

## REFLECT, RE-TOOL, REINVIGORATE, REPEAT!

Remarks by Jeremi Snook, CEO/President

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When the Airbus descended slowly over the Tasman Sea on final approach to Auckland Airport, I began to wonder what some of those first lowan exchange participants might have been thinking about on their final descent into the Soviet Union almost 40 years ago. In what I can only imagine as a blend of emotions, and consumed with their singular purpose to extend a hand of friendship, they disembarked as ambassadors of peace during the height of the cold war, not knowing they were paving the way for nearly four decades of similar such exchanges.

At that time almost a year ago now, being new to Friendship Force, and in almost stark contrast, my mission was a little less poetic flying into New Zealand on the first of several CEO trips to meet Friendship Force members around the world. For starters, thanks to my son, I had contracted a mean cold that had me spiking a fever somewhere over the Atlantic. I felt bad for the two chaps sitting to the left and right of me. Disheveled and looking something akin to an airline mechanic who got caught in the landing gear prior to takeoff, I made my way to meet my new, extended Friendship Force family.

In a similar way, though, to those first ambassadors in 1977, this trip was my first experience connecting with the mission. It was also my chance to meet a few hundred who represented thousands of members who make up the Friendship Force today.

That first conference in New Plymouth, New Zealand, was wonderful, as were the following five conferences in their own unique ways. Each conference seemed to build on the former in helping to bring into focus what can only be described as the collective voice of club

members. The themes of their concerns became more noticeable and the questions more clear

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“Forty years later, who are we in this rapidly changing world? Are we still relevant?”

If there was one take away, one thing Friendship Force members around the world were asking it was this: **How do we reawaken our mission and secure our place in a world that desperately needs us?**

In July of this year, I shared with the international board of directors a ten page document describing a vision for the future of the organization. Not a concluding document, but a starting place for a conversation that I want invite you to be a part of today.

## Part I: On Relevance

There is a British proverb, although many claim its variations, **“you don’t know where you’re going until you know where you’ve been.”** To better understand the purpose of our organization, we must spend time reacquainting ourselves with what inspired and motivated Wayne Smith to put into action a plan to promote greater understanding in the world. This is why a significant portion of time at regional conferences these past eight months has been dedicated to building a metaphorical house, beginning with the organization’s foundation, then continuing by recognizing what has made Friendship Force strong over the years and also identifying ways, perhaps, our foundation has weakened. A presentation we will work to make available online.

In the late 1970’s the world was still grappling with the effects of the Cold War. Popular perceptions of the world around us were guided and misguided by propaganda - perceptions that flourished in a vacuum of widespread cultural literacy. Wayne Smith and a few others

came to realize that these perceptions had created room for prejudice and discrimination of whole cultures and it was this realization that empowered them to form the Friendship Force.

***That was nearly 40 years ago, before a technology explosion, before lightning speed global communication. What about today?***

Turn on the news or follow the threads on Facebook and we are immediately immersed in detailed stories of violence and moments of public panic around the world, **but are these “breaking news” events a true representation of our world or are they used by media conglomerates solely to increase viewer ratings?** To begin to answer these questions, let's start with technology.

Contrasting the Friendship Force world in 1977, few can disregard the impact technology has had on our culture. Research will tell you that every 12-18 months, computers double their capacities. Author and futurist, Ray Kurzweil predicts that as technology continues to grow exponentially, this technology will irreversibly transform people and how they interact in the world. Today, two-thirds of the world has access to the internet, and over 84% of people in advanced countries own a cell phone. Long gone are the days of rotary telephones and going to the library to explore the world through the latest set of encyclopedias. Technology, and thus the world, is in our hands, in our ears and on our wrists.

Nothing probably better illustrates this rapid acceleration, and perhaps you can identify with this, than a recent driving trip my family took through rural Georgia, USA. My son pointed out the window at this funny looking contraption on the side of the road and said, “Dad, what is that thing?” I looked at him in bewilderment and answered, “it's called a phone booth, son.”

(Then I had this sobering reality check of my age and started to sob silently to myself the rest of the journey.)

**So, with all this new technology creating unprecedented connections between people, isn't the world coming closer together?** You might think so, but not necessarily, and not in the way you might think. The assimilation and widespread adoption of technology is promoted mainly by commerce driven corporations seeking efficiency in communications and operations. This profit-driven thinking is what many social scientists are referring to when they talk about *globalization*. Business might be forcing the world closer together, not for the betterment of mankind, but with the goal of enhancing their bottom line - profits.

Charles Lerche, writing for the International Journal of Peace Studies, says, "Another paradoxical effect of intensifying globalization, is that while it seeks to homogenize, it also increases awareness of social heterogeneity. Groups whose identity and solidarity are based on race, ethnicity, religion, language have become increasingly vocal and have used the global media to make their discontent known." Perhaps *this* is what we're beginning to see in the news. Although extremists take center stage - because it constitutes juicy reporting that viewers like to see- there are still countless others who, in their own ways, are fighting against the dilution of their culture caused by globalization. French economic and social theorist, Jacques Attali, writes, "We live in a world that is simultaneously shrinking and expanding, growing closer and farther apart....National borders are increasingly irrelevant. And yet globalism is by no means triumphant. Tribalisms of all kinds flourish. Irredentism abounds." Social scientists such as these suggest that as globalization continues to accelerate, increased conflict and violence is inevitable. This type of forced global change puts incredible stress on society.

**Conclusion? Although the places where the need for greater understanding in the world is different today than 40 years ago, it is no less relevant. In fact, the impact of**

globalization on cultures has underscored the need for greater understanding for all mankind.

**Make no mistake about it, perhaps now more than ever before, the world needs us- needs you and needs me- to promote the power of friendship. The world needs the Friendship Force.**

## Part II: On Growth

***If we are still relevant, then why the steady declines in club membership and exchange activity?***

The acceleration of technology and impact of globalization has forced businesses of every type to adapt their practices in order to continue to connect with their customers.

This is not an uncommon challenge for organizations like the Friendship Force that have been in operation for several decades. When grouped with organizations of a similar age, we gain incredible insight into the real, and perhaps predictable, obstacles we now face. There are many resources that speak to this, but probably one of the more clear examples comes from nonprofit consultant and author, Judith Sharken Simon.

In her book , *The Five Life Stages of Nonprofit Organizations*, Sharken describes that organizations like the Friendship Force that have been around for 30 or 40 years, will inevitably face the reality of being slightly out of sync with world and will need commit itself to a turn-around. **Great! So we're not alone!**

But recognizing we are not alone in this challenge is only a first step. The act of recognizing, too, that in order to survive **we must change**, is another step we as an

organization must overcome. Renowned author on leadership, John Kotter, wrote, “the rate of change is not going to slow down anytime soon. If anything, competition in most industries will probably speed up even more in the next few decades.”

Perhaps a little less academic but equally insightful is this:



If our examination of technology and globalization wasn't a precursor to this statement, just look at any one of the dozens of organizations that currently market to our prospective members. Regardless of these organizations' underlying motivations, today's nonprofit organizations are no longer in competition with a similar organization down the street or in the next city over. It increasingly finds itself competing with for-profit sector companies.

For Friendship Force, it's no wonder that companys like HomeStay.com, HomeExchange.com and AirBnB push the social good aspect of “living like a local,” gently pulling at the heartstrings of prospective customers in order to turn them into buyers. They know people are looking for something different, but it's not out there, at least not competing in the

same technological playing field. **Their success proves that our mission alone isn't enough. It needs to be supported by a business structure that meets the expectations of a world that is rapidly and continually changing.**

So, what does this mean for Friendship Force International? Shortly after joining FFI, it didn't take long to realize the disparity between how Friendship Force operated and where we needed to be-disparities that were confirmed over and over again as I interacted with club leaders, members, board members and staff; disparities which inspired a plan that, with the help of members and leaders like many of you, I have not hesitated to put into action.

Let me give you a few examples:

ISSUE: We say we're international and yet nearly all of our materials are in english and our support staff is in the United States.

SOLUTION: Recognizing the success of FFI support staff in Japan and Germany, and the proven success of teleworking made possible by the internet, we began to take bold steps in hiring club support staff **in the regions where clubs exists**, hiring staff who understand the culture and language, and who live in the same time zone. Just last month Friendship Force International hired staff in Europe to help cover Eastern and Western Europe and just a fortnight ago I had the privilege of introducing Friendship Force's first staff member in Brazil much to the praises of delegates at the Brazil National Convention.

SOLUTION: Additionally, while all of our materials will be first published in english, we have already begun to translate our policies, our website and our promotional materials into multiple languages.

ISSUE: Another observation is the need to find ways to once again promote the mission of Friendship Force on the world stage. But this starts with better supporting clubs in their local efforts to promote the work of FFI.

SOLUTION: Through streamlining the budget and contracting with proven professionals we now have a team of people working to improve communications and marketing across the board. Efforts Kaitlyn, FFI's Director of Marketing and Communications, will be highlighting during this conference.

One more example...

ISSUE: Finally, it was clear that in order to help stabilize the budget, Friendship Force had begun tweaking and adjusting policies. While it did help bring stability, in the short-term, the fee structure has become complicated, difficult to implement in some cases and equally difficult to defend.

SOLUTION: In March of this year the board put together a Policy Review Committee with the explicit goal of stepping back from this fee structure FFI has created over the years and ask ourselves, "does this actually make sense? Is there a better way?"

I share a few of these business improvement examples because I believe they are important to highlight, but also to demonstrate that by addressing something as simple as how we conduct our business, we may finally reach thousands if not tens-of-thousands of potential members waiting for Friendship Force to make this leap and modernize its business.

Now, these are just business adjustments. This only helps us in the HOW we run our organization. More importantly, and what I want to leave you with, is a much more important topic - WHY we exist?

## Part III: On Finding Our Voice Again

Our focus these past several months has been intentionally oriented around cultivating our stories. Stories are the lifeblood of Friendship Force, and each story is a testimony to the power of friendship. Even without knowing exactly what next steps need to be taken strategically, focusing on our stories gives us inspiration and clarity of purpose. We need this clarity because our mission, having evolved ever so slightly over the years, lacks the adequate breadth or depth of impact to inspire on its own..

Our original mission as described in 1977:

“To provide, largely through volunteer efforts, a means by which the people of the United States and other countries can meet and develop friendship and understanding among each other. It is our belief that the knowledge, understanding and friendships developed through personal contacts with the people of different countries will promote the cause of world peace.”

Our mission was later revised in 2007:

“To promote world peace and understanding by creating an environment where individual friendship can be established across the barriers that separate people.”

Our mission today reads:

“To promote global understanding across the barriers that separate people.”

A longitudinal review of our mission statement begs the question, **“has the evolution of how we define our reason for existence over the years simultaneously diluted our once clear purpose?”** Perhaps the best path forward is linked to where we began. At the heart of these thoughts is our need to reconnect with why we as an organization exist. The words we have used to describe ourselves in the last 3-5 years are a reflection of our digression from our core in pursuit of less sustainable ambitions. This has us spending time focusing on activities that generate revenue rather than on creating opportunities for greater involvement. It has us experimenting with variations of different types of exchanges rather than experimenting with bold ways to invite different audiences to engage with our mission. Finally, it has us beating the drum in our communications to “recruit, recruit, recruit” rather than inspiring and re-energizing our clubs, members and others in why what we do is important. By focusing on these tangential ambitions we risk diverging from the core, and indeed, I believe, we have. **The need for all of us to be inspired and motivated to embrace a clear and actionable mission is Friendship Force’s only sustainable path forward.**

When you strip everything away - our programs, business structure, clubs, members - you are left with our mission in its purest form. What is that? To visit the latest attractions? To say to our friends and neighbors that we’re world travelers? No. One Friendship Force Member suggested simply that what we do is “wage peace, one friend at a time.”

**Finding our voice in the world again starts by revisiting and making clear why we exist and what our mission seeks to accomplish, for ourselves and for the world.**

## Part IV: A Strategy and a Vision

As stewards of the Friendship Force mission, we are required to challenge the definition of what mission-fulfillment looks like. Some members, including myself, have begun to wonder if those elements that once made us great have been lost to the bureaucracy of program administration and the ever-narrower definition of the Friendship Force program. “It must be no less than seven days! Friendship only happens on the seventh day! And the group must be larger than 15 people - any less and the magic formula for friendship will fail.” Do these statements sound familiar? Do you know that friendship can happen in an instant? I can’t tell you how many stories I have heard that start like this: “After having traveled for thousands of miles and left to navigate this foreign land alone, I was unsure of what experience lay before me. I don’t think I was with our hosts for more than five minutes when I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that we would be friends for life. And indeed we have been.”

Where do we begin?

## Part V: Opening Our Mission to the World

**“I’ll go anywhere as long as it’s forward.” - David Livingstone**

Friendship Force started with working families and youth. In my travels and in visiting with Friendship Force members around the world, I have been surprised by the number of people who were introduced to FFI during a very different time in their lives. Some were introduced as children going on an exchange or to a meeting with their parents, many were mid-career professionals, and others were fathers and mothers with children in tow. **These**

**were the memories that marked either their beginnings with Friendship Force or a moment that inspired them to join later in life.**

The limitations for how we fulfill our mission today are self-imposed, not dictated by the mission itself. If travel were banned or limited, how else might we fulfill our mission? Would our mission be any less relevant or needed if exchanges in the traditional sense went away? This isn't to suggest we move away from exchanges but rather intended to force us to think more broadly of how we might also realize the full impact of our mission in action. **Investing in the future of Friendship Force is to invest in broadening its impact by exploring ways to open the organization to others of all ages and backgrounds so that they too may experience the power of friendship.**

#### Not a New Concept, Just a Dedicated Effort

A quick stroll through the annals of Friendship Force will prove that participation by groups, youth and families have always existed in some form within our existing model. Although it is harder to see the clubs comprised of both parents and children within the Friendship Force network, they do exist, and where they do, these clubs are *thriving*. Even as recently as this last year, clubs have experimented with foreign language exchange programs for youth. And in the recent past, they have also facilitated international band exchanges between schools. These efforts, however, have been regarded as outlier experiences, and not necessarily a concerted effort to expand our core offering of programs. The same is true for our Friendship Force members who wish to travel independently of clubs. We have danced around the formation of a program by instituting a stayover policy, but again, not part of our core program. This has to change.

- For you and the clubs you belong to we must embrace tools and methods that make us stronger - technology in all its forms, the ideas tested and proven by the NextGen group, the proven methods of nurturing multi-generational clubs as seen in Japan and Peru, and perhaps more importantly, to remind you every chance possible that you are not alone in your work, but you are connected to diverse and wonderful Friendship Force family worldwide - ready to share their ideas and stories of their own successes with you.
- For families, we must develop opportunities to connect both locally and internationally. Creating opportunities where parents and children can come together with other parents and children for both the benefit of cultural education and friendship.
- For youth, we must expand and invest in programs that join together young people around similar interests, planting the seeds of cultural understanding at a young age while also creating opportunities for lifelong friendship and to connect with our mission.
- For individuals, we must recognize that the way people wish to engage with the world has evolved and, for many, that means creating opportunities for individuals to meet, sit at the proverbial kitchen table of understanding and explore friendship.

**If we believe that our mission of promoting understanding should inspire all people and in all seasons of life, it is vital that we embrace a vision that includes opportunities for individuals, groups, youth, and families.**

## Part VI: It's Time

When we disembark in a foreign land - when we extend a hand, a bow, a smile - we represent so much more than ourselves. While we honor our heritage, our past, our culture, and our people on these cultural exchanges, we come *first* in the name of what makes us human. Free of those things that often divide people, we come to connect as people who have loved and, perhaps, lost, who manage families and work, and who desire nothing more than to build friendship. That is the place where the path toward peace between whole peoples begins and is strengthened. This is where the fulfillment of our purpose, as a new friend once said, becomes “noble and great.”

It is time to find our voice again and use it in a world fractured by misunderstanding and ignorance. If we believe the mission of Friendship Force continues to be relevant today, as I hope we do, then we are obligated to do whatever it takes to ensure a positive way forward. This includes allowing ourselves to be re-energized with how powerful our message of friendship *could* be if we challenged business-as-usual at Friendship Force with sound reasoning, research and bold vision.

It's time...

- **to secure our mission's place** for the betterment of the world.
- **to rally around the mission** and reconnect with our core purpose
- **to publish in newspapers, magazines, blogs and social media for the world to see a counter-narrative**, to the prejudice, racism, stereotypes, general distrust and hate
- **to advocate for greater understanding in the world by creating pathways for people of all ages and backgrounds to take part in the Friendship Force**

- **To pool our resources and invest in the future of our organization**
- **My friends, to reignite the passion that first drew you to Friendship Force and see our mission anew. Our current and future generations depend on us - Citizen Ambassadors - diplomats of understanding - to provide a better way forward for the world.**