

Cross-cultural exchange

By Steve Lundgren
Of the Emerald

Small, silk and porcelain geisha girls stand silently on a shelf in Kenneth Fenter's Springfield home. In a dim and sparsely furnished room Fenter sits on the floor at a round Japanese table.

A wisp of steam rises from his coffee and plays across his cheek.

The room is chilly by American standards, cooler than he used to keep it. But the chill doesn't bother him now, he says. Fenter and his family have learned to get along with less. The table, which he brought from Japan, has a built-in heater and a colorful quilt skirt around the edge, and he says it provides sufficient heat to work by.

The cooler temperature, the table and the dolls are all reminders of an experience Fenter says changed him and his family forever.

In "Gaijin! Gaijin! An American Family in Japan," a book Fenter wrote and recently published, he describes what he calls "cross-cultural experience" — the experience of being thrust into a foreign environment — which he credits for the changes in his family's way of living.

When the Fenters arrived in Japan in 1977 the natives called them "gaijin," a Japanese word meaning "foreigner."

The family went to Isahaya, Japan, where Fenter taught English to Japanese students at a junior college.

After two years of living in the small town near Nagasaki, Kenneth, his wife, Lora, and their children, Philip and Janelle, returned home to Springfield in 1979. Last summer Fenter finished his book, which tells of the struggles and joys of the family's first year in Japan.

Upon arriving in Japan, simple tasks such as grocery shopping were nearly impossible for the family because of the language and cultural barriers. Fenter says his family felt handicapped. They could see and hear, but nothing made sense.

Until they learned the language the Fenters' only contact with their own culture came from a few books and magazines they found in a Nagasaki bookstore. It wasn't until much later that they began to feel at home in their new environment though, he says.

"It wasn't always easy," Fenter says. "But each disappointment or each hardship was offset by something that was equally nice or pleasurable."

The Fenters' interest in moving to Japan was sparked in 1977 when they hosted a Japanese English teacher, who was part of a visiting entourage. Although the teacher stayed with them only two weeks, she and the Fenters quickly became friends.

Her colorful descriptions of her country and culture intrigued the family, and she encouraged them to see Japan for themselves. She told them they could work as English teachers in the schools there.

Her words were enticing, but it was another factor that convinced the family to move, Fenter says.

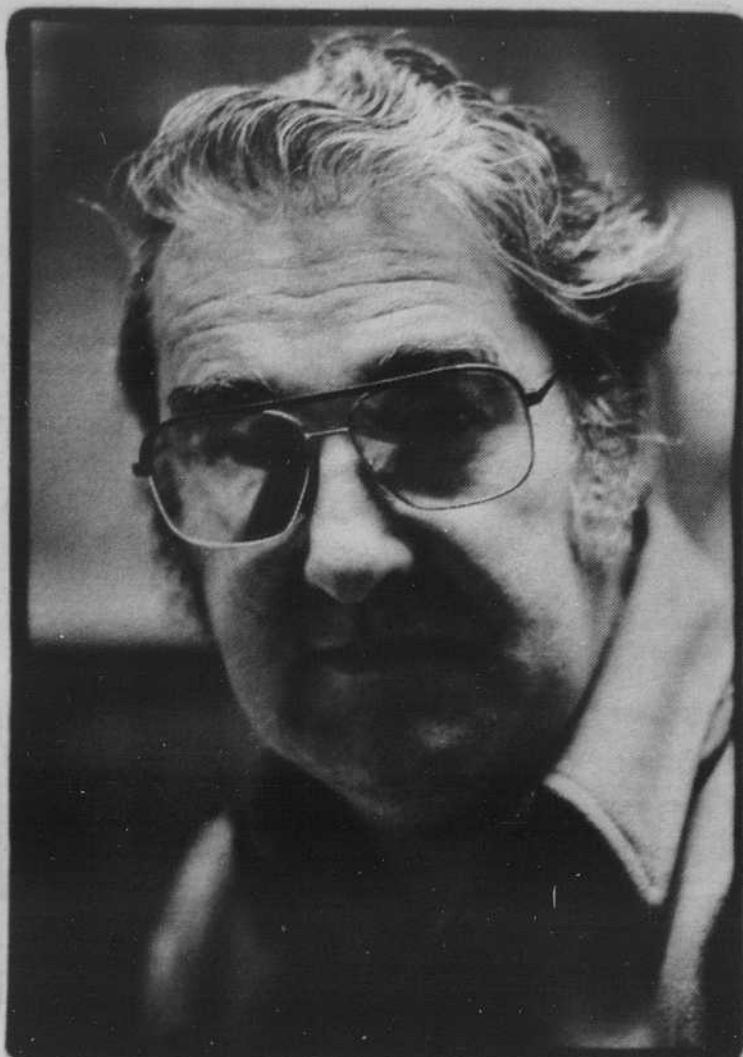
"I started realizing that our children were having no contact with any other group than white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. So (moving to Japan) looked like a way we could introduce them to minority problems — by being a minority," Fenter says.

"We spent a lot of sleepless nights thinking about it before we actually did it," he adds.

But once the decision was made, Fenter and his family stuck to it despite the cost. Fenter and his wife, both long-time teachers in the Springfield school system, resigned from their jobs when they were denied leaves of absence.

The two had been exposed to cultural and racial differences at an early age. Fenter grew up in a Mexican-American town in southwestern Colorado, and Lora was raised in a black neighborhood in St. Petersburg, Fla.

This early cross-cultural exposure created an awareness in Fenter that later caused him concern



Kenneth Fenter

when he was teaching at a Springfield high school and saw foreign exchange students struggling with language and cultural barriers in the classroom. "I would see them sitting there really frozen because they couldn't understand anything that was being said."

Fenter says he understands this plight of minority students better since he and his family have seen it from the other side. This understanding of other cultures is important in overstepping barriers that separate different people, he says.

In his book, Fenter illustrates the lack of understanding between Eastern and Western cultures through a conversation he had with a Japanese friend. The woman encouraged the Fenters to learn about the Japanese people by taking part in their culture, and in turn share American culture and language with the Japanese people.

To this woman, an "ugly American" was one who visited Japan, but refused to participate in this exchange. She said to Fenter, "When you get back to America you can tell your friends we are more than television sets and radios and Honda Civics."

Fenter believes failing to understand different cultures can have strong impact.

"I'm really concerned that by lack of knowledge of other cultures we really don't know that we have a lot in common," he says. "We don't know how to interpret cultural differences in order to avoid conflict."

The awareness of other cultures, awareness of differences, and awareness of similarities too, — awareness that people in other cultures cry and hurt — makes people more tolerant of people's skin color and language differences."

Since the family returned to Springfield, Fenter notices his children have become more compassionate toward handicapped people.

The family is also less materialistic than it once was, Fenter says. Before staying in Japan, the Fenters considered a small car an inconvenience, riding a city bus a nuisance and a house with a temperature lower than 70 degrees uncomfortable. Now none of these things disturb them, he says.

"We came home feeling like we really had it pretty good here," Fenter says. "And we didn't realize that when we went over there. On a global scale we're in pretty good shape."



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