

PREVENTING VIOLENCE IN THE CARIBBEAN

Gregory Thomson, project director at the St. Maarten Central Agency for Joint Financing Development Programme, has become the treasurer of the Victory Over Violence Foundation on St. Maarten. Jamie Liptan, World Tribune staff writer, and Jeff Farr, associate editor, talked with him June 11 about his hopes for the VOV movement there.*

World Tribune: Why did you become involved in SGI-USA's Victory Over Violence campaign?

Gregory Thomson: When I was approached about getting involved with this project, I immediately became excited because it focuses on youth. That is one of the areas that right now we are concentrating our energies on in St. Maarten.

I see a foundation such as VOV playing a major role in combating the problems that our youth are facing now.

WT: What kinds of problems regarding violence are youth on St. Maarten facing?

Thomson: I think that St. Maarten, relatively speaking, has not had much violence as compared to Curacao, which is part of the Dutch Antilles, or some of the big islands and Puerto Rico. The violence here is not at that level.

For us, it is prevention, more of making sure that violence doesn't happen here.

WT: What are the biggest social challenges facing St. Maarten?

Thomson: Especially as far as the youth are concerned, we have a major outflux — youth going to Holland, for example. Some of them are going for academic reasons, and they may or may not return. So we have that well-known phenomenon of “brain drain” affecting us.

We also have youth leaving because of the difficult economic times that we are going through at the moment. We have had five or six hurricanes in just the last five years. The core of our economy is tourism, and our hotels have been severely damaged.

WT: In America, people know the Caribbean as a vacation spot, but they don't normally think of it as a place located between the continents, a place where many different cultures come together. What will Caribbean society be like in the future?

Thomson: A lot of our cultural mix will be maintained. But based on global changes, I think that the culture will obviously go through some changes and some phases and maybe some dilution in order to more or less fit into the global structure that we are heading toward.

St. Maarten is unique in that it has a French side and a Dutch side. We have two governments, two desalination plants and two electric companies. Basically, we have a French culture and a Dutch culture. I don't want to say that we are struggling, but we are kind of defining our own island identity as we speak.

Unfortunately, many times the two sides of the island are too separate. I work on the Dutch side, where I do my projects, but I know of many projects on the French side that I wish I could help finance. It's the same island, after all. It would benefit the whole island to work together more.

The VOV project has been very interesting in this respect. We got major support from the French government and the Dutch government. It was excellent—both sides were very happy that baseball Hall of Famer Orlando Cepeda could visit here and introduce VOV to St. Maarten.

The French government gave awards to Cepeda, as did the Dutch government, and he attended various events on both sides. Normally, when we have projects of this nature, it's either on the Dutch side or the French side. It's not on both sides simultaneously.

So, even if it is one small island with just a line separating us into two, it is still two different cultures, really. And if you want to take it further, as far as integration of the Caribbean as a whole, then it becomes even more complicated.

WT: As you know, the purpose of VOV is to bring people together, to teach people to respect one another more. VOV points out that there are lots of other kinds of violence besides physical violence—disrespect is a form of violence, for instance. Do you see that on St. Maarten?

Thomson: I know that the youth wing of the local VOV Foundation has been having activities in the schools using the Quest for Peace videotape, and they have given us briefings that they are meeting children who have been through psychological abuse, or passive violence as it is described. It does happen here.

I don't think that this is yet well documented. Perhaps this is an area where some research could be done, so that we would be able to answer that question from more of a professional standpoint. But, yes, it does exist, and the youth involved in VOV have been pointing it out to us.

We are talking on the foundation's board about having a significant presence on St. Maarten and being able to keep pushing this whole cause of the VOV ideals. We may even eventually offer counseling, assistance for battered wives and shelter for abused children.

WT: You seem to get a lot of fulfillment out of being socially involved. How would you encourage others who want to make a difference?

Thomson: I would say keep an open mind and be flexible. And try to avoid dogmatism and prejudice.

There is much to gain from being socially involved. I have worked with the Red Cross during the five years of hurricanes around here, where people have lost their roofs and their homes. There's always a sense of victory when you can secure the funds to help these people out.

Last year, however, I was no longer active with the Red Cross. And when the hurricane came, I was at home. My house got flooded, and I had to evacuate the premises. I could not live in my house for three or four days, until the water dropped.

I was, for the first time, personally a victim of the hurricanes. Since I was not actively involved in disaster preparedness and relief, for the first time I personally knew how people can feel when this happens—really unmotivated.

It took me a month or two before I could recover from that feeling. I got a new perspective on the importance of the work I had done with the Red Cross, on what a difference it can make to people.

One thing you see immediately after a hurricane is that there's definitely a sense of "Let's help each other." There's no question about that. People who may be neighbors but really don't have much interaction start helping one another.

Of course, it really doesn't last too long. But overall, the five years of hurricanes have left us with more of a sense in St. Maarten of "Let's help each other."

Recently, we had the pleasure of signing two financing agreements for St. Maarten, in which a local foundation will be constructing a recreational center for the elderly and the St. Maarten Housing Development Foundation will be constructing 36 apartments for the elderly.

There was one elderly lady who told me that they had been working on this project for 11 years. In the meantime, she said, many of the elderly that started it had died. She was very happy that it had finally become a reality. I think that once in a while, you need to hear something like that. It was really touching. And that is really what reminds you why you are doing what you are doing — that's the satisfaction.

It is easy to forget that people are really benefiting from your work. But that's what keeps you going. Once in a while, you get a little comment like that lady's, and—boom!—you have energy again.

WT: In your dealings with the VOV Foundation, you've come into a lot of contact with the SGI-USA. What are your impressions of the SGI-USA members and the organization as a whole?

Thomson: I feel really comfortable with the people in the SGI-USA. They have a very relaxed, adult kind of approach. And Nestor Torres, Orlando Cepeda—these are wonderful people! You would hardly believe that they are international celebrities because they are so down to earth. The whole cause of the SGI-USA is one with which I agree.