlanta, Georgia before switch to a domestic flight - Delta Airlines - to get to Washington DC. All along, I had been using South African Airways.

When I left Lusaka for Johannesburg, I did not know exactly where I was going, but I had to keep the faith, knowing all was well with me. I was at Johannesburg international airport for close to three hours before embarking on a longer flight to Atlanta.

I knew my flight was scheduled for 19:00 hours and so I had to locate my boarding Gate (Gate G) in time.

On my flight to Atlanta, I sat next to a gentleman (Clinton Shick) who was eager to learn about my country. He had just returned from Swaziland where he had gone to embark on an orphanage project. As a matter of fact, he was part of the Hearts for Africa Christian team that had travelled to Swaziland, one of Africa's surviving kingdoms. My interaction with Clint gave me a hint to know how Americans look at life. He told me about his family and the fact that he had a son who likes to hang around a golf pitch.

He also told me that he had a beautiful grandchild and good wife somewhere in a Californian valley, where he is a commercial farmer, growing peanuts.

He told me everything about himself even though I did not ask him to. I admired his freedom and courage to talk to a stranger like me. I did not open up quite the same. I was a bit reserved, perhaps largely because I grew up in a society where feelings are concealed - a communal society where the community takes centre-stage and not individuals.

For Americans, what you see is what you get. If an American loves you, you know it. If an American is mad at you, you know it still. I noticed this through interaction.

"I think it's important for people to know what you think so they don't misunderstand you," one university student told me when I asked her why Americans love their freedom so much that they would do anything possible to protect it.

They are generally affirmative people and empowering too.

In America, you get affirmation at home and not on the streets. So you grow up believing you can reach the unreachable, touch the invisible, dream the impossible, and so forth.

If an American spots talent in you, he or she would give you the resources to bring out the best in you. It is that drum-major instinct that keeps them afloat.

Yes, it is true that that drive is sometimes perverted.

Americans have a sense of humour.

At the height of the immigration debate and protests, one old man stood up saying, "the solution to immigration in America is to deport everyone and leave the red Indians."

Back in Zambia, feelings are not quiet the same. People tend to be more reserved and conservative.

It is a culture where you conceal your feelings and just try to forget about a matter even when it is unresolved.

Something could be wrong, but one may not tell you what is really wrong right there and then.

Normally the offender has to find out what is wrong with the offended.

In short, feelings take time to build up before a problem or an issue could be debated. And when a solution is found, it is rather too late and lots of resources would have been lost.

An American wants to know you before you can talk business. So he or she will get personal with you.

A conversation may begin by someone appreciating your looks, your smile or even touching your shoulder.

That aside, I told Clint my personal life and the purpose of my trip to the United States.

After a 17-hour-long flight, our plane landed at Hartsfield airport - the world's busiest airport.

That morning, I knew I was in a different world all together. So I needed to cope up. Thank Heaven; Clint was there to guide me.

He helped me through the complex Hartsfield airport. I never will forget his kindness.

I parted with Clint after I met a colleague - from Botswana - who was also going for the same inaugural Edward Murrow Leadership programme for journalists.

In Washington, I was booked at a French Hotel, Sofitel - located some 300 metres from the White House.

I took advantage of the proximity to this house of world fame to visit and see it for myself besides other federal buildings like the Supreme Court, Capitol Hill, the Russell Senate office building, the Lincoln Square Memorial and several other federal buildings.

I visited Washington at a time of the Cherry Blossom Festival, where some pink flowers blossom on certain trees for a few days.

Thereafter, they disappear. Several of my Edward Murrow fellows wondered why thousands of tourists would spend their money every year just to watch flowers bloom on trees in Washington.

My federal tour revealed something to me about the nature of America and Americans.

Americans, naturally love freedom of speech. They believe, issues however offensive they are, should be argued and debated in what they call "the market place of ideas".

For example, I found a group of youths at Capitol Hill and the White House carrying placards protesting against circumcision of infants. Seeing pictures and reading some of stuff on the placards, a person harbouring conservative convictions would find such offensive or rather outrageous.

Still in Washington, I had to get used to metro-transport (trains and buses) to get to places like Pentagon city for shopping or just for fun. Further, I had to adapt to the style of life out. I had to get used to tipping - a token of appreciation given to a service provider for a good service. It applies in several circumstances and places like restaurants, barbershops and private transport.

Tipping is customary for most services in the United States.

If you order a meal in restaurants, waiters/waitresses should be given a tip of 15 to 20 per cent of the bill. The same applies to taxi drivers, beauticians, manicurists and, so on.

From Washington, I headed for Los Angeles- on the West cost. Flying using Alaska Airlines, the whole trip took about five hours.

I discovered that time zones in the USA are never the same.

Washington is ahead of Los Angeles by three hours. It means when you fly from the East coast to the West Coast, you gain three hours. It is also a reality that when you fly from the West to the East Coast, you lose three hours.

Unlike Washington, Los Angeles is a different place all together. It is humid and desert like.

It is predominantly Hispanic and home to Hollywood. Further, LA is a lot faster in terms of life style - plenty of cars, ring highways, sky-scrapers. You have to be affluent to live in Los Angeles.

While in LA, I had a chance to spend a day in Hollywood.

Being at universal studios, was indeed fascinating.

It is a place where fairy tales are meant to look like reality. It is amazing how they play with graphic images to toy the human mind.

I remember rocking on a still car that felt as though it was travelling at 200km/h. Sometimes, you see and feel as though you are hitting some mountain or bouncing into a dinosaur.

The car would fly over the hills and valleys low. You get lost into that entire world and only to wake up to find out that it was sheer fiction at its best. Hollywood can make you look like a foolish dreamer trying to build a highway to the sky. There are no idle moments there!

While in Los Angeles, I happened to tap my feet into the Pacific Ocean. This was at Santa Monica.

Further, one evening in Los Angeles, with some of my colleagues, I walked over to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, where Bill Clinton (former US president) was addressing over five thousand people.

While he covered global issues and internal politics, he also spoke as a motivator to youths. He spoke on responsibility, dedication to duty, confidence and vision as a prerequisite for life's fulfilment. Listening to Mr Clinton speak, you can't resist his charm and wicked sense of humour.

After a week in Los Angeles, the next stop was Atlanta Georgia, a diverse city and pretty layback in lifestyle compared to other parts in the United States.

While flying in the skies of Georgia, I wanted to see the red hills of Georgia which slain civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr, referred to in his all-time "I have a dream" speech.

When I arrived in Atlanta, Jazz great Ray Charles's Georgia On Mind song rang in my mind and so, I knew I was in a different place all together.

If you are a Jazz fanatic, there is so much to listen to in Atlanta. I looked out for CDs by some of my favourite Jazz artists, Goerge Duke, Kim Burrell and Kirk Whalum among others.

It was while here that I happened to visit the CNN Centre, Martin Luther King Memorial Centre, Carter Presidential Centre, Athens among other places.

It is amazing how accents vary in the United States. The locals in Atlanta have that southern accent (slow but sure). People in Washington and other parts in the north are rather faster in their speech.

On Easter Sunday, I happened to go to Ebenezer Baptist Church where Dr King was pastor in the 1960s.

Raphael Warnock, a young charismatic minister is the presiding pastor of that church now.

As a matter of fact, he is the 5th pastor of Ebenezer after Martin Luther King Sr (Dr King's father).

Presiding over a big church like Ebenezer, with a great historical background, could be a huge challenge to any successor.

It means Pastor Warnock must be really good. And he is good. Which is why he could preside over a church whose membership is largely composed of senior citizens.

Further, while in Atlanta, I had the privilege to meet Joe Beasley, one of the civil rights leaders working hand-in-hand with Reverend Jesse Jackson in the Rainbow Coalition.

At the time of my visit, Mr Beasley had just returned from New Orleans, where he had gone with Rev Jackson to advocate for voting rights of locals, the majority of whom are black.

After a week in Atlanta, I left for Washington, to link up with over 120 Edward Murrow fellows from all over the world.

It was in Washington where US secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, addressed us. We also had an opportunity to ask her questions. Ultimately, America, like any other country, is not a perfect world. It has its own problems and challenges too. Challenges of immigration and homelessness in places like Los Angeles and Washington are indeed a big issue.

True, America is a super power, but there are also poor people out there, this I don't have to be told because I was there in person, not too long ago and saw things for myself.

Such is life and the Biblical teachings: "The poor will always be with you" is also considered to be true to Americans. Where there is plenty, some people still go hungry. It is a paradox of life.

Further, while in Zambia many are dying to gain weight, in America people are dying to lose weight.

Every now and so often, adverts on television are run, giving advice on how best to lose weight.

In all, America is a great robust society. A society where a nobody could be a somebody. It is all part of the American dream, rooted in a philosophy of liberty, opportunity and trust in God.

A visit to America surely shows that it is not only a land of plenty, but a true home of the proud and free. It is for this reason that some people believe that they can make it in life given an opportunity to start their life all over again in America.

It is important to note that what makes Americans different from the rest of the people in the world is confidence in their abilities to achieve greater things - this, I am not ashamed to copy from them.

End.../