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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person

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Person to Person in New Zealand

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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in New Zealand

For the most part, Steve and Sue lead lives very similar to those of the people I know from back home. They are happily married, own two cats, and have three grown sons that are perpetually moving around the country, flitting in and out of the house. Because of this, their house is always in a state of flux but they seem to find a balance nonetheless. Sue just recently got a new job and Steve works full time, but they both make an effort to go to their sons' cricket matches and have family tea (dinner) at least once a week. They are all passionate about sport, which in my family is mostly reserved to my brother and father, so when I go over to visit I invariably learn something new about either cricket or rugby. Besides this, I've noticed that everyone in the family is very active, similar to my family back home. In general, I have found most Kiwis to be fitter than the average American, and there seems to be a drive to challenge themselves and excel at what they put their mind to. Steve and Sue are also active in their neighborhood watch and, from what I can gather the community at large, and I can definitely appreciate the vitality with which they live their lives.

In terms of cultural similarities/differences, I've definitely noted how welcoming Steve and Sue are. I am quite literally a friend-of-a-family-friend's-relative, and they still welcome me in with open arms every time I stop by. Even if I only intend to drop something off, I invariably get roped into a long conversation about sport, politics, school, or whatever else happens to be on our minds, and end up staying far longer than I intended. They are direct about asking questions that the average American might skate around, which is something I have come to appreciate. There doesn't seem to be the same degree of strict "political correctness" amongst Kiwis, and they mostly just make solid attempts to be respectful while still being able to carry on an interesting conversation.

Steve and Sue are also some of the most generous people I have ever met. If I mention I need something, and they have it on hand, it will be in my hands by the time I walk out the door.

Furthermore, if I am in their house for any period of time I am always offered tea (or, in the evening, “something stronger”), and any food they have lying around. Steve and Sue (and Kiwis in general) have a very laid back attitude towards life which I find quite refreshing coming from the relatively high stress environment back home. No matter how many times I say “Thank you”, the response I always get is “No worries”. They seem to go above and beyond the level of courtesy I would normally expect back home, and in doing so expect nothing in return other than a good conversation.

One interesting thing I’ve noted is the sense of isolationism in New Zealand, at least from the Kiwis I’ve talked to. It is a novelty for me to be from the United States because it is such a huge, powerful country, while many Kiwis consider living in New Zealand to be normal, but not that interesting. Most students I’ve met have expressed and urge to either study or travel abroad after their studies to get a better grasp of the world, and I can say I’ve encouraged many people to do so. The distance between New Zealand and other countries also means that cultural exchange is more limited than in the U.S. While I’ve met a significant number of people who live in Christchurch from various parts of southeast Asia, for the most part ethnic diversity is concentrated in backpackers and people coming to visit New Zealand. I suppose I’ve always taken the “melting pot” for granted, but I have met Kiwis who have never met a black or Hispanic person before. This isn’t to say there is prejudice, it is just the fact that New Zealand hasn’t been as exposed to global cultural exchange as the United States. Because of this, the Kiwis I’ve met are all curious to hear what I think of their country, and then ask me to describe and similarities or differences between here and the United States.

Above all, my conversations with Steve and Sue have always been enlightening and vibrant. Talking with them solidifies my belief that New Zealand is one of the friendliest countries you could ever hope to visit, and I feel truly blessed to have had a chance to be here. I don’t think less of the United States because of this, but I certainly hope to take back some of what I have received from Steve and Sue in terms of generosity and a “no worries” attitude and apply it in my own life back home. Learning

to live life day by day and not fixate as much on the future has made this trip all the more meaningful for me, and I will forever be in Steve and Sue's debt in that regard.

Interview: Steve and Sue Peters (Family friends of my flatmate's New Zealand relatives)