Iowa Students Arrested in Africa

Freetown, Sierra Leone, July 2006

Two Iowa students were arrested and held by police in the dilapidated capital of this West African country that was ravaged by civil war in the late 1990’s. Mary Powell and Serge Gia-chetti were visiting the All As One Children’s Center from which Powell’s younger brother, Gibrila, had been adopted in 2002. They were strolling idly through the streets when they passed an interesting mural painted on the wall of a local building. “It was a really colorful and beautiful mural,” Powell said, “warning the citizens that Satan was on the loose.” Rashly, without getting prior approval from local authorities or seeking advice from the US consulate, the students made an impulsive and disastrous decision: they photographed the mural. “We just figured, Hey, we’re Americans,” Powell recalled, “If we can invade Iraq, we can photograph walls.” Uniformed policemen at a nearby check point immediately seized the young Americans. They were forcefully informed that they could not take pictures without a permit.

“They warned us that if we were formally arrested, and if we were officially charged, and if we went to court, it could be very bad for us.” Powell said. “They used the word ‘if’ a lot.” Powell, who has had some experience traveling in poor countries, asked the police, “Can you sell us a permit?” Luckily, in Sierra Leone the police can not only sell permits, but can collect fines, right on the spot, as long as you pay in cash. “It’s a really efficient system,” says Powell, “it cuts way down on court costs.”

The police informed the students that the cost of the permit and associated fines would be 200,000 Leones (about $50). Acting as her own attorney, Powell suggested an alternative figure of 100,000 Leones. Eventually a compromise of 150,000 was reached. “And they gave us a handwritten permit on a scrap of paper,” Powell said. “So we felt really legitimate after that.”

The students returned to Iowa after 10 days in Africa but faced some emotional fallout among family and friends. “She was usually such a good girl, how could she do this?” Powell’s mother Irene reported tearfully, “how could she do this?” Powell’s father, Mark Montgomery, expressed shock and anger. “We raised her with strong traditional values,” he said, “It never occurred to us that she’d start taking pictures of walls.” To atone for tarnishing the image of American youth abroad, the students presented an exhibition of their photos, with all proceeds from picture sales going to the All As One Children’s Center. The exhibition raised about $3000 in much-needed funds for the organization.
Getting the Most Out of Family

Pennsville, New Jersey, Dec. 4th

During the recent holidays, many of us have been reminded of the importance of extended family – aunts, uncles, cousins and our dearest friends – in making our emotional lives more meaningful. But experts say they can do more than that. “Extended family can be an excellent source of uncompensated labor,” says Dr. M. Montgomery of the Institute for Family Economics. “Sometimes you can manipulate them into helping you out, buying you things, even giving you food and shelter.” He described one client who moved in with her brother in Detroit for 3 months to recuperate from Epstein Barr virus with cardiomyopathy. The woman’s sister-in-law did all of the cooking, laundry, shopping, absolutely everything. “The beauty of this scheme,” says Montgomery, “is that when my client eventually recovers, she doesn’t have to tell her brother. As long as she claims to be sick, she can continue to milk them for free room and board.”

How do you know which family members will let you freeload? Montgomery advises to “Look for someone who volunteers to take most of the burden whenever a crisis arises. That person makes an excellent target.” For example, Mark M., a Midwestern college professor, describes how his sister Shawn and her husband Michael took charge last December when his father was hospitalized with severe depression, and his mother with heart problems. “They were doing everything for Mom and Dad,” he said, “calling the doctors, arranging medications, visiting them every day. It just seemed so unfair!” Wife Irene was also appalled by the inequity “Why should his parents get all of the attention?” she said, “If Shawn and Michael will make big sacrifices for family, we definitely wanted a piece of that action.” The couple managed to talk Shawn into stopping in Iowa last month during a business trip. “We didn’t really need her,” Irene said, “we just asked her to come help decorate our Christmas tree.” This is what Dr. Montgomery calls a masterstroke. “Getting relatives to fly hundreds of miles to perform trivial tasks is the ‘holy grail’ of family exploitation.”

Many people make the mistake of thinking only blood relations can be hoodwinked in this way. “Don’t overlook family friends,” Montgomery advises, “you’d be surprised how many of them can be abused as well.” He gives the example of Iowans Mike and Tinker (not their real names) who allowed friends Kathy and Jeff Streitz (their real names) to care for Mike’s octogenarian parents, Eddie and Dean (almost their real names). “It’s amazing what these two have done for someone else’s parents!” Mike says. “We were going to ask them to raise our sons, too” says Tinker, “but we thought that might be going too far.”

Economist Montgomery advises caution however, when maneuvering family and friends into caring for your elderly parents. “Remember, you must somehow keep these renegades altruists out of the will!”

ASK DR. GIBRILA

Dear Dr. G,

On Christmas morning I was thrilled to discover I’d gotten a new Boston terrier puppy. The only person who could have possibly have gotten it for me is my husband, but he claims to know nothing about it. He says that for 25 years he’s complained about our having dogs (which is true) and would never, ever dream of getting another one. He claims the dog was left in our house by a mysterious one-armed man. I don’t know why he’s saying these things. Should I confront him about this obvious lie or not?

Ticked Off in Grinnell

Your husband is exhibiting behavior often seen in borderline psychopaths. Having performed what he considers a contemptible act — getting another dog — he simply denies it ever happened. Your husband, I’m afraid, is one sick puppy.

“I don’t smell any one-armed man.”

* Though technically not a real doctor, Gibrila does wear glasses that make him look very smart.

WE ARE EXPANDING OUR THEATRE SECTION!

In addition to covering Broadway and Off-Broadway shows, our critics will shortly be beginning reviewing in a new theatrical category: As-You-Can-Get shows. The first will be a new original comedy by Mark Montgomery, GOOD ANSWER, to be performed the first two weekends in May by the Grinnell Community Theatre. While plays in this category may have humble beginnings, but when revised and polished, the best works can aspire to production in such venues as Tama, Newton, or, in a few exceptional cases, even Otumwa.

Scientist Proves Cisterns Are Easy Targets for Terrorists

Grinnell, Iowa, January 5th

Recent experiments in Central Iowa have revealed that the unused cisterns in some of the nation’s oldest houses are vulnerable to terrorist attacks. A cistern is an underground tank used to store captured rainwater; they were common in the Midwest at the turn of the last century. In the summer of 2005 amateur chemist Kurt Montgomery and three of his young colleagues demonstrated that these seemingly innocuous features of older homes can easily be turned into deadly weapons. Like many great scientific discoveries, this one was serendipitous. “We were actually conducting experiments to determine whether gasoline, when poured on the ground, would ignite when a lit match was dropped on it. Almost as an afterthought, members of the research team wondered what would happen if gasoline were poured through the hole in the cistern’s [concrete] lid.” When a flaming stick was dropped into the hole, the aerated gasoline exploded, blowing the two-inch-thick concrete lid ten feet in the air and ripping four sheets of siding off of Montgomery’s own home. “Our findings were pretty definitive,” Montgomery said, “if terrorists start pouring gasoline into our nation’s cisterns, many citizens will be in grave danger.”

Other scientists have challenged Montgomery’s methodology. Dr. Irene Powell, of Grinnell College, deemed the experiment “incredibly stupid and unbelievably dangerous.” She is a vocal advocate of cutting funding to the cistern project. “I don’t ever want to see this done again,” she told Hog & Home, “and I mean NEVER!”

TIGER FOOTBALL

Grinnell Tiger freshmen finished the year with 2 wins, 1 tie, and 5 losses. The freshmen had trouble mounting a passing attack, so most of the yardage gained was on the ground with halfbacks Kurt Montgomery and Jake O’Polka. Montgomery led the team in yards rushing and also played a key role as linebacker on defense.