



Taking the World by Storm



Tom and Jean Kostrzewa.

While visiting Tibet in 1999, this Kostrzewa-led group posed in front of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet.

up and down the coasts of South America, the former Soviet Union, China, the forbidden island of Cuba, and the top of the Earth in Tibet.

In recounting the places he's seen and the treks on which he's traversed, he connects them to global events that have rocked the planet — a few months before Tiananmen Square, as the Soviet Union was poised to pounce on Poland, right after one of dictator Idi Amin's blood baths in Uganda, etc.

Tom Kostrzewa loves to travel just about anywhere, and he's happy to share his experiences with others by leading "a charge" of eager followers.

by Tom Thinnis

Kostrzewa has been a part of the WMU Department of Political Science since 1987. He has taught a wide range of comparative courses for the department including Russian, Chinese, African, Latin American, and U.S. political systems. Most recently, he has been associated with the WMU Honors College teaching courses in comparative genocide.

Kostrzewa first began leading student trips for WMU in 1989 when a colleague's illness gave him the opportunity to take part in the railroad version of "The Semester at Sea Program." The enrolled students traveled through Finland, The Czech Republic, Hungary, Russia, Germany and all the way to Egypt over a four-month period. The Kalamazooan, with some first-person tales to add, taught courses in political science as the countryside whizzed by the students.

By the early 1990s, Kostrzewa wanted his Western students to have the opportunity that came his way through the counsel of his CMU mentor.

"Students were talking about the world in their classes," he said, "but they were not seeing it up close and personal. So let's talk about it, and then let's go see it."

That spawned a series of overseas

TOM KOSTRZEWA ALWAYS had a wanderlust to see the world, and today it's as strong as ever. In guiding intergenerational parties of students and life-long learners to the four corners of the planet for experiential, perspective-expanding adventures in education, his interest is still as keen and energetic as the day, decades ago, that he heeded the advice of an Eastern-European professor of political science at Central Michigan University who said:

"Young man, if you are so interested in all those places, then go see them for yourself."

And that is exactly what Kostrzewa (pronounced Kost-treva) did — interrupting his football-scholarship studies at CMU, polishing his hitch-hiking skills, throwing caution to the wind, and going to see the world, without having to join the Navy.

Many years later, his passport has been stamped by 83 countries throughout Africa, the Middle East, the Far East,



Swaziland was the destination for this group of WMU students in 1996.

journeys that took WMU students — and eventually interested members of the community — to Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, Indonesia, South Africa, Cuba, Vietnam and — most frequently — to Tibet. Timed for spring or summer breaks and often earning college credit, the journeys have attracted about 400 participants through the years.

“It’s pretty easy duty,” he said. “The best method is to just shut up and let the places speak for themselves. My role is to stimulate discussion about what they are seeing and what they are understanding.

“I like it,” he said. “No! I love it. It’s a very appealing part of my job, but it’s also an extension of my life’s work and who I am as a person. And I’m getting paid for doing what I truly believe in.”

In their latest incantations, the travelers are multigenerational. On the journey to Vietnam that marked the 20th anniversary of the end of the war, joining the “traditional” students were veterans of that conflict, along with those who had fought in Korea and during World War II.

Generally, there are themes for each trek. Race and public policy was the focus in South Africa. With apartheid rel-

egated to the pages of history, Kostrzewa had his students analyze what Nelson Mandela faced when the black majority began calling the shots in a newly structured nation that had been governed by a white minority.

Trips to Tibet have examined the fate of that roof-of-the-world culture in the face of the onslaught of Chinese money, power and technology.

“WMU has told me that these are the most dangerous activities in which the university is involved,” he said.

“Instruction is taking place in Third World impoverished countries, not in metropolitan Kalamazoo. I cover that in the orientation sessions. The basic message is — if people have the desire, attitude is everything.”

Kostrzewa loves the intergenerational and community aspects that add to the group dynamics. A 76-year-old World War II veteran accompanied WMU students to Vietnam; a 74-year-old female physician was part of a Tibet trip. “Once they are all on the road together,” he said, “they are all Americans, not people of different ages.”

Tibet is again on the docket in May of 2006. In recent years, he’s undertaken the study-abroad experiences as an

independent.

“I prefer a university connection,” he said, “but that brings some bureaucratic baggage and constraints. The two processes are different, but there is an equal amount of care for the safety of participants with or without programs being associated with Western. Nobody has ever gotten lost. We’ve had a bit of sickness here and there, but nothing major. That comes with the turf and orientation takes care of much of that.”

Kostrzewa’s interest in parts unknown all started when he was a youngster and began tuning into shortwave radio broadcasts originating in strange and exotic places. He wondered what those locales were really like, and how things work in Morocco and Argentina and points beyond.

Born in the Upper Peninsula community of St. Ignace, Kostrzewa grew up in Mt. Pleasant, the son of a 35-year veteran of the Michigan State Police.

A good enough athlete at Mt. Pleasant Sacred Heart Academy to earn a football scholarship to CMU, he played on the Chippewas’ national-championship team that featured Matt Means, a Kalamazoo Central High School alum-

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Kostrzewa

nus, and quarterback Mike Frankowiak, who was drafted and played for the Denver Broncos in the National Football League.

"I was on the team for two seasons until I blew out my knee in a scrimmage," Kostrzewa said. He had enough vision to realize that football was "the fun and games of college" to be enjoyed, but that he was really there to chart a course for his future.

Majoring in political science, he said: "I had always been interested in the rest of the world and in foreign languages."

Kostrzewa sampled a bit of life abroad as a summer student at the University of Munich in Germany, but that was only an hors d'oeuvre for somebody craving an eight-course international banquet.

The 20-year-old adventurer decided to heed the advice of his professorial mentor and put his formal studies on hold in



Student travelers, along with a Vietnam War veteran, share a meal with local residents during their 1995 trip marking 20 years since the end of the war.

1974. He was off on a two-year, unplanned, impromptu journey that took him around the world.

"I earlier had the privilege to interview and talk with Studs Terkel about his approach to writing and storytelling," said Kostrzewa, who took a few journalism courses at CMU. "That's how I was able to help make ends meet during those two years. I was something of a syndicated journalist who submitted stories about common people in out-of-the-way places in the Studs Terkel style, which had always inspired me. He lets people talk and guides them along in telling their stories before making his own comment or two.

"I found that existence so fascinating going from place to place that I never really came back to the way things had been for me before," he said. "It was experiential education to complement what I had learned in the classroom."

Nothing in the classroom could match the educational clout of coming into contact with anthropologist Dian Fossey, the "Gorillas in the Mist" heroine in Rwanda, or the human

species of guerillas — the Sandinista types operating in the martial-law environment of Nicaragua. And he was hitchhiking across Iran when the shah was in the process of being overthrown.

“It was a two-year hike around the world,” he said. “And it was a life-changing two years, writing about all kinds of people and places, from road workers in Guatemala to copper miners in Zambia.”

In Turkey he schooled people in how to use power tools. In small villages in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Nepal, he taught English.

“It was a dream-like existence,” he said, “and it became almost second nature to me.”

Admittedly fatigued, Kostrzewa eventually pointed his compass back toward the United States, specifically the comparatively mundane world of the CMU campus where he completed work on his undergraduate degree.

The future WMU faculty member recharged his batteries by teaching at a high school in eastern Tennessee and working as a contractor. But wanderlust had never left his soul. By 1978, Kostrzewa was bound for China, six years after President Richard Nixon’s historic visit there and at a time when “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” had triggered the effort to “normalize” relations between the two world powers.

“I went to see whether there had been any changes,” he said. “I went to see what I hoped would be a different China. But I was very disappointed. It was still a very authoritarian and tightly controlled country.”

Kostrzewa had arranged for a teaching job at Nankai University. He “starred” in a local television show, “Meet a Foreigner.” He taught courses in both English as a spoken language and English for economists.

“It was supposed to be China’s big coming-out party,” he recalled, “but it didn’t quite come out that way. I was so naïve, and so was China.”

He left knowing that someday he



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Tom Kostrzewa became friends with Li Yuan Hong, his assigned "minder," during his 1980 trip to China.

The summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro was one of the stops during Tom Kostrzewa's 1979 tour of Tanzania.



wanted to return. He also left with the knowledge that his days as a bachelor were soon to end.

"I'm in Beijing, a city of 10 million people and only a handful of foreigners," he said. "I'm walking along a back street, not even on a main road, and who do I meet coming the other way?"

"Who" was his soon-to-be wife, Jean Ogilvie, a born-and-raised Kalamazooan who was studying in Taiwan under the auspices of WMU. "What's the chances of that happening — probably the only two people from Michigan in China at the time and our paths cross on a back street."

Kostrzewa can almost match that entry in the "It's a Small, Small, Small World" derby. He was hitchhiking along a road headed for Afghanistan when, approaching from the other direction with his thumb out bound for India, was an acquaintance from Mt. Clemens.

Within a month of being back from China, Kostrzewa embarked on another globetrotting mission — this one took him from Flint, down the west coast of South America and back up the east coast, using his thumb to flag down rides. Again, his talent for carpentry

helped provide meals along the way.

A year later, as the 1980s neared, Kostrzewa returned to Africa, via a plane ride to London and more hitchhiking to Greece.

"There is a perspective I received from an aged Indian I once met," he said. "It's all about walking, water and will-power. When you are on land, you can walk just about anywhere you want to go."

With the arrival of the new decade, Kostrzewa was now a duo, and he and Jean returned to China for a two-year sojourn. The first of their two sons, Ben, was born there.

"This time," he said, "we traveled the whole country. When it was time we thought to return to the United States, we boarded a train in Beijing with Paris as our destination. The Trans-Siberian Railroad took us through Poland at the time of the unrest among its unions. There was also a short stay in Oslo at a

peace institute.

"Back in the United States," he said, laughing at the memory, "We had no money and a child. There is great meaning in wanting to change the world, but that doesn't pay the bills."

The couple located in Kalamazoo where Kostrzewa completed his studies for a master's in international relations and Chinese minority policy. Later came a doctorate from Notre Dame in his specialty.

When he's not being "On the Road Again" a la Willie Nelson, Kostrzewa is single-handedly restoring his neighborhood with the carpentry he has practiced since his 11th birthday. He and Jean, who owns Mid-America Psychological Services Inc. near The Moors of Portage, have purchased eight residences in their neighborhood. In addition to restoring them as

single-family homes to be sold to families, the first new house in 40 years was recently built in the area.

“We call this neighborhood ‘Little Tibet’ because almost all of the people who live here have been to Tibet with us,” Kostrzewa said. “Back in 1989, Jean and I made a choice to stay in Kalamazoo because we love the city. If we were going to stay, then we were going to get involved and keep it a great place to live.”

Because of that commitment, Kostrzewa was appointed to the city’s Housing Board of Appeals, eventually chairing that advisory body. Through that connection, he saw the impact that absentee landlords were having on houses in his neighborhood. When those buildings went up for sale, Tom and Jean bought them.

Another great influence the Kostrzewas have had is on their children. Son Ben, who is fluent in the Chinese language, graduated from George Washington University and is now enrolled in the University of Washington School of Law where he is studying East Asian law. Alex is a freshman at the University of Michigan, majoring in Chinese and Japanese. Both have traveled with their parents around the world.

But there seems to be no place like home: “We love to live here — and to live in the world,” he said. “Those two options complement each other very nicely because Kalamazoo is a great place to come back to. I might not be able to change what is happening in China or Tibet, but I can do something here.” 🐘

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By Angela Gross

Angela wrote this poem about living in the Andes — in Quito, Ecuador. She works in the international programs office at Kalamazoo College and sometimes teaches Spanish, German or English as a second language. Armed with a BA in German from Kalamazoo College and MA in teaching languages and linguistics from Gerogetown University, she lived in Germany for two years and Ecuador for five and a half, returning to the United States in 2002.