



Watch out for the Elephants!

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Travels with the Todds

Sisters C. Angela Todd and C. Ann Todd, with roots in Red Bank, write about their childhood as citizens of the world.

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BY L.C. ROGERS
CORRESPONDENT

They were little girls from Red Bank when the spectacular odyssey began; little girls with an eye for adventure and parents — James and Norma Todd — who encouraged them all the way.

This year, the women, who now live in the Midwest, decided to share their memories of that life in a book about their travels called "Watch out for the Elephants!" (\$20, Leathers Publishing, Overland Park, Kansas).

The book — loaded with illustrations, color photographs, world maps and lively storytelling — details how, back in 1945, their father became only the 11th African American appointed to the U.S. Foreign Service. He began a series of postings to Europe, Africa and Asia, and he and his wife, Norma, decided to take the girls along.

Norma Todd, founder and director of Lunch Break, the soup kitchen, food pantry and social services center on Bergen Place in Red Bank, said mid 20th-century American diplomats didn't automatically get to take their families with them when they set out for a new post.

"But the State Department was really wonderful to James. They said whenever you go, wherever you go, take both your children and your wife," Norma Todd said. "It turned out to be a wonderful experience. A lot of people thought we were crazy to do it, but it worked out very well."

Norma Todd well remembers the way she and her husband challenged the girls to make the most of their ever-changing landscape.

"We lived in Cairo, Tel Aviv, Salzburg, Jakarta, Vienna, Frankfurt, the Ivory Coast, Congo," she said. "We always challenged the girls to become part of the society wherever we went. At one point, they wanted very much to learn French. They wanted to go to a lycee — French school.

"We decided to give them a two-week trip to Paris to see how they would do with the language," Norma Todd said. "People laughed and said no one would ever learn the language that quickly. But we thought, "Let's give them a chance.' "



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The Todds encouraged the girls to conquer French menus and currency and to undertake chores around the hotel so they could communicate with the staff. In two weeks they had learned enough conversational French to assure their parents they would make good students at the lycee.

The sisters say such experiences broadened their horizons and left them with incomparable memories, which they share in the book.

Angela, who has retired twice — first from TWA after 23 years and second from Kansas City Power and Light where she worked in equal employment opportunities and diversity — retained her love of French. She earned a master's degree in the language and teaches French 101 three days a week in a local college. She lives in Kansas City.

Ann, St. Louis, has a master's degree in psychology and is a weight counselor in a Kansas City hospital, a job she took after losing 180 pounds.

They created their book with an eye toward opening up the wonders of the world to children. It has attracted a fair share of attention among educators who are introducing it in classrooms around the country.

There's a lot of interest in creating a companion work book for middle school students, Angela said. And, just last week, an animation company contacted the sisters expressing interest in creating an animated version of their tale.

The Todd sisters explained that the title of the book comes from their shared belief that their unusual upbringing was a distinct privilege that carried with it the distinct responsibility to pass along the important life lessons they learned.

Primary among those lessons, they said, was: "As you go through life, regardless of what shape or form they may take, always watch out for the elephants!"

In a conference call from their respective homes, the sisters talked about their aspirations for the book saying it was written as an "enduring legacy" to their parents who showed them what it meant to be "proud Americans even in the light of frequent adversity."

They talked about what life was like when they started out on their journey. Objectively stated, it wasn't a time particularly friendly to black diplomats, their wives or children. When they were school age, for instance, their parents put them in local schools in the countries they were posted to rather than in schools for the children of the diplomatic corps.

"Mom would tell us that it was because we'd learn so much more about the people and the culture where we were staying," Angela said. "Not until we became adults did we realize she was also doing it to shield us from bigotry."

"Racial prejudice was a part of that world," said Ann Todd. "But where the book was concerned, we had to do some negotiating with our father."

The late James Todd was very much alive when they started writing the book and very much a part of the project.

"He didn't want to dwell on the negative in the Foreign Service. He felt the book should be a positive experience for the kids who would read it."





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And so, the sisters said, they focused on the creative and brave road the family walked while integrating the U.S. Foreign Service. They also emphasized the cultural diversities of the different lands they lived in and talked about how to live in harmony with diversity.

Inspiring young people to savor that diversity in a post-Sept. 11 world is a real focus of the book, they said.

"When we were growing up, diversity was like oxygen in our air," said Angela. We worry now in this post-Sept. 11 world that we've reached a point where we are so isolated.

"We want kids to realize as they read our book that we were able to make friends with kids around the world and that the only thing that was important was that we liked each other."

