

**Personal Account of the International Association of Social Work with Groups (IASWG) Symposium**  
**Kruger National Park South Africa June 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> 2018**

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**Introduction**

The 2018 IASWG Symposium was held at Kruger National Park in South Africa. This was the first time the Symposium had been held outside of North America. I recall attending last year's membership meeting at New York University on a hot sticky evening and Reineth Prinsloo getting up and announcing: "Next year the Symposium would be held in South Africa at Kruger National Park and that she promised it would be a symposium we would never forget!" Well, she wasn't kidding!

I really don't know where to begin with the superlatives to describe just how wonderful the whole experience was. For me the journey was amazing, everything just worked like clockwork--the bus from Portland, Maine to Boston Logan Airport, the flight from Logan to Amsterdam--hey, I even had a priest sitting next to me. Now, if that wasn't a good sign!

When I arrived in Amsterdam, I bumped into Anna Noska and Kyle McGee and that made me feel a little more confident. Then things got even better because I ended up having three seats to myself for the ten hour flight to Johannesburg. I guess the polite thing would have been to have gone and found Anna and Kyle, but three seats to myself, sorry that wasn't going to happen.

**Arrival in South Africa**

In Johannesburg, Anna and I walked to immigration together. Again, I was very appreciative of her company as the airport terminal signs were a little confusing. However, I had made arrangements to stay at the Aero Lodge which was a short drive from the airport. Anna had arranged to stay at the airport hotel for the night.

Yet again, just as the e-mail had instructed, I called the number for the hotel and within ten minutes there was my ride. I must admit that where I was being taken I had no idea. The lodge was in a gated community and by the time I arrived everything was closed. A gentleman showed me to my bungalow and I had somewhere comfortable to sleep for the night.

The next morning I found the dining room and sat next to the wood burning stove. A lady came in and she remarked how chilly it was. So, I invited her to join me at the table next to the fire. Well, this was another wonderful opportunity. She informed that she was retired and lived in Alaska; however, she was in South Africa working for a veterinarian group who dispensed medications to landowners for their animals. She would be undertaking this work for the next several weeks, living in tents and traveling hundreds of miles. She also informed that she had visited Maine and thought it to be a beautiful state.

### **Journey to Kruger**

Now, all of this had transpired over the course of 36 hours and I hadn't even arrived at Kruger yet; but before I got to my final destination I had another wonderful group work experience. Ten of us had arranged through Just Transfers to take a van from Johannesburg to Kruger. The plan was for us to meet at the information desk in the International Arrivals Terminal.

Once again, everyone was on time. No one's flight had been delayed, no one had missed a connection, so the merry, but somewhat jet lagged, band of group work travelers all boarded the van for Kruger. If my memory serves me correctly, the group included the following: Lorrie, Peter, Joan, Emily, Anne, Emma, Mamadou, Greg and Lisa.

I should at this point apologize to my fellow travelers due to the fact that I had arrived the night before and managed to get some sleep at my hotel, but for those who had just arrived and had been on flights for approximately fifteen hours, they all looked extremely tired. However, I was extremely perky and keen to make conversation. Peter, to his great credit, indulged me in polite conversation, but for the others my chatter must have been extremely annoying.

That aside, what was so wonderful about the journey to Kruger by van was the opportunity it gave us to see the country. As we left the city, we got to see some of the places where people lived. There was a stark contrast in that some of the homes looked like metal shacks, while in other places there were brick homes that were not yet completed. At the other extreme we passed homes that were extremely grand.

Another thing that I noticed was the difference in stores and people selling goods. Some of the towns we passed through had strip malls and a multitude of stores. In other places along the way, there would be just a brick building by

the side of the road, which had a painted sign on it which said: "haircuts." Another part of the journey there were people selling fruit and goods at the side of the road.

As we drove further north, the terrain hanged. It became much more mountainous and we could see what appeared to be forest fires in the distance. Our journey took us through numerous small towns, past large orange groves, and also what appeared to be vast forests of pine trees. Another sight that stuck with me was the color of the sky. It was just this bright blue sky. In the States during the winter, the sky is grey and extremely cloudy, but here it was extremely bright.

At around 3.30 p.m. we arrived at Kruger National Park. After completing some necessary paper work, we were allowed to enter. It was like being on a school bus. As soon as we drove into Kruger, we saw an elephant, some zebras, a couple of giraffes, buffalo, impalas, baboons and Vervet monkey's. There were lots of ooh's and awww's. "Look over here", "stop the bus". Cell phones and cameras taking pictures--to say that we were all very excited would be an understatement!

### **Welcome**

We then were driven to the conference center, where, once again, much to my amazement we were greeted by Reineth and it appeared her entire family. She was hugging people, thanking them for coming, saying over and over "welcome", "welcome". Again, this was a recurring theme through the time of the Symposium. Everyone was so friendly, happy, engaging, and genuinely concerned about each other. At the reception desk, the staff couldn't have been more helpful. "Welcome to Kruger, your bungalow is Number 106, please take a map, and please let us know if there is anything we can help you with."

### **Catching up with Friends**

The other wonderful aspect of attending the IASWG Symposium is catching up with friends, and I hadn't been in the place five minutes and already the conversations had started. I have to admit I am extremely drawn to and fond of my Irish contingent. Hence, within an hour of arriving I was sitting on their porch, drinking wine, numerous cups of tea, catching up on family news, telling stories, and laughing so much. I was having so much fun that I didn't realize the time,

which frequently happens when I visit family in Ireland. I call it Irish time. It's as if all the constraints of the clock go out of the window. No one seems concerned about the actual time they are much more focused on the moment.

### **Visit to After School Community Program**

On Thursday two busloads of us went to two community centers: The Amukelani Center and the Siyakhula Center. It was my understanding that these two programs provide daily meals to over a 100 children after school.

I really don't know where to begin to describe how wonderful this visit was, but I must give credit to some of the following folks who were at the Amukelani Center. Firstly, the student volunteers who were attending the Symposium. The way they played and engaged with the children. The face painting they did, oh my goodness!! Then there was the gentleman who came with a drum set, including a base drum. There were all these children sitting on the ground, with sticks and plastic paint can's following his every drum beat and playing along. It was just spectacular!

Yet, we were there for only an afternoon's visit. Yet each day there are a number of volunteers who cook a meal for the children to have each day. According to the director of the program, this is the only meal the children get. Many of them are living with older siblings, or are taking care of younger brothers and sisters themselves. While our visit was a fun filled afternoon, I couldn't help wondering what life must be like on a daily basis for so many of these children

### **Boma Braai Dinner & Informal Gathering**

On Thursday evening, I attended the Boma Braai Dinner and my goodness the food was absolutely wonderful. Even more impressive was the number of people in attendance. As I already alluded to, I was in the company of my Irish contingent, hence, we were on Irish time so a couple of the staff helped me move a large table and we were able to join everyone. What was even more noticeable was that it appeared that there were games of musical chairs going on. People kept getting up and going over to different tables. People were hugging one another, kissing one another; there was a great deal of chatter and, more importantly, laughter. It was just a wonderful fun evening.

### **The Symposium**

On Friday morning the “formal” Symposium commenced. Once again, we were treated to the singing and dancing of the Giyani Society for the Aged Choir. What a spectacular performance they put on for everyone. Usually you go to an opening breakfast reception and there are polite and extremely formal events, but this was loud, colorful, and invigorating. The cameras and phones were out recording the event. If you were half asleep when you walked in, you were wide awake when they the choir started singing and dancing. The other wonderful aspect was the breakfast. It was a full English cooked breakfast! For the boy who grew up in the UK and often dreams of this meal, life doesn’t get much better. They even had real tea. Oh—my-- goodness!

By now I am sure that many of you are starting to observe some recurring themes. These being: excellent food, great company, lots of conversations, and a great deal of laughter.

I should also point out that every session that I attended was very well attended. The presentations were wonderful and, at the end of every session, each presenter was given a small gift as a thank you for their presentation.

Another noticeable issue was the number of students who were in attendance. For me, students really make the symposium. Students bring to the event so much vitality and excitement. Their importance was further illustrated to me on numerous occasions during the Symposium. Firstly, during the community visit it was the students who were doing the face painting and playing soccer and frisbee with the children. After my own presentation a number of students came up to me and thanked me. Also, during the Symposium it was the students who were so helpful. If you went up to the information desk, they were always willing to assist you or answer a question. On one occasion one student said: “let me take you there.”

### **Saturday Night Game Drive & Bush Braai Dinner**

Following the two days of plenary sessions, workshops, poster presentations, membership meetings, and board meetings, it was time for the Game Drive. Oh my goodness! We all boarded the numerous buses that had been arranged for us. Little did I realize the spectacle that was about to occur--elephants, giraffes, zebras, baboons, and impalas. Elephants so close either right in front of you or right by the side of the bus, it was just unbelievable. I realized that although I had seen these animals at London Zoo as a child, seeing them in their natural habitat was just amazing. I

really could not get over the size of the elephants. Despite their size they walked methodically. As for the giraffes, they were just so graceful in their movements. The fact that you could see them above the tops of the tree line was incredible.

Following the Game Drive was the Bush Braai Dinner and if Thursday's informal dinner was great, this was just out of this world. At this event I had the good fortune to sit with Dave Ward, his wife, Anne, and Jenni Fleming, the editor of *Group Work*. Now, I knew Dave from hearing his voice during a number of Group Work editorial board meetings. But this was the first time I had met him in person and I found out that Dave is a huge football fan and supports Plymouth Argyle. Now anytime I find someone who can talk about football, especially about teams in the lower echelons of the English Football League, I am a happy chappy.

So there we were talking about Plymouth Argyle, Southend United, Exeter City's and Colchester United's of this world And I informed Dave that in 1969, I had seen Watford beat Plymouth Argyle at Vicarage Road and get promoted to the old Division 2 of the football league. The other scary thing was that I could still remember the names of some of the players; but, at the same time we were being served this amazing food--beef, lamb, chicken, and a rice dish to die for. There was also wine on the table. They then announced that we could go and get dessert. Oh my goodness, there was this warm custard over a sponge treacle pudding. Well Dave and I were like a couple of naughty schoolboys. Could we go and get more we asked?

### **Outdoor Experiential Session**

The next day was the outdoor experiential session. While the night before I had reminisced about Southend and Plymouth, at this event I actually got to play football. (Well, kind of.) The folks who worked and lived at Kruger had challenged us to a game of footy. At first there were all these little kids on the pitch. Ok, I thought, I can give this a go. But, then they miraculously disappeared and all these big fellas showed up who were half my age and had soccer boots and the rest of the football attire.

It was not too bad of a drubbing, only three nil; but, once again I had such a great time. In my little brain I was 14 or 15 years of age pretending I was George Best. Only problem was that I infrequently had the ball and spent most of the time chasing these big fellas around the pitch. For about forty-five minutes it was a lot of fun.

We also had a tug of war tournament between the staff and Symposium participants. I won't tell you what the outcome of that was. All I will say is that instead of going backwards we went forwards.

Following these two events there was a closing ceremony which was very touching. Again, the impetus for this was the students who had been working at the Symposium. One of them read a beautiful poem dedicated to Reineth. I do hope someone has a copy of it. Maybe it could get published in *Group Work* or in the proceedings of the Symposium.

### **Sunday Afternoon Walking Safari**

After our athletic events morning, I went on a walking safari with a number of the folks I had driven to Kruger with from Johannesburg. I don't know if they were getting their own back on me or have one extra seat for the journey back to Johannesburg, but our two guides were at the front of the group with guns, and I somehow I ended up at the back of the group. None of them seemed to be concerned either. It was a wonderful late afternoon walk, the highlight being when we spotted a Rhino. Just incredible! The other highlight of the afternoon was walking back to the van and watching that sun go down so quickly. Literally one minute it was there and the next it was gone. Driving back, to the conference center, I couldn't believe our fortunate I had been to get to experience this whole adventure.

### **Drive Back To Johannesburg**

The next morning it was time for me and my fellow group of Just Transfers to head back to Johannesburg International Airport. But Kruger still had one last treat for us. Just as we were nearing the gate we spotted a giraffe. What a sight, just so majestic in the way he walked, as if there was nothing to worry about. One minute he was there and the next he was gone.

During the drive back I sat in the front with our driver, Ian, and peppered him with numerous questions, especially about sports--rugby, football, and cricket. As my wife often says about me: "Anything with a ball and he is hooked." We

passed a number of sports stadiums and Ian informed me that the 2010 World Cup had been staged at this particular venue.

The journey back was as spectacular as the drive to Kruger. Again, I couldn't get over how blue the sky was. We passed through all the same towns again, but this time I couldn't help noticing as we were driving south the people that were working in many of the fields or operating stores at the side of the road were wearing jumpers or coats. I had to keep reminding myself that this was winter here in South Africa.

Before I knew it we were pulling into the airport and then each of us was grabbing our bags and saying our goodbyes as we headed off to different airlines for our respective journeys. One minute we were all together as a group and then we were 12 individuals all with our own agendas.

### **Conclusion**

I think I have made it abundantly clear throughout this paper that the Symposium in South Africa was absolutely wonderful. On further reflection, I wanted to try and identify what made it so outstanding. When I gave the subject some thought, the following came to mind.

Firstly, there was a palatable energy and enthusiasm from the folks who were running the Symposium. Every time you saw one of them or had a question you were met with: "How can I help you?" or "What can I do for you." Nothing was too much trouble. The other thing was that outwardly they made it look effortless. Everything was under control. Secondly, the location, Kruger National Park was just amazing. It was just spectacular. Also, the staff there were so helpful and friendly, and the food, oh my goodness! At the Thursday night Boma Braai Dinner and the Bush Braai Dinner, everything was prepared. It was like being in a Harry Potter movie in the dining room at Hogwarts. Everything just miraculously appeared. Yet, I am sure they didn't just wave a magic wand and it was all done.

Thirdly, there were the attendees. Everyone I met was so caught up in the experience; they were completely in the moment. Everywhere I went I saw people having conversations, hanging out over a cup of coffee or tea, laughing and eating together. One lunch time I sat outside with a lady and we ate together. We were talking away and she was telling me where she was from, where she lived and I also told her my story. But then she said: "You know, less than thirty

years ago, we couldn't have sat together having lunch." I can still recall watching on television in 1990 the day Nelson Mandela was released from prison.

As I have already alluded to in this paper, another group that I believe really brought a great deal of energy and vitality to the Symposium were the number of students in attendance from so many schools and also from a number of different countries. I was so impressed on the Thursday during our community visit with how so many of the students interacted with the children. It was just outstanding.

Finally, I have to return to Reineth Prinsloo. I have to admit that I am not very well acquainted with Reineth. I have met her on a few occasions at different symposiums, but I do have to thank her for pulling this outstanding event together. I cannot imagine the countless hours she must have put into this--the phone call, emails, meetings, etc., It was a truly an amazing experience. I will always remember my visit to Kruger National Park in South Africa.

Thank you.