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United Nations at city council

Wednesday, October 11, 2006

By **SEAN C. McCULLEN**
Staff Writer

BRIDGETON -- Tuesday night's city council work session had a decidedly international flavor to it.

No, council members didn't kick their feet up and enjoy an ethnic buffet while discussing city affairs for the non-public-meeting week.

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Rather, Bridgeton Youth-to-Youth coordinator Karen Barnett brought visitors from around the world to the meeting so they could discuss what they've been doing and what they will be doing with the city's youth during their week-long stay here.

Come to think of it, the meeting very well may have been a historic occurrence.

Have there ever been seven different countries, including the U.S., represented inside city hall at one time?

Well, there were Tuesday night.

In addition to three American representatives from ACTION, a program of Initiatives of Change, there were representatives from Vietnam, Senegal, Rwanda, South Africa, Ukraine and Latvia.

ACTION aims to teach people to accept and champion diversity, and to work with people of different races and/or nationalities to help communities overcome societal ills. In doing so, the group's traveling members have learned a lot of lessons that will allow them to better themselves.

ACTION is in Bridgeton for a second consecutive year.

Several of the international visitors noted they came to the U.S. for the

two-month, nine-city trip, in part, to have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether stereotypes about Americans in their native lands are true.

Latvian Artyom Konohovs told council he wanted "to bring a real, personal picture back home."

Konohovs had been told prior to his visit that when Americans smile, it's because they are thinking something bad about the person at whom they are smiling. Now on the third stop of the nine-city trip, he's noticed Americans don't smile much, but when we do, we seem "natural."

Selly Wane, of Senegal, remarked how surprised she was to see how religious Americans are.

She also was a little shocked to see how many Japanese cars are on the roads.

Nombulelo Khanyile, a black South African, noted that her people have only been out from under the hateful, bigoted ways of the apartheid system for little more than a decade.

"We are still battling our painful history," she said.

Khanyile said that through her participation with Initiatives of Change's ACTION program, she and the rest of the group are learning "to celebrate our diversity instead of accentuating our differences."

Ukrainian Angela Starovoytova told council she is not a big fan of U.S. foreign policy. She's undoubtedly learned, even early on in her trip here, that a lot of Americans aren't, either.

Starovoytova said she was amazed in talking to the city's Youth-to-Youth participants and other school-age children how well-versed they are in race relations.

It was Starovoytova who best summarized the purpose of ACTION, and similar groups, for that matter.

"If we can change, our families can change and the world changes," she said.

The group met with Youth-to-Youth Saturday and with Broad Street School students on Tuesday. It is scheduled to meet with Bridgeton High students today.

Matt Freeman, of Richmond, Va., has been amazed by how many trees there are in South Jersey, saying his perception of New Jersey prior to the trip north was that it was nothing but industry off the turnpike -- sounds like someone's seen "The Sopranos" intro.


The other ACTION visitors are Virginians Chris Breitenberg, a former Initiatives of Change employee who helped come up with ACTION, and Tee Turner, Richard Kananga of Rwanda and Trong Nguyen of Vietnam.

The group will head to New York at the end of the week.

Before they leave, though, there will be a dinner-dance at Gia's Catering, located on Mulford Drive, Thursday night, beginning at 6 p.m.

If interested in attending the event, contact Barnett today at (856) 455-1684.


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