I Remember, Liina Keerdoja

As I left for college in the fall of 1960, I told myself that now I was leaving Seabrook for good, as I always knew that one day I would. The years that followed took me through college and graduate school, and eventually brought me to Washington, D.C. where for the past 20 years I have been working as a librarian at the U.S. Department of State. I have had occasion to travel and to become acquainted with people from all walks of life and from all over the world. Whenever and wherever I've talked about growing up in Seabrook, people have listened with genuine interest. And why not? Brought into being by force of circumstances and through people the majority of whom would have rather been somewhere else, Seabrook certainly was a novel, if not a unique place. Over the years, I have come to realize that though I may have left it, Seabrook has not left me. A Seabrook legacy that unassumingly came along with me that day I left Seabrook for good is an appreciation for and an understanding of people different from myself - something I would have otherwise had to learn as an adult.

I came to Seabrook in May of 1949 and started first grade at Seabrook School the following September. The handful of other Estonian children I found in my class that September morning long ago served to lessen somewhat my anxieties about being brought to a strange and unfamiliar place where everyone looked different from us and no one spoke our language. Besides ourselves, the class was made up of Japanese American children, American children of European descent, and a few African Americans. I'm sure we seemed just as different to them as they to us.

This ethnic and cultural mix, later supplemented by newcomers of German, Latvian, and other ethnic backgrounds, continued to be the norm during all my years in Seabrook. Holding on to our ethnic identity (i.e. being different) also continued to be the norm, at least in the Estonian community. Yet, even as the Estonian community at large concentrated on preserving its ethnic and cultural heritage, at Seabrook School, we children found ourselves readily interacting with children of other backgrounds. We learned together, played together, occasionally got into fights together, and in the process came to regard one another's different cultural and ethnic backgrounds not as something negative, but as the most normal and natural thing in the world.

What started out as strange and different had in time become normal and natural. Our ethnic and cultural differences did not disappear, but neither were they a barrier to our getting along. Looking back, I see Seabrook as a playing field of sorts on which we acquired an outlook on life that makes it easier today to live and work and feel at home in a multicultural America. Multiculturalism, a popular buzz word of the 1990's, is not a new concept. In Seabrook more that forty years ago, it was already a fact of every day life.

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