
Plus

THE FRISBEE DIPLOMAT

Ron Kaufman's "secret weapons" are music, soap bubbles, balloons and Frisbees.

It began as a lark—a one-shot sideline to Ron Kaufman's tremendously successful mail-order Frisbee business. The plan was to take 24 American Frisbee players to Mainland China for two weeks, where they would give demonstrations, lessons—and hundreds of Frisbees—to the Chinese people. But that 1985 trip of the "China Flyer Friendship Team" turned out to be just the beginning of what some have called Kaufman's "Frisbee diplomacy." It has become, in effect, a peace mission—a way to have people smiling and playing together, cooperating instead of competing.

The energetic Kaufman, a San Diego resident, has since taken another Citizen Diplomacy trip to China and two to the Soviet Union. And each one the group of traveling Americans is armed with "secret weapons": music, hula hoops, Frisbees, pogo sticks, soap bubbles, Teddy bears and balloons. "Play crosses every cultural barrier," Kaufman explains confidently. "It's something everyone likes to do. It is the best common ground for friendship, and through friendship we will have peace."

Kaufman's business card identifies him as a "Participation Specialist." Getting people to participate together is what he does best, and the bigger and more incredible the event, the better. Take Kaufman's most recent trip to the Soviet Union, for example. He discovered that a week-long arts spectacular was going to be staged in Arbat Square in Moscow during the time his group was there. Several thousand people were expected to attend. Kaufman's

wheels started spinning. He managed to arrange a meeting with the organizers of the program and convinced them to let him create a role one evening for his 64 Americans.

"Before we went on," remembers Kaufman, "the audience was standing there watching the performance without much response—that's traditionally Russian. It's not like in America, where people go, 'All right! That's great!' But in the middle of their show we introduced an element of celebration. We got them singing and dancing in the streets—something that ordinarily doesn't happen in Moscow streets. Americans are like sparklers in the international world, even a little bit crazy. I see this as something we can use in bringing the Soviets a gift—in the form of play and celebration." Helping Americans to get to know the Soviet culture, too, is an important part of Kaufman's plan to bridge the gap. His understanding of the differences and similarities between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. is something he imparts to his tour groups before they leave home. He also gives them a chance to discuss prejudices, expectations and preconceived notions about the Soviets, so that they'll be open to what happens during their visit, rather than blinded by prior assessment. "Citizen Diplomacy isn't about comparing one culture to the other," says Kaufman. "It's about me being willing to temporarily step out of my culture and fully step into and experience yours."

Kaufman is convinced that the first priority of the ordinary Soviet people is peace. "World War II left its mark

by Ellie Kahn

on them. They've been bombed, they lost 23 million people and many towns were leveled. I've heard over and over again that they don't want any more war," he reports.

Appreciating Strengths

Kaufman, who has a degree in International History from Brown University, says that, while he is aware of the weaknesses and limitations of the Soviet culture, he has also been impressed by what he sees as definite benefits. "It's a priority that everyone in the Soviet Union have a place to sleep, that everybody be fed and have a job," he notes. "Of course, their system doesn't encourage innovation, motivation and individual entrepreneurialism. So there are tradeoffs.

"But in the Soviet Union when you walk down the main street in any major city and you pass the grocery store, you will see 20 or 30 baby carriages out front—with the babies in them. Mommy's inside shopping. If a kid starts to cry, whoever's walking down the street stops, picks the kid up, comforts it, puts it back in the carriage and walks on. In the United States people can't do that because they're afraid their children are going to be stolen!" According to Kaufman,

Six different Soviet ministries have asked Kaufman to create a big event for New Year's, 1988, in a stadium holding 10,000 people. He's already making plans for huge outdoor video screens with simultaneous link-ups between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

many crimes that we consider commonplace would be unimaginable in the U.S.S.R.

Another difference, suggests Kaufman, is the issue of ownership, which greatly influences the Soviets' attitude about global conflict. "In the Soviet Union, all of the weaponry are made by state-owned industries. In the event that the State said, 'Let's cut in half the weapons budget and move it over to tractors, hospitals and schools,' there would be a need for retraining and a shift of allocation of resources and people, but they could do it because they're just taking money out of one state pocket and putting it into the other. But who would pay U.S. companies that manufacture weapon-



Ron Kaufman and local police in the Soviet city of Baku. Here, Kaufman says, he is demonstrating a skill necessary in the Soviet Union: "Changing the subject when one is caught on a lawn."

ry to retool for tractors? Who's going to tell a company whose entire existence is predicated on offense or defense contracts to get into another line of business?"

Although Kaufman can speak intensely about politics, problems and the threat of war, his real commitment is to allow people to learn about each other through fun and play, so the problems and threats will—hopefully—be lessened. His tour company, World Peace Tours, is an expression of that commitment. The people who travel with Kaufman needn't be Frisbee fanatics but they must be willing to have fun. And even more important, they have to want to connect with the Soviet people, rather than watch them from the other side of the street or a tour bus.

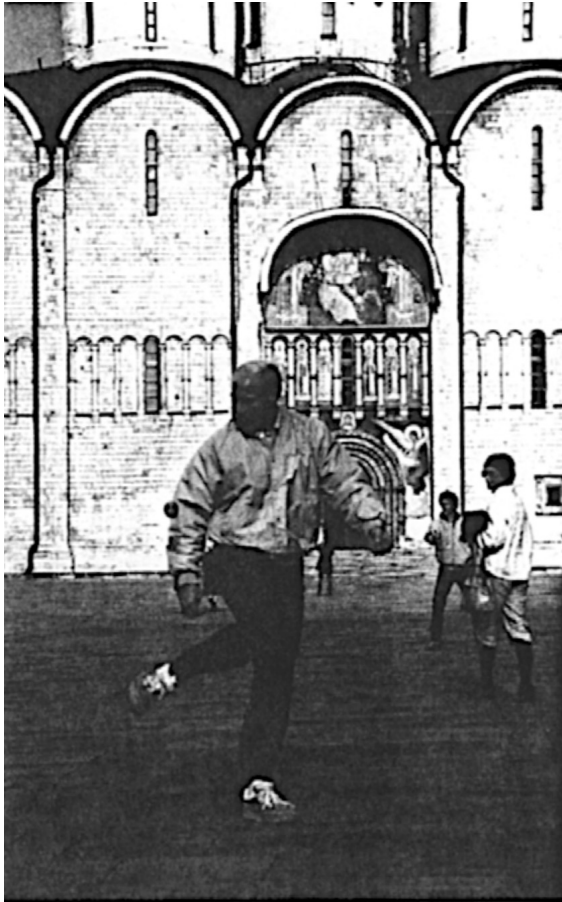
When there are Frisbees, music and pogo sticks around, there's no need to know the same nouns and verbs and adjectives. Play is a language that crosses all cultures. But in the Soviet Union, Kaufman points out, one can't simply drop into a park or a school with a carload of Frisbees and expect to make meaningful

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bonds. “The Soviets need to have a context around anything we’re going to do together,” he says. It helps enormously to be affiliated, as Kaufman’s groups have been, with an organization that has developed a history of trust, such as the Center for Soviet-American Dialogue, based in Bellevue, Washington.

The Citizen Diplomacy groups each have a bilingual guide, and the travelers carry business-type cards to



Citizen Diplomacy traveler Greg Cortopassi gets into a game of footbag inside the Kremlin, near the Church of the Ascension.

give away with the Russian translation of the following: “Hello. I’m a visitor from the United States. It’s an honor to be here. I come bringing expressions of peace and understanding from my family and friends in the U.S.A. Thank you for extending your kindness to me.” The cards, the music, the toys and gifts create an opportunity for connections to happen—even if that is simply in the form of two people sitting and smiling at each other, or exchanging lapel pins, a popular friendship-sealing gesture in the U.S.S.R.

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Kaufman is not shy in his attempts to get press and television coverage of his trips, and plans a documentary about his work. All that helps to create the image of a vigorous promoter. But his product isn’t Coors or Pepsi—it’s Peace. And Kaufman doesn’t see anything wrong with turning a profit along the way: “People make money promoting war...why shouldn’t we make money promoting peace?”

Happy New Year, World

While he may not yet be reaping any substantial financial benefits, Kaufman is definitely excited by the impact he’s having. As a result of the January 3, 1987, celebration in Arbat Square, he says, representatives from six different Soviet ministries asked him to create an even bigger event for New Year’s, 1988, in a stadium holding 10,000 people. Kaufman is making plans for huge outdoor video screens with simultaneous link-ups between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Such technology, he says, has led to “a whole new phenomenon, where I can be in Moscow, seeing you on a screen from Times Square, and I see you seeing me waving on the screen. It definitely lessens the distance. Once you can have such a wide interactive experience, that person over there is no longer the enemy.”

But a Soviet-U.S. celebration by video is only a start. Kaufman’s trips, he hopes, will fuel another dream—that of a world-wide holiday. “As an event designer, I ask, What has never happened before that we can make happen? It’s fun seeing what humans are willing to get into, and what the energy is like when we do,” Kaufman enthuses. But more than that, what Kaufman wants to create is something that will teach people compassionate human values—compassion towards themselves and towards others. “I want to see people be happier about being alive, to be more forgiving more quickly, and,” he says, “to be willing to extend a hand in friendship.”

In spite of the many differences between the Soviet and American cultures, Kaufman notes one very significant similarity: “The U.S.S.R. says, ‘There’s not enough to go around, and the best way to handle that is through Communism.’ The U.S.A. says, ‘There’s not enough to go around and the best way to handle that is through Capitalism.’ Obviously, what they have in common is the erroneous assumption that there isn’t enough to go around. The point of all of my work is to communicate that there is enough, and you do that by working not only through the political system, but through themes common to humanity.” One theme that Ron Kaufman knows is common to humanity is play. And fortunately, the world is not likely to ever run out of music, soap bubbles, Frisbees and fun.