

Detained man's North Korean trip baffles many

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DAYTON, Ohio — Neighbors, acquaintances and former classmates are puzzled by the decision of a West Carrollton, Ohio, man to visit North Korea, where he was detained by authorities for allegedly breaking that country's exceedingly strict laws.

By many accounts, Jeffrey Fowle, 56, was not the type of person you would expect to be at the center of an international incident.

The 1976 Beavercreek High School graduate was a member of the photo and chess clubs and was active in the school's Bible club.

After graduating from Ohio State with a bachelor's degree in agriculture, Fowle accepted a job with the city of Moraine in the late 1980s and has worked in the street department ever since.

In April Fowle traveled to North Korea on vacation as part of a guided tour because he loved to travel and experience different cultures and see new places, an attorney for his family said. The father of three young children previously had trekked across the globe to visit war-torn areas and to court the Russian native who would become his wife.

U.S. citizens who have visited North Korea as tourists tell this newspaper they were lured by the chance to see one of the most secluded societies on earth.

But some academics and foreign-policy researchers said North Korea is the last place Americans should set foot, since it is full of perilous pitfalls.

"I would indicate real concern with the decision to go, not only because it's not safe, but also because the North Korean regime uses this for their own propaganda, and it helps to prop up this regime, which is the most brutal dictatorship, almost in human history," said Mitchell Lerner, director of the Institute for Korean Studies at The Ohio State University.

Fowle, born in Winter Park, Fla., in 1958, attended Beavercreek Elementary School and graduated from Beavercreek High and OSU.

On his job application, Fowle described himself as reliable, dependable, thorough, honest, friendly and a quick learner.

He also said he was familiar with Spanish, German and Russian, and he held a pilot's license.

His Russian helped him in his romantic pursuits. In the 1990s, he began communicating with women overseas, connections that he made by perusing ads in the back of singles magazines.

Fowle traveled to Russia to meet a young woman named Tatyana "Tanya" Shoom. He returned for a second visit not long after.

Tanya accompanied Fowle to the United States, and they married on Sept. 20, 2000, Montgomery County records show. Tanya gave birth to their first child, Alex, in 2001. They had a second child, Chris, in 2003, and a third, Stephanie, two years later. Tanya works as a cosmetologist.

Fowle owns a farm house on 4000 block of Soldiers Home Road in a rural part of West Carrollton. He bought the property in August 2010. Before that, he lived in a more modest home on the 3500 block of Beechgrove Road in Moraine.

Fowle reportedly was detained by North Korean officials in mid-May as he was wrapping up a two-week organized tour.

Japanese media outlets reported that North Korean authorities claimed to have found a Bible Fowle left behind in his hotel room, which led to accusations of Christian proselytizing, according to The New York Times.

Religion, including Christianity, is outlawed in the authoritarian state. In describing the country, the U.S.-based Cato Institute said the North Korean communist system is considered holy like a church, and the totalitarian rulers are secular saints.

Family members have said little publicly about Fowle's trip and confinement. Limiting publicity is a wise strategy to aid his return home, according to experts in political affairs.

But the family's silence has fueled speculation about Fowle's motivation for visiting a nation ruled by one of the world's most oppressive regimes. Local residents said it is hard to believe the quiet and reserved man they knew would want to visit such a place and act in ways that would lead to his captivity.

"He's quiet, keeps to himself, never hurt nobody," said Terry Beasley, 26, who grew up down the street from Fowle. "He wouldn't hurt a flea."

Fowle was kind of nerdy and quiet, but always friendly, said David L. Stephens, 36, who lived just a few blocks from Fowle's old Moraine home.

Fowle was well-respected in the community, and neighbors would undoubtedly band together to help him and his family out if they knew how they could, he said.

“A lot of people would put up money if there was a jug at the market,” he said.

Fowle was an experienced traveler who loved new adventures, according to a statement his family released.

In 1996, he was one of 35 ambassadors with Dayton’s Friendship Force who visited Croatia and Sarajevo following the Dayton Peace Accords, reached between Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia, which ended the Bosnian war.

The group — which included then-Dayton Mayor Mike Turner, City Commissioner Idotha Bootsie Neal and Dayton Daily News Editor Max Jennings — witnessed the war’s destruction firsthand.

“I am concerned about him, because he’s such a mild-mannered person that I can’t imagine anybody not letting him go,” said Doris Ponitz, who served as the group’s tour leader.

In May 2008, Fowle requested permission from his employer to use 20 days of his vacation time so that he and Tanya could travel to Russia.

Tanya had tried to keep her husband from going to North Korea, a family friend said.

“She tried to tell him not to go because it was too dangerous and something might happen, and he didn’t listen to her and he went ahead and went anyway,” Jeff Seidel said.

Just a few thousand people, including U.S. citizens, have visited North Korea each year since the nation lifted restrictions on tourism in 2010, industry groups said. This newspaper spoke with several U.S. citizens and citizens from other Western nations who have traveled there to better understand their interest in the destination.

Andrew Lombardi, 37, a software developer who lives in Laguna Beach, Calif., said he visited North Korea for about seven days in 2011. He said some family and friends thought he was crazy, but he could not pass on such a unique opportunity.

“It was just something different to do,” he said. “But the main draw was that it’s unseen, and most Westerners have never been there.”

Tourists are supervised every moment of their visits, and tour guides advise them to use good judgment and not to run off on their own, he said.

The trip, Lombardi said, was eye-opening, compelling and occasionally fun, like when he played in the nation’s first-ever ultimate frisbee tournament.

“People are the same everywhere you go; it’s just the circumstances are different,” he said. “A country that probably 99 percent of Americans think is evil in some way is really not. The government behind it is completely evil beyond belief, but all the people who live there are in an unfortunate circumstance.”

In his experience, Lombardi said tourists who followed the rules did not encounter problems during their visits.

Cyrus Kirkpatrick, the California-based author of “How to Make Money While Traveling,” went to North Korea as part of an organized tour in 2012 and 2013. He said he was drawn to the country because of its isolation and mystery.

“The idea of going into a forbidden country is what piqued my interest,” he said.

Kirkpatrick said his first trip went smoothly. But during his second visit, he was afraid he was going to get kicked out. His offense was illegally using his camera to make a recording.

Kirkpatrick said his guide helped defuse the situation, and the country is safe for anyone who learns the rules and follows them.

“If you can comprehend following basic rules, like not wrinkling newspapers with photos of the Kim family, not bringing up topics about politics or other taboo subjects, and not bringing in Bibles or other restricted items, then there is nothing to worry about,” Kirkpatrick said.

Guests need to be respectful of North Korea’s laws and customs, which are similar to many non-European countries and include not taking photos of military or police officials and avoiding subjects such as politics or religion, said Tudor Clee, a New Zealand attorney who visited the country for 10 days in 2012.

“ I’m concerned that many people are visiting who aren’t experienced travelers and don’t appreciate how seriously infractions are taken,” he said.

Ohio State’s Lerner said North Korea is a dangerous and unpredictable place for U.S. tourists, who can be arrested at whim for perceived, actual or potentially fabricated violations of arcane laws.

“In North Korea, you have to have a picture on your wall of the ruling family. If that picture is not dusted well enough, you can be arrested ... or sent to a prison camp where you’re killed. And not only can you be sent, but three generations of your family can be sent,” Lerner said.

Lerner said he wishes Fowle a quick and safe return home. But, he said, Fowle is being held by the most closed and repressive society in the modern world.

Few nations are as overtly anti-American as North Korea, and the danger to U.S. tourists is unique because it comes from the government and not third-party groups and actors, which makes it far more of a threat to travelers, Lerner said.

Adventurers thirsting to experience exotic and unusual places put North Korea on their travel lists when the country eased its tourism restrictions, but they may not always understand the hazards involved in visiting, he said.

“They call it the Hermit Kingdom for good reason,” Lerner said. “I think people sometimes don’t think through the ramifications, both in terms of the threat to their own safety and what they are doing to support the government that is killing its own people.”