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Foreign visitor program offers slice of U.S. life

United Press International
WASHINGTON — Stewart Edwards learned years ago never to cross his leg in front of an Arab visitor.

"It's offensive to show him the sole of your foot," explained the program officer for Meridian House International's Visitor Program Service.

Edwards said he and 30 to 40 co-workers must learn foreign customs to "avoid the effects of cultural shock" when dealing with their yearly 1,000 foreign visitors.

VPS is one program of Meridian House — a 10-year-old private, non-profit institution, specializing in services to international visitors. Meridian House is one of four agencies under contract to the International Communication Agency to assist the 2,000 foreign professionals who are invited to the United States each year.

About 500 of the VPS visitors come on pre-planned group projects — Latin American educators or East Asian graduate student leaders, for example — and 500 have individually tailored programs.

"The purpose is to put such people in direct contact with Americans with similar professional interests with the thought that both will learn from the experience and in the hope that some lasting contacts will be made," said Rufus Z. Smith, VPS executive director.

"It is also to provide the visitor with what we hope will be a realistic exposure to American society in general — our problems as well as our successes, our political process, our economy, our history and traditions, our technology, our sense of values," he said.

"This is not with the thought that we're teaching anybody anything, or

that they'll go back to their countries and try to emulate us, but that at least they will have a realistic understanding of what the United States is all about and what it's trying to do in the world," Smith said.

"The strength of our program is in the fact that we'll send visitors anywhere they want to go. We don't isolate them from any part of society," Smith said.

That has included sending a Brazilian broadcast editor to Los Angeles to view the taping of a television show; a French economist to South Falls, S.D., to learn about agricultural marketing; a cardiologist from Barbados to Newport, R.I., to "age in water sports" and visit a community health care center.

The program team even has tracked down distant relatives of old acquaintances and arranged visits.

Each visitor costs the government about \$4,000, including overseas transportation, U.S. travel, and \$55-per-day allowance.

A small town sojourn and a visit to an American home is included in most all programs.

Arriving in a small town, a foreign visitor often is treated as a celebrity.

Smith likes to tell about the Tunisian provincial governor who said they were interested in viewing agricultural development in an area with a climate similar to their own. VPS sent them to Indio, Calif., known as the almond capital of the United States.

"Our contact met them at the airport with the high school band, the mayor, the fire department, the police chief and a red carpet," Smith said.

Not all visitors are a delight. Some expect a high level state visit, complete with chauffeur and an appointment with President Carter. Others feel they already are an authority on the United States or the profession.

But Smith said he and his staff convinced the program is worth while.

"It's very difficult to measure the tangible results of a program of this kind. We can point to very prominent world leaders today who years or so ago came on this program before they were ever big names," Smith said.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, French Prime Minister Raymond Barre, former West German Prime Minister Willy Brandt, and British opposition leader Margaret Thatcher are some mentioned in a "I knew her when" story by program officers.



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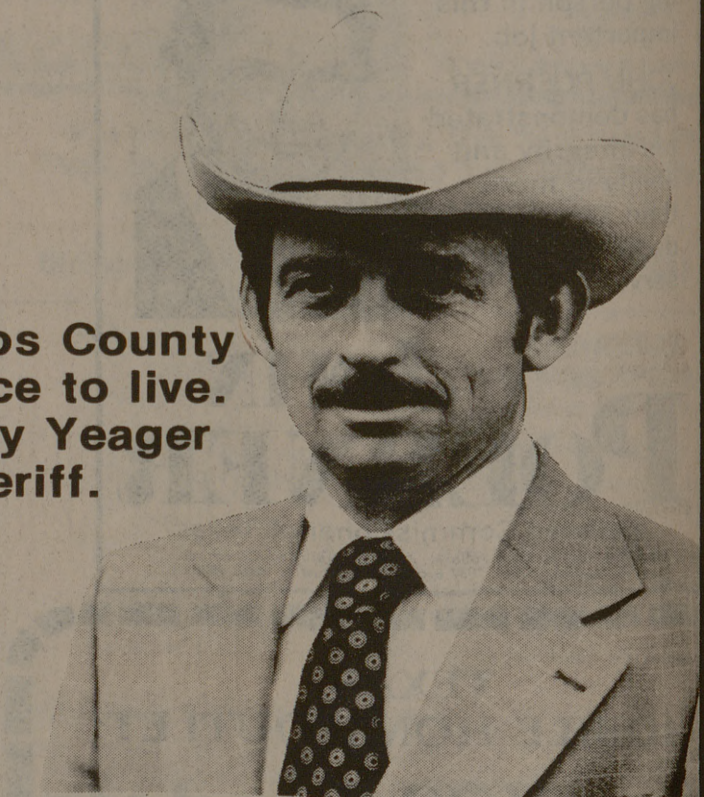
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