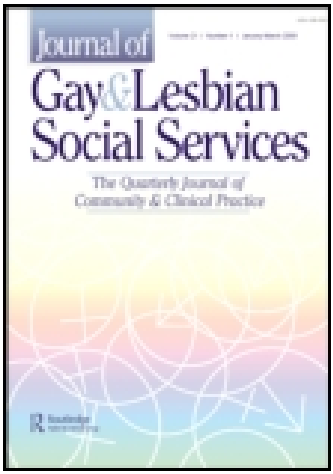

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Researching Gay and Lesbian Domestic Violence

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Researching Gay and Lesbian Domestic Violence: The Journey of a Non-LGBT Researcher

Joan C. McClennen

SUMMARY. The purpose of this article is to present the author's personal journey as a heterosexual woman conducting research on domestic violence within the LGBT community. The contributions of these studies to the theoretical and knowledge base of this social problem provide evidence of the ability of a nonaffiliated member to produce meaningful and sensitive research within an oppressed population even on a sensitive topic. In this article the author presents her rationale, as an outsider, for being interested in the LGBT community and, more importantly, her adoption of eight innovative strategies to overcome methodological barriers. These strategies emerged from her initially designing these studies based on the feminist participatory research model. Each strategy is discussed with particular attention paid to the one that most influenced her life–immersion into the culture. Also presented are the exchanges of rigor for relevance in her research, and her perceptions of the costs and benefits of conducting research within a stigmatized population. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com>*

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Debate exists about the ability of nonaffiliated group members to do meaningful and sensitive research within oppressed populations. This ability is further challenged when the topic is of a sensitive nature. As a heterosexual woman, I have spent over six years investigating domestic violence within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Adoption of innovative strategies assisted me in overcoming many methodological challenges, thereby producing quantitative studies that contribute to the knowledge base of this social problem. The purpose of this article is to share these strategies with others who are researching relatively unexplored social problems within oppressed populations for the ultimate purpose of overcoming social injustices. Rather than concentrating on my research results, I request that you accompany me on my journey as a stranger in a foreign land.

CHALLENGES OF NONAFFILIATED VERSUS AFFILIATED RESEARCHERS

If they are to produce meaningful results, nonaffiliated researchers within the LGBT community (as well as other oppressed populations) need to overcome the methodological challenges of theoretical approaches, gaining access to the community, and maintaining their professional ethics (Jacobson, 1995; Zinn, 1979). Because theoretical approaches are largely established using majority populations, and thus are not generalizable to minority cultures, researchers need to approach the LGBT community with alternative theoretical frameworks. Gaining initial access to the community, and securing the ongoing cooperation of its members, require researchers to adopt culturally-sensitive strategies enabling them to be considered as other than intrusive outsiders (Park, 1992). Nonaffiliated researchers are particularly suspect of violating their professional ethics by using studies of the LGBT community in order to enhance their own careers, rather than for reducing social injustices (Gorelick, 1991). Inability to overcome these challenges tends to result in oversimplification and overgeneralization of findings, creating a disservice to the oppressed community (Mindel & Kail, 1989; Warren, 1977).

The argument that affiliated members of the LGBT community have fewer problems in producing meaningful research has not held true. Although initial access to the community is more easily obtained, feelings of obligation and apprehension about public intervention may bias their work and preclude these researchers from accessing the inner circle of the community. Although affiliated researchers may have different problems in overcoming barriers to producing meaningful research, their problems are equally severe (Maykovich, 1977; Zinn, 1979). Both nonaffiliated and affiliated members of oppressed populations continue to search for strategies that will help them to overcome barriers to producing meaningful research.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Participatory research models have proven effective for qualitative researchers in overcoming various methodological challenges (theories, access, and ethics) by breaking many of the barriers that are present between themselves and members of oppressed populations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992). The feminist participatory research model provides guidelines for both qualitative and quantitative researchers in producing meaningful results through the combination of investigating problems of concern to the LGBT population, approaching the study as an educational process for the researchers and the participants via collective interaction, and using the results of the study for social change (Park, 1992; Renzetti, 1995). Despite progress in reducing methodological challenges through the adoption of numerous models, current strategies remain insufficient for empowering the oppressed to break the barriers between themselves and the society that oppresses them (Gorelick, 1991).

Typically, researchers do not detail the specific strategies they use to generate knowledge in their writings. Instead, their focus is on the problems tackled, the general methods used, and the results obtained. Sufficient explanations of methods for obtaining the results are provided to assure scientific rigor within the investigation process. Understandably, this primary focus is based on researchers' ties to academia and the conventional norms of academic writing (Zinn, 1979). So, too, in researching same-gender domestic violence, I have journal articles reporting the outcomes of my studies, but until now, I have not written a detailed account of the strategies used to reach these findings.

In this article, I report my strategies for overcoming the challenges I faced in my work. In essence, this is a documentary of a heterosexual woman's journey within the LGBT community while conducting research on the sensitive subject of domestic violence. The hope is for this story to assist other non-LGBT re-

searchers to produce empirical information aimed at reducing social injustices within the LGBT community.

MOTIVATION FOR RESEARCHING LGBT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

My entrance to academia followed over 20 years of being a social worker, principally within the areas of family violence and mental health. Being a survivor of domestic violence, my interest in conducting research on this topic was natural. During the exploration of the domestic violence literature, a traumatic event occurred within my family; my brother's partner of 15 years, Jim, died of a heart attack. In the aftermath of his death, the two issues of domestic violence and same-gender relationships merged as a topic to which I began to dedicate my research. I reflected on the struggles my brother (who I will call Lee) had experienced during his life. While in a heterosexual marriage, he served his country and had three children. Following his divorce, he experienced many broken heterosexual relationships. In time, he began living with a man and identifying with the same-gender community. I observed my family's reactions to my brother's changed life. Mostly, silence prevailed as if nothing had occurred. I had my own inner turmoil in accepting Lee's changed life, due to belief in my church's doctrine. Despite all the feelings that haunted me, I remained silent. Prejudice rejoices in denial.

The silence between Lee and me ended with the family's trauma of a series of deaths, with Jim's being the final breaking point. Preceding Jim, within a four-year period, was the death of our parents, my sister's husband, and my husband. Lee and I shared the same sorrow in the loss of our loved ones. It was during this time, when we shared the same grieving process and inner battles, that I truly started to realize the similarities, rather than the differences, between same gender-oriented and opposite gender-oriented people.

As a professor, I wrote articles and taught classes about family violence. But I had read almost nothing about domestic violence between same-gender partners, nor had I given it much thought. Even though no problem of this nature had existed within Lee's relationship, Jim's death brought the question to my mind: "What about domestic violence between same-gender couples?" Soon finding that research on this topic was scarce, I continued my pursuit to answer this question. Although apprehensive about gathering information from members of a community about which I knew virtually nothing, this relatively unique topic fascinated me. Thus, my area of research was born. In time, I became a living testimony of Gorelick's (1991) findings–in participatory studies the researcher is transformed in the process as she influences and is influenced by those being researched.

Research Projects

With co-authors, I conducted two research projects; one addressed abuse between lesbian partners and the other between gay male partners. The purpose of the research with lesbians was to design a scale that assessed power imbalance resulting in abuse between partners. Based upon the available theoretical and empirical evidence (Coleman, 1996; Davies, 1995; Renzetti, 1992, 1996), factors were identified that could potentially be used to define and identify power imbalances. Convenience sampling techniques were implemented. Collected data were factor analyzed. The resulting Lesbian Partner Abuse Scale-Revised (LE-PAS-R) is a 25-item assessment tool having concurrent and construct validity. Further details of its construction are presented elsewhere (McClennen, Summers, & Daley, 2002).

The purpose of our research on gay male partner abuse was to obtain empirical evidence regarding the dynamics (forms, patterns, and frequencies), help-seeking behaviors, and correlates of this social problem. Methodological procedures were implemented to answer seven research questions. Data collected on a convenience sample were analyzed and compared with data from two other studies on same-gender partner abuse (Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1992). Results of this study are also presented elsewhere (McClennen, Summers, & Vaughan, 2002).

LEARNING MY WAY AROUND: THE JOURNEY

Following the Feminist Participatory Research Model

Considering that Renzetti (1992) was the first empirical article I read on same-gender partner abuse, I tended to follow many of her methods, including the adoption of the feminist participatory research model. With the intent of having this model help me overcome major methodological barriers, I followed its guiding principles: (a) a critical examination of cultural insensitivity within the research process; (b) giving voice to the members of the marginalized population; (c) rejecting the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched in favor of acting in mutual relationship; (d) making a political and moral commitment to reducing social inequality; and (e) taking action on this commitment (Cancian, 1992 as cited in Renzetti, 1995).

I began to sensitize myself to the LGBT culture by performing volunteer services within it. I formed two research teams comprised of LGBT members to give voice to the community being researched and to break hierarchical rela-

tionships between the researchers and those being researched. I made a conscious commitment to the LGBT community to use the research findings toward overcoming social injustices. Had I known of the depth of the commitment needed to continue my research, I doubt that I would have had the courage to begin this journey.

Emerging Strategies

As I continued toward gaining acceptance, trust, support, and entrée into the same-gender oriented community, various strategies for overcoming methodological barriers emerged: (a) becoming educated about the culture; (b) preparing for objections; (c) incorporating instruments designed by those being researched; (d) implementing various sampling techniques; (e) engaging affiliated members for assistance; (f) becoming immersed in the culture; (g) collaborating with scholars and other professionals; and (h) triangulation in data collection. Specifics about each of these strategies are presented to assist future researchers in overcoming the barriers they will face in conducting research with these and other marginalized populations.

Becoming educated about the culture was a slow, arduous, continuous process. Through continually searching library holdings and making contacts following any leads, I read the classics on the topic of same-gender partner abuse (Island & Letellier, 1991; Lobel, 1989; Renzetti, 1992). And, using the snowball technique, I spoke with individuals throughout the United States who were interested in this topic.

I formed a Lesbian Advisory Committee consisting of a dozen lesbians and lesbian-friendly women. These women initially met at my home on a Saturday afternoon to give their opinions regarding my conducting research within their community, and after supporting this idea, to help design the Lesbian Partner Abuse Scale. Other contacts were made by telephone, through e-mail, and in person.

I worked with a less formalized group of gay men to assist in the study within their community. A gay male friend made possible my invitation to visit the group during one of their weekly meetings. The purpose of the visit was to obtain their opinions and sanction for my conducting research within their community. Being supportive, they acted in an advisory capacity during the project's design and implementation. Contacts were also maintained with members of this group throughout the study.

Attendance at a meeting of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay Men (PFLAG) and at a national conference targeting LGBT issues proved educational. At both meetings I made presentations about my research and was able to obtain feedback.

Preparing for objections helped to reduce my anticipatory stress. During the beginning years of my research, a few members of the same-gender oriented community raised objections. Two poignant objections were my being opposite-gender oriented and my use of politically incorrect phrases (e.g., alternative lifestyle). I attempted to overcome these objections by relying on the advice of the same-gender oriented individuals who supported me, continuing my involvement with the community, and being truly committed to the cause of using my research to reduce social injustices within this community.

These objections helped prepare me for the rejection I expected from a large portion of the LGBT community. The reality was quite different. For the most part, I was accepted and patiently educated by the people with whom I had contact. When I asked one person if I had an opportunity to be accepted, the unforgettable reply was, "We're not the ones who discriminate." I have received complimentary advertising, booths, meals, and board. Most of all, I received patience, kindness, cooperation, and psychological support.

Incorporating instruments designed by those being researched is presupposed within the feminist participatory research model. Systematic error from using culturally inappropriate instruments can cause immeasurable harm. The instrument designed by Renzetti (1992) to gather data from lesbians experiencing partner abuse served as a model in designing the instruments for my two studies. The two advisory groups–one of lesbians and one of gay men–assisted in content validation of the instruments.

Implementing various sampling techniques was essential for obtaining respondents. Initially, we randomly selected 300 therapists to mail our instruments for the construction of the Lesbian Partner Abuse Scale, and another 300 to mail instruments for obtaining data on gay male partner abuse. Our efforts met with dismal results; the total response was 17 (2.8%) out of the 600 requests.

As alternative techniques for obtaining respondents, we used purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling. Ironically, the failure of our original data gathering method led to enriching experiences in the LGBT community and the commitment needed to continue my research. The most effective source of data came from person-to-person contacts, including those with individuals at PRIDE festivals, professionals at conferences, and members of the local community. In addition, advertisements were placed in LGBT-oriented magazines, and counselors, administrators, friends, and family members knowing of potential respondents were mailed packets of information.

Engaging affiliated members for assistance began with two individuals–one lesbian and one gay man. As a former victim of domestic violence, the woman allowed me to tape an interview for use in my presentation at a national conference. She was my access to many of the women who served on the les-

bian advisory committee, to volunteer opportunities with the LGBT community, and to other persons within the community.

A gay man who expressed interest in the research was invited to assist in its implementation. He became my advocate and teacher, as he shared information about the community and accompanied me to various events and locations (e.g., restaurants and libraries) that targeted the LGBT community. Having these closely affiliated members to assist me in the research process was immeasurably helpful.

Becoming immersed in the culture required a multifaceted approach. Becoming immersed tends to overlap with other strategies (e.g., becoming educated); however, the experiences are more intense in the immersion process. During the immersion process I not only came to know about the LGBT community, but to socialize in it and form friendships with its members.

My attendance at the national conference targeting the LGBT community and at several PRIDE festivals was quite valuable. Although the initial intent of attending these events was research oriented–to present the studies and to collect data–these encounters helped to immerse me in LGBT culture. These immersion experiences were open, honest, and sincere efforts to understand a culture unfamiliar to me by getting to know people within it. Approaching these events as a researcher would not have resulted in the same outcome.

My male partner, Ivan, attended most of these events with me. His experiences, coupled with mine, changed our attitudes toward persons seemingly different from ourselves; they therefore changed our lives as well. These experiences, which influenced us emotionally and spiritually, were far beyond the mere cognitive domain of educational events. Although not considered homophobic, Ivan had been relatively uninterested in discussing any topic about same-gender oriented individuals. In time, and with his interaction with attendees at the conference and festivals, he was transformed into an ardent advocate for the rights of LGBT people. His transformation was evidence for the assertion that lack of understanding should not be confused with intolerance (Smith & Dale, 1999).

The PRIDE festival within my own urban/rural community led to my meeting and identifying with a largely closeted group of individuals who seemed equally surprised to see me in attendance. Word of mouth continued to assist in my connecting professionally and socially with LGBT individuals and their advocates. The conference and other PRIDE festivals were held in metropolitan cities. Most of the time, Ivan and I were on our own in these unfamiliar environments; we became the "minority." Most people sensed we "looked lost." Rather than discriminating against us, people went out of their way to help us feel comfortable and welcomed.

The following encounters, although they may seem trite to others, were exceedingly personal and life-changing to us:

- At the conference, we had the opportunity to speak with innumerable individuals about health care and related issues. We asked questions about medications being displayed for HIV-positive individuals and about other personal issues. While people around us were discussing the various options, we had no clue what they were talking about; it was a foreign language. Although feeling somewhat embarrassed by my unending, seemingly ignorant questions of the most intimate nature, no one laughed; they enthusiastically helped us to learn.
- At one dinner, our gay male friend informed us that he was surprised we did not mind being seen with him, since many people would not want to share dinner with a gay man. Ivan and I had not given this a second thought; he was our friend!
- During a walk to observe contributions to the AIDS Memorial Quilt, I could barely hold back the tears as I thought of all the young men who had died so tragically and senselessly; as my lesbian acquaintance shed tears, we formed a bond.
- Before Ivan saw the Quilt, a man had informed him that one reason we were having so much trouble finding gay male respondents was because many of them had died from AIDS. The actual experience of seeing and reading squares of the quilt embedded in Ivan's psyche the overwhelming truth of this statement. To him, this was an emotional and spiritual awakening.
- At one of the festivals, we became acquainted with a man whose booth was next to ours. He was a volunteer at a shop supplying donated items for members of the LGBT community, especially those suffering from HIV and AIDS. For years after that event, Ivan and I would attempt to take items to this man and keep in touch by telephone; numerous failures, we believe, came from his increasing health problems.
- At PRIDE festivals Ivan sat and had drinks with gay men; his initial intent was to discuss my research and elicit their assistance. Their conversations lasted for hours and touched on an endless number of subjects, similar to his conversations with his opposite-gender oriented friends. Gay men became just "men."

Aside from these experiences, Ivan and I went with my brother Lee and his new partner (who I will call Mitch) to various LGBT bars. We danced, socialized, and celebrated one New Year's Eve in a gay male bar. We also accompanied Lee and Mitch to numerous church services. My most emotionally intense

experience was sharing communion with the two of them and a minister as we prayed before Lee's surgery. The tears I shed heightened my commitment to my research despite my adversaries, and to its ultimate use to alleviate social injustice.

All these experiences served to immerse me in the LGBT community. I became sensitized to the similarities rather than the differences between members of the opposite-gender and same-gender oriented communities. Cultural immersion included my participation on a website advocating LGBT issues and writing proposals to obtain funding for further research and services.

Collaborating with scholars and other professionals researching or employed in the LGBT community established relationships that assisted me in gathering information about LGBT culture and about available services throughout the U.S. These individuals also helped me to locate respondents. Some were researchers who willingly shared the results of their studies even prior to their publication, thus helping to keep us aware of the latest findings. I had the privilege of joining the Editorial Board of a same-gender oriented professional journal and of serving on a doctoral committee at another university; the student had heard of my research and contacted me for assistance. I continue to receive e-mail from across the U.S. and am able to share information about research and services. These ongoing contacts maintain a feeling of camaraderie among individuals interested in helping the LGBT community to alleviate the problem of partner abuse.

Triangulation in data collection enhanced the cooperation of respondents at PRIDE festivals by having at least two trained individuals collecting data who were different in style and gender. During these festivals, Ivan and I circulated to recruit respondents. Although we asked the same questions, we had two different styles–he as an extrovert salesman and I as a more introverted professor. The higher comfort level between him and gay men was balanced with my higher comfort level with lesbians. Together, we were able to obtain the interest and involvement of both men and women. Had we obtained additional grant funding, we could have hired members of the LGBT community to assist in data gathering at these events.

Obtaining gay male respondents was more difficult than obtaining lesbian respondents. At the festivals, lesbians were more receptive to discussing our research. This experience supported the literature about the "veil of secrecy" (Montero, 1977, p. 5) gay men maintain about partner abuse to protect their community from further stigmatization.

Thus, in the debate regarding the need for researchers to be affiliated members of the community under study, I side with those who believe that being knowledgeable, sensitive, and culturally unbiased can compensate for this cultural difference. To a great extent, I was able to conduct my research by adopt-

ing the feminist participatory research model and by implementing innovative strategies for overcoming methodological challenges.

APPROPRIATE USE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

According to the feminist participatory research perspective and the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (NASW, 1996), research findings are to be used for the reduction of social injustices. Researchers, especially those studying sensitive issues within stigmatized populations, must not lose sight of those who would misuse their findings to increase the stigma. Both same-gender and opposite-gender oriented persons can condemn researchers publishing about same-gender partner abuse by accusing them of "fueling heterosexism" (Renzetti, 1999, p. xi). The more stigmatized the population being researched, the more sensitive researchers need to be in relating findings.

Overgeneralizing findings tends to oversimplify problems. Many research studies on same-gender partner abuse use a small number of respondents from a relatively homogeneous group; most respondents are from the middle and upper class (Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1992). My respondents were no exception. In generalizing from our findings, researchers must be specific as to who their samples were and how they were chosen. This is not to diminish the importance of these studies' findings. Each piece of the puzzle helps to put together the whole picture of same-gender partner abuse. The nature of partner abuse is as complex as the people involved. The more the problem is understood, the faster prevention and intervention strategies can be implemented.

Appropriate use of findings involves communicating these findings to other researchers interested in the issue. It also demands remaining politically and morally committed to the use of research findings for reducing social inequality in the population under study (Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992).

COSTS TO RESEARCHERS CONDUCTING STUDIES ON STIGMATIZED POPULATIONS

Straight researchers of LGBT populations need to be aware of the potential personal and professional costs of being identified with the population under study. The same environmental pressures placed on the stigmatized community, such as individual and institutionalized homophobia, are placed on them (Montero, 1977; Warren, 1977). If researchers are willing to assume these pressures, they need to develop strategies to cope with them.

Some of the pressures I have had to endure in order to study same-gender partner abuse included: (a) upon reading that my research was being partially funded by the University, two prominent citizens contacted the University administration and questioned its quality and appropriateness; (b) being untenured at the time, I became apprehensive about continued employment because of my topic of research, which proved to be unnecessary since university personnel remained supportive; (c) the prejudices of many of my family members caused me to have to refrain from discussing my work; and (d) innuendoes of my being lesbian were spread to students, faculty, and to my male partner.

The strategies we developed to overcome these environmental pressures were based on our making a conscious decision as to the amount of personal and professional risk I was willing to take to continue my research. We prepared for potential negative professional consequences, trusted in the support provided by colleagues and administrators, sought a church that was nondiscriminatory toward same-gender oriented persons, and maintained a veil of silence toward family members and acquaintances who were offended by my work. Undertaking and continuing research of stigmatized populations requires commitment to the ethical contract that exists between the researcher and those being researched.

RIGOR VERSUS RELEVANCE IN STUDYING STIGMATIZED POPULATIONS

Rigor, the extent to which methodology has been followed, is emphasized in quantitative research. Relevance, the extent to which a study is useful for developing theory or social policy, is the emphasis of qualitative research. Rather than being seen as a dichotomy, research can be conceptualized as existing on a continuum, with exchanges between rigor and relevance (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The feminist participatory research model is a paradigm falling midway on the quantitative-qualitative continuum. My two research projects reported quantitative outcomes. However, the methodology required the flexibility necessary to follow the model's guiding principles.

The innovative techniques implemented in conducting my studies inevitably detracted from their internal and external validity. Respondents self-identifying as victims of partner abuse may actually be perpetrators who think they are or were victims; volunteers may be different from non-volunteers; and non-random selection of respondents limits generalizability. However, adopting innovative, unconventional methodologies is necessary if research on sensitive topics within stigmatized populations is to be relevant and useful (Jacobson, 1995; Roffman, Picciano, Wickizer, Bolan, & Ryan, 1998). Re-

searchers need to make conscious decisions regarding the exchange between rigor and relevance. In essence, I made a decision to trade some rigor for relevance in order to decrease the social injustices suffered by members of the LGBT community experiencing partner abuse.

BENEFITS OF "DOING IT MY WAY"

The purposes of research are to develop theory, to increase the knowledge base of our profession, to improve the effectiveness of our interventions with clients, and to reduce social injustices (Grinnell, 1997). The products of my research within the LGBT community can assist professionals in: approaching this problem from different theoretical perspectives; improving their skills through the use of screening instruments to detect potential abuse; continuing their efforts to further comprehend the dynamics of this social problem; advocating to reduce social injustices based on my findings; and empowering members of the LGBT community (McClennen, 1999; McClennen & Gunther, 1999).

We must never lose sight of the reasons we dedicate ourselves to chosen endeavors at the cost of alternative activities. As I continue on my journey, I am asked to contemplate, in retrospect, the benefits gained in conducting my research the way I thought was right, despite any criticisms of over-involvement in the community or of the exchange between rigor and relevance. In addition to professional satisfaction, my benefits are personal. Through this process, my theological and psychological foundations were shaken, torn apart, and rebuilt. I have gained in spiritual peace within myself and through fellowship with others who are open to diverse populations. Peace within oneself is an invaluable benefit. I have watched my partner shed his prejudicial feelings, and he continues on this journey with me. Having someone on a journey makes it less lonely and deepens the bond between the travelers. I came to an awareness of my unconscious prejudice and have overcome it. Having brought it out of its closet, it no longer exists. Lack of prejudice opens the gate for exciting new experiences of life. As a professor, I share my experiences with my students. If nothing else, this forces them to think critically about their choices in life. Many have thanked me for my openness, whether or not they agree with me. These are some of the small rewards of teaching.

However, the ultimate benefit of making a journey to a strange land is enlightenment. In my case, the enlightenment was filled with new dimensions of love for life.

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