

Mieke's Voice - Episode 21 - America - part 2 - Stepping into a movie

Brussels Airport, June 21st 1990. The plane was ready for take off. There I was, sitting in between two Americans, in the largest plane I had ever encountered. Everything up until that point went so fast. The newspaper article, the phone call, the appointment, the meeting with the teachers, the exams and the travel preparations. I was totally ready to explore a culture I only had a glimpse of from the movies.

Arriving at the New York airport, every moment was an adventure, everything was new and exciting. I soaked up all the details I perceived with my senses. An hour drive in the van from the Newark airport to downtown New York felt like 5 minutes! I was mesmerized with every little detail I saw. It literally felt as if I stepped into a movie! Being born in the European culture, the only connection with the American life style was through the many American movies I had watched up until then including a few soap operas such as Dynasty and Dallas. Everything I saw I recognized from in a movie, the cars, the license plates, the yellow taxi cabs, the roads and streets signs, the houses and buildings, the traffic lights, the people, the sounds and language. Nothing was left from our European Culture except a few American things such as Pizza Hut and Mac Donalds which we did have as well. What an incredible experience!

We stopped at a traffic light in downtown New York, I noticed a man with a leash in his hand and what seemed to be a plastic mouse attached to it. He stops, looks behind him, checks if his pet mouse is following him, talks to it, smiles and happily moves on. "Yip", I thought by myself, "I am in a movie! Welcome to New York"!

The van stopped at the given address. Totally conscious and excited about every move I made; I walked into the 4 story brownstone home that was buzzing with activity and people. As instructed I walked into the office. A friendly young man sitting behind the old wooden desk welcomed me and gave me information about my assigned camp. I was delighted to hear that all exchange students were offered a three day stay in New York to explore the city before going to their camp. A dinner in China Town, a boat trip around the Statue of Liberty and much more was on the menu.

I was shown my room that I shared with three more students and many cockroaches. This was my first encounter with those creatures and they

were all over the room! Creepy to think that they were able to crawl all over me in the night while I was sleeping, but after more than 24 hours traveling I was too tired to really care! I needed some sleep!

The next morning I was called back into the office. The same friendly man asked me to go upstairs to room 3 and look for a girl named Nancy De Turcq. She would be going to the same camp I was going to and a van would take us there leaving in about an hour. I was also informed I would have three days to explore New York AFTER the two months working in my camp. I was a little disappointed at first. I felt the essence of New York and heard exciting stories from the other students who already explored the city. I was eager to explore it myself! I realized I had to wait two months now for those experiences, but dropped the disappointment immediately. There was so much in front of me to explore and learn and be excited about! I was ready for my next adventure.

I knocked at the door of room 3 and asked in English “Who of you is Nancy?” Nancy responded in English “That would be me!” I explained we were going to the same camp and leave in about an hour. She took her suitcase and we both walked back down the narrow wooden spiraling stairs. Continuing in English I asked her what country she was from. “Belgium” she replied. “Well, then we don’t have to speak English” I responded in Dutch, making the guess she was from the Flemish, Dutch speaking region in Belgium and not from the French speaking part! We were both amazed and laughed! I told her I lived in Deinze and would be starting college in Gent after our three months adventure in America. “Hey me too, I will be going to the Hogeschool in Gent to become a teacher.” she replied. My jaw dropped! “Me too”, I said, “I will be going to that same school to study Orthopedagogy!” A universal joke! Synchronicities at it’s best as I call it! This was the beginning of a life long friendship!

We arrived at our destination, Camp Huntington in High Falls, upstate New York! We had four days before the campers arrived to get to know the layout of the camp, learn about the rules and activities of the camp, get to know the other counselors and get ready for the arrival of our campers. We were both assigned as co-counselors for Bunk G8 and became a great team. “G8 is Great!” became our slogan during our two months adventure.



There were so many different sorts of camps we could have chosen from; sports camps, nutrition camps for overweight children, camps for children with social behavior problems and many more. I choose to work in a camp for children and adults with disabilities because that was what I wanted to study in college. I was born in a family where disabilities were a norm and was used to live with that on a daily basis. It was second nature to me.



Nancy and I took care of three young ladies. Diana with Down Syndrome lived in her own little world. She was such a loving presence and loved to hug us all the time! Kristen had a severe form of Autism. She did not tolerate any form of physical contact. Musically she was a savant. She didn't speak but could sing any song that played on the radio. Bryn rocked her body most of the time, had an obsession with food, had many temper tantrums and couldn't get along with others. She was often aggressive and hyperactive. All three of them were self-abusive when they felt frustrated.



Our counselor duty was a day and night job. We took care of all aspects; we washed the girls, got them dressed, combed their hair, brushed their teeth, took care of bed wedding issues, hand fed them and helped them do all their camp activities etc. The five of us shared the same bunk room together with two other activity counselors.

The camp provided many activities for the children, some done in small or large groups, and sometimes with everyone involved at camp. We hiked, spent refreshing moments at the swimming pool, had many dance evenings, campfires, talent shows and evening activities. Many classes were provided such as academics, music, arts and crafts, sewing, drama, gardening, woodwork, cooking and basketball. Free podium nights and dance evenings were part of it as well. There was one activity that was really impressive to me and fun for everyone. A fire truck came and filled the field with foam. Then everyone dived into the foam and we had foam fights. That was a lot of fun! Once a month was family night. All families were invited to visit the camp. Many activities were organized with the families including a big BBQ.

On our free days, we counselors hang out together at the creek outside of camp. We visited the town of High Falls or decided to visit neighboring



area's for a day trip. We visited Lake Taghkanic, the famous town of Woodstock and Lake Mohonk in New Palz. I was used to hitch hike in Europe and thought that would be a great way to get around on our days off. The first car that stopped was a truck. There were already three people sitting in the back of the open truck and they invited us to hop in as well. That was such a cool and free feeling experience; hopping into the back of the truck, feeling the wind in my hair, the sun on my skin and the presence of five people and a dog crammed together while driving through the mountains and woods. The second time we hitch hiked a guy stopped and asked us why we were hitch hiking. He warned us that this was not a safe thing to do in these times in America. We were surprised by his comment but took it to heart and decided to not test our fate. Later on I accepted the invitation from the camp director's son to take me on a ride on his Harley Davidson into the mountains. That was another incredible experience. Somewhere on the road we got stopped by a police officer who asked if we had possibly witnessed a crime he was investigating that occurred there the day before. Hmm, all those fascinating experiences!

During my time in America, I was totally present in the moment, I felt so free and at peace. I could completely be myself. It was such an expansive experience. A great way to explore life and a culture I had never been in before. The massive nature is something I had not experienced in my lifetime in the small country of Belgium. As well the open and fearless essence of the people and the open space I felt all around me was very nurturing to me. It was a very rich experience to be able to speak English, connect with people from all over the world. Being able to work in America and express myself freely. What a gift, what a joy!

The two months of camp ended on August 15th 1990. What an incredible experience! I learned so many things. This was the end of one chapter and I was about to begin another one of which I had no idea what it would bring. Four weeks on the road traveling the United States with a group of teenagers from all over Europe. When we signed up for the trip, we were offered six different routes from which to choose. I first chose to take the East Coast - West Coast tour, including the Grand Canyon. Nancy had chosen the route from New York down to Florida. That trip would also include Washington, D.C. and two days at Disney World. Because Nancy and I had created such a beautiful bond together I decided to change my

trip and join her route.

Two vans and a car were provided for our group. We were given a map and an address for our next destination. They needed three confident volunteers to drive the three vehicles from downtown New York to our first destination. Sure I can be one of them I thought. I was not intimidated driving in the big cities in Europe, I had even driven in the heavy traffic of Paris. New York can't be that much harder. With my hand up I chose to be volunteer and jumped behind the wheel of a rather large van I had never driven before. I took my time checking out the workings of the vehicle. A clutch next to the steering wheel? Weird! With a van full of excited teenagers I dived into the heavy New York traffic. I found myself in the middle of many yellow cabs which I had only encountered before in a movie. GPS was not an option at that time. I had someone next to me holding the map and helping me to navigate.

We visited many places and attractions and did fun activities. I will mention them briefly. Each of them could have been an episode by itself. My first tubing experience was on the river in Phoenicia in New York. We visited the Vanderbilt Mansion, the Independence Hall in Philadelphia. We learned the story behind the nation's coins in a tour of the Philadelphia Mint.



In Lancaster County in Pennsylvania, Nancy and I chose to stay with an Amish Family for four days. That was truly a very unique experience. No electricity was used in the house. The fridge ran on gas and they used oil lamps at night. Transportation was accomplished by horse and wagon. We learned so much about their Amish culture and life style. Something I never heard of before.



In Washington, DC we visited the White House and the National Portrait Gallery. We stayed at the Harrington Hotel, visited the George Washington Memorial, the National Air and Space Museum in the Smithsonian Institute. We had a tour inside the FBI building, and ate lunch at the Hard Rock Café. Then we visited Thomas Jefferson's house in Monticello.

Our second host family in Virginia invited us on their lake boat. We learned how to jet ski which was so much fun! We also joined them in their weekly

square dancing activities which I had never done before! On my birthday, a BBQ was organized in the Blue Ridge Mountains in West Virginia.

We visited the Oconaluftee Indian Village in North Carolina. It is a replica of an 18th-century Eastern Cherokee community.

In Atlanta, Georgia we visited the underground dancing scene and danced all night. We visited The World of Coca-Cola, which made me sick sampling at least 20 different soda's.

In Florida we visited Cape Canaveral and the Kennedy Space Center on the day a space shuttle was planned to be launched. While we were waiting we were informed that the launch was canceled. We also visited the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

In Jacksonville, Florida, my favorite bathing suit and jeans skirt were stolen. I was drying it overnight outside the motel room on a chair. That was not a good idea!

We had two fun full days at Disney World where we explored Universal Studios and the Epcot Center. In Miami we visited the Florida International University and had lunch where the television series Miami Vice was filmed.

Nancy went snorkeling while visiting the first of the Florida Keys and in St. Augustine we visited Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum which was fascinating!

What an incredible road adventure! I was so glad I joined Nancy's route. And there was more! Now it was time for my three days exploration of New York city. It was the cherry on the cake! I love New York! Dan, the camp directors son had his own apartment in New York City and he invited me to go out with his friends on my last night before flying back to Belgium. Hanging out in New York with locals was so much fun, but not a good idea! I drank a little bit to much and spent most of my flight back home sick in the bathroom on the airplane! Never to be repeated again.

Nancy and I had so much fun during those three months together and have stayed great friends since. We attended the same college for three years and had the opportunity to work together in Brussels during the next two

summer vacations. We were counselors in a summer camp for children from dysfunctional families. But the synchronicities were not done yet! Several years later Nancy announced she was going to marry her English boyfriend Philip and move to England, which she did. I didn't know at the time that soon I would be meeting Paul in my future and marry him one year later. This turned out to be two weeks before Nancy's wedding was planned. We had amazing alignments going on in our lives.

Those three months were so rich. I lived totally in the moment. I didn't think much about home in Belgium at all. Homesick? NO WAY! Being gone to America for three months felt so good. I felt so open, so free and present with all that presented itself. Many people were warning me about a possible culture shock. I didn't know what that meant. Encountering the American culture was for me a gift of expansion, an invitation to be totally myself. It opened me up in ways I never imagined possible.

And then came the day I arrived back in Belgium! I was totally not prepared for what was to come next. I experienced a painful head-on culture shock when I arrived back home. For those three months I had relaxed into my own space. I felt an expansion and an openness I had never felt before. My energy field opened by being in nature and by the open interactions I had with others. My authentic nature was able to express itself more fully. My heart was open and happy. My body was opening up to life, like a house with all windows open and the fresh air freely moving in and out. Being back in Belgium felt like I had to shut myself down again. My open heart was not able to stay open. I didn't expect that and didn't understand what was happening. I felt in the debts of my soul that it was a very painful affair!

Of course I quickly adjusted back to my old ways of being. Life goes on. Another important chapter of my life was about to begin.

Life as a college student in Gent! I was ready!

P.S. Thank you Nancy for taking the time to dig into your old boxes of information about the camp. You provided many more details than I was able to remember! As you expressed wonderfully, what a fun dive into our shared history! Thanks for the collaboration to this episode.



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(Sharing permitted with my name and email included)
(With a simple email let me know if you like
to be added or removed from this list).

Mieke's Voice - Part 1

- Week 1 - Introduction part 1
- Week 2 - A Rough Start
- Week 3 - Vision
- Week 4 - History Lesson
- Week 5 - Bookstore Caecilia
- Week 6 - Invisible Hand
- Week 7 - My family, a circle of 5. Part 1 - My parents Anny & Hugo
- Week 8 - My family, a circle of 5. Part 2 - My brother Jeroen
- Week 9 - My family, a circle of 5. Part 3 - My sister Kathleen
- Week 10 - My family, a circle of 5. Part 4 - Something about myself, Mieke
- Week 11 - Encounters with extraterrestrials
- Week 12 - The Movie E.T. - The Extra -Terrestrial
- Week 13 - What happens after the body dies?

Mieke's Voice - Part 2

- Week 14 - Introduction part 2
- Week 15 - Expressing my authentic nature
- Week 16 - Sexuality - part 1 - Unity
- Week 17 - Sexuality - part 2 - Separation
- Mieke's Voice - Part 1
- Week 18 - Sexuality - part 3 - Menstruation
- Week 19 - Intimate Relationships

Week 20 - America - part 1 - Newspaper Article

Week 21 - America - part 2 - Stepping into a movie