



Q&A: Big Apple Greeter shares visitors' views of NYC

By SHEILA ANNE FEENEY
8/5/12



Photo credit: Photo courtesy of Jo Murray

Jo Murray, 43, a full-time executive assistant, is also a volunteer guide for Big Apple Greeter, a non-profit organization that is celebrating its 20th year of giving visitors personalized welcomes to NYC via real New Yorkers. She lives in Marble Hill, with her husband, real estate investor Ken Murray, and their daughter Diana, 6.

Q What would you most like to see changed or accomplished in NYC?

A Everyone needs to be a little more loving and trusting. If you see someone lost, offer help: It doesn't hurt to take a minute to help some poor lost soul from Mongolia or where ever they're from. Kindness costs nothing. The stereotype of New Yorkers is we're always in a rush, but the interaction you can have with a total stranger can really change the attitude someone has of our city - and change your own life for the better.

Q What kind of visitors do you tend to specialize in?

A I have a six-year-old and try to take people who also have little kids to parks, because kids traveling really need to stretch. We might go to Teardrop Park in Battery Park City: It's very small physically, but it has a two story slide. Or to the Brooklyn Bridge Park and Jane's Carousel. I'll often let my daughter decide what park to go to: She wants to be a Big Apple Greeter, too. These people with teenagers wanted me to take them someplace with food they'd never eaten before, so I took them to dim sum at Jing Fong in Chinatown. My daughter was three then and one of their teenagers was walking her around the restaurant. Instead of coming back to our table, my daughter insisted on stopping and talking to another woman who looked like me and was wearing a shirt like mine. The teenager had to tell her, "Diana: That's not your mother!" Now we call it "The Wrong Mommy Restaurant."

Q You're Chinese-American. Do Chinese visitors to NYC specifically ask for you?

A These young ladies from China asked for a greeter who spoke Chinese, but I tried to explain that all the dialects are so different, it was unlikely I'd be able to speak with them. They spoke Mandarin, but the little I know is Cantonese. I do speak French, but my brain and mouth starts hurting after speaking it for an hour and I lapse more and more back into English. I had to stop because my daughter doesn't understand me.

Q What do you know about New York that no one else does?

A Kids love looking at buckets of frogs in Chinatown stores. Unless they're from Hong Kong, they just haven't seen live frogs being sold out of garbage cans.

Q Have you made any permanent friends from the people you've shown around town?

A This one couple from Wisconsin came every year for the Fancy Food Show to sell their cheese, but always with a different relative in tow. After six years in a row, I said, "we're friends now." I get Christmas cards from people I haven't seen in five or 12 years. Greeting is so great because it makes the world a smaller, happier, friendlier place.

Q I bet you have 1,000 Facebook friends from all over the world.

A I don't Facebook. It's a choice.

Q Have any of the visitors taught you something about NYC you didn't know?

A Oh, yeah! This one woman was a big fan of Will & Grace and showed me the exact exterior shot of their apartment building. It's on Riverside Drive around 88th St. Visitors have seen the city depicted so much on television and the movies, the city already feels familiar to them. If they see a yellow cab and an orange cone spewing smoke in the middle of the street, they say, "this feels so familiar."

Q What's the biggest misconception they have about New York?

A "Is it safe?" "What streets should I avoid?" "How late can I stay out?"

It's amazing to me what people consider safe or not. This one couple from overseas came with their two daughters and really wanted to go to a jazz club. I suggested a jazz brunch so their children could come. "Couldn't we just leave the kids our kids in the hotel room and go out at night?" they asked. I guess they didn't hear about the British couple who left their daughter in a hotel room in Portugal and now don't have her any more. I had a third generation Japanese Peruvian woman who kept taking pictures of us together. Every where she stopped, she wanted a picture of us together. I asked her why she wanted so many pictures of us, and she said that when she told her friends she was coming to New York City and would meet a real live New Yorker, and they asked, "how do you know they won't be a rapist and murderer?" She told them, "We'll take lots of pictures of us together!" Some South Asians – they were of Indian descent – who lived in South Africa told me they couldn't believe it was safe to walk around. They lived in a gated community with a German Shepherd and never left it. "Why do you stay?!" I asked them.

Also, I've had people ask me, "Do the Chinese mind non-Asians coming to Chinatown?" No! Economic necessity brings everyone together!

Q Give us your best obscure historical tidbit.

A There used to be a store in Chinatown that opened in the 1800s – back in the days of the Chinese bachelor societies – that also served as an unofficial post office for the entire Chinese population of the city. Back in the 1800s, and early 1900s, the U.S. Post Office had no idea how to deliver all the letters that came in addressed in Chinese and just took all the letters to the store to give out. Eventually, the guys here would learn how to write in English or find someone to do it for them and write, 'Dear Beloved Wife, Please write this on the envelopes you send to me,' and include their address in English. But that took, like, a generation! The store closed up in the last 20 years. It wasn't significant enough architecturally to be land marked, but it was culturally significant!

Q What have you learned by being a Big Apple Greeter?

A Each person has their own fulfillment fantasy about New York. You really have to probe and listen to find out what people want from New York. One guy really wanted to go to Central Park. I asked him what he expected from it. It turned out he had seen the movie "Hair" at a pivotal point in his life and he was captivated by that scene of someone on horseback going under a bridge. So I directed him to the southwest corner where there are a lot of pedestrian bridges and told him about the bridle path. If they say they want to go to Greenwich Village, you want to find out if they are trying to see something that was in "Sex and the City" or they are interested in the beatniks and Jack Kerouac.

Q What's the best investment a New Yorker can make?

A A good pair of walking shoes. I don't care how close you are to the subway, you still have to go up and down at least two flights of stairs.

Q What makes a New Yorker?

A Someone who appreciates New York; our mix of people and all the zany different lifestyles, and who has really good coping skills for the cost of food and housing and the small spaces we live in. You have to have good coping skills. You can't get upset by the guy clipping his fingernails in the subway or the kid blasting his boom box. You have to let it go. Have some forgiveness! Be gentler!