

FROM OUR PRESIDENT:

Certainly, travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living.

Mary Ritter Beard

This month we are exploring educational travel. I am passionate about affording our students the opportunity to travel since most of our students have not traveled outside the United States, or even outside of Minnesota. Teaching for a decade in Brooklyn Center, I made it a priority to offer an international trip every two years. It was difficult...when one fundraiser ended, another started. I knew that I'd probably never have more than six kids fully commit to each trip, but I was committed to those six kids. Here are excerpts from an essay written by one of my former students. ~Marjie Hay

"My first international experience occurred during my junior year with my Spanish class at Brooklyn Center High School. That year, the Spanish trip abroad was to Ecuador. No one in my family spoke a language other than English or had been anywhere other than Kansas and Minnesota. I knew I had to be a part of this trip. I LOVED Spanish and I really thought it would be the only time I would ever have the chance to travel and speak the language. I remember flying in, seeing rolling mountains for the first time and feeling shocked that I was actually there ...realizing a dream that had felt impossible just a year before. What I learned from this first trip was that if life presents an opportunity, you have to take it. I do not think I would have done any further traveling had I not taken advantage of that initial opportunity in high school. At the U of MN-Twin Cities, I studied abroad three more times, visiting four countries. First, I went on a medical mission trip to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I practiced Spanish by taking medical histories and patients' vital signs. I assisted in giving physical exams and even helped deliver a baby. Next I traveled on a medical mission trip to the Dominican Republic. This humbling experience really changed my outlook on life. We visited a community living in a dump. While I was dissatisfied with my life at home, I knew I had more material possessions than these people would ever know. Upon my return to the States, I realized the Dominicans had given me

some of their happiness. I discovered these trips weren't only about serving others, they were also serving me. My final study abroad experience in college was once again to Ecuador. I revisited places that I had been to before and also traveled to new ones including the Galapagos Islands. In a way, it was like my short life had come full circle. The greatest lesson I learned while in Ecuador for those three months was "you just need to go with it." Because of my adventurous spirit, I was able to live in a setting very different from the other students. I was the only student to live with an Afro-Ecuadorian family in one of the Afro communities. Many times during this experience I had to put faith in myself and just go with the flow. My advice to someone who is considering studying abroad is just do it. Don't worry about what will hold you back; focus on what will get you there. My advice to those traveling is to be honest and open with people. I had such a great connection with my host family because I was 100 percent honest with them when I was feeling sick, when I just didn't want to talk, and when I was feeling great. Finally, challenge yourself by questioning everything. When you are surprised, ask why. When you are homesick, try to find the reason. When you are afraid, look inside yourself and ask what your real fear is. It is in those moments that you learn the most about yourself, about others and how you perceive the world around you."

~Chalonne Wilson



Chalonne Wilson (far left) with her host family in Ecuador



Concordia students on the Mekong Delta

Lessons Learned from the Mekong Delta

In 2011, I co-led an interdisciplinary study abroad program to Vietnam with French and Nursing students and alumni from Concordia College. We had become familiar with the Mekong Delta and had spent a fair amount of time in boats traveling along its majestic banks. The Mekong's power and girth were impressive as we were pummeled about in rising waves on our way to glimpse the triangle where the Mekong crosses several countries and eventually empties into the great ocean. This is an adventure we experienced regarding the Viet Cong and the Mekong on that trip.

One day we traveled to a place near the mouth of an important tributary river to the Mekong which gave us the chance to see the infancy of the mother river. My children had joined me on this trip. On this typically hot and humid day, my one-year old son and I were back with a group of students who needed a more modest hiking experience while my six-year old went along with the heartier group on a more serious hike. We crossed rope bridges easily spanning this nascent river. When the other hiking group returned hours later, I was told an amazing story about the "Viet Cong." My son had fallen on the hike and had been bleeding from several wounds along his legs. The guide quickly and expertly found a local plant, crushed it slightly, and pressed it to his cuts. The pain and bleeding stopped almost immediately. My son continued the hike and was even in high spirits when he got back. When we asked the guide to tell us about this miraculous plant, he simply said with a smile that it was called the "Viet Cong" because you can find it everywhere and you cannot get rid of it. This remark shocked and surprised me, although later my Vietnamese friend confirmed that it was probably just a joke. My first thoughts were of the war with the United States and, whatever one's political bent, it made me sick at

heart to think of our soldiers who had died fighting the Viet Cong. We had seen the Cu Chi tunnels and swampy Mekong Delta and could imagine how ingeniously the native Vietnamese used their landscape and local knowledge to foil U.S. initiatives. We thought hard about calling a plant this. We had learned that "Viet" means "the people". Few translations report any meaning other than "Communist" for "Cong," which ties that word, for us, irrevocably to the war. And, the guide's reference to them being everywhere and impossible to get rid of seemed a jab at how, at least according to them, we had lost the war. These resilient and resourceful people from the south of China had fought oppressors, our university professor explained, for over 1,000 years: first from China, then France, and later the U.S. We never learned another name for that miraculous plant although my friends say it must be "CỎ MŨC," whose healing powers are indeed well known in traditional medicine.

The lesson I choose to take from this experience of wisdom and the triumph of nature is not political but one that highlights the importance of language and culture. As K. David Hamilton evoked in his 2012 ACTFL keynote speech, we risk losing incredible resources if local expertise is lost. And this expertise is contained in the culture and sometimes only able to be communicated through the native languages. The biodiversity of the Mekong is third in the world, ranking just below that of the Amazon and the Congo. I had witnessed the value of traditional medical therapies. A simple crushed leaf eased all the pain and stopped the bleeding. No band-aids were necessary, no drugs, and the wounds healed quickly.

Upon our return home, we were still mystified by the beauty and healing power that the "Viet Cong" and Mekong left with us. My trip to Vietnam humbled me, motivated me to learn this beautiful and difficult language, inspired me, and renewed my faith in the importance of being multi-culturally literate, open-minded, and open-hearted in my travels and interactions each day. ~ Gay Rawson, Concordia College

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Stamped: "Havana, Cuba"

Most travelers don't usually associate crying while passing through the airport customs of a once "enemy" nation as a good thing. There I was, dripping in the oppressive heat, with my U.S. passport in the calm hands of the customs officer. She was polite, yet straight-faced, all of her movements routine, checking my signature and photo. Her efficiency moved me through the process, until she lifted her glance towards my tearing eyes. And then I lost control. I just cried and cried. She was certainly confused, but I was quick to blurt out in my best Spanish that it was a matter of me simply being at peace in finally reaching my lifelong dream destination: Cuba. She graciously smiled with a sense of pride and seemed to accept that I really was in awe of miraculously attaining this lifelong goal. She slid the passport back through the window and wished me a good visit to which I thanked her, apologized for my tears, and passed through to join my group of colleagues. Effortlessly, I was already taking in the real live sights and smells of Havana.

As a world language teacher, one has the privilege of making sure that world travel is a constant. It is our duty to remain fresh to the nuances of the cultures that we teach and to stay fluid in the language skills that we instill. For years, I had such a curious desire to legally get to Cuba and visit it before the lifting of the long withstanding U.S. embargo. I knew that I needed to experience this colorful nation before it would permanently change. As soon as the embargo is lifted, Cuba will be a different place with a different flavor to offer the U.S. tourist who has been starved to see what has been held at arms length for so many decades.

As the Cuba-U.S. relations shift and become less restrictive, there will be fewer roadblocks for U.S. citizens wishing to land on Cuban soil. Therefore, in the last few years there has been a surge in groups of educators and other community leaders legally traveling to this once "forbidden" neighbor. Granted, it is not a simple process to obtain the right to board a plane bound for Havana, but there are quite a few organizations dedicated to just that,



A scene from the streets of Havana

like the one that made this adventure possible for me, Witness For Peace (www.witnessforpeace.org). Our purpose was to learn about the Cuban people from their art, food, music, dance, theater, history, natural environment, government, education, healthcare, and tourism so that we in turn would be able to bring this information back to our classrooms as Spanish teachers and ambassadors of good will, connecting two very different cultures through a shared experience.

Our days started early with Cuban nationals hosting morning seminars on a variety of topics, then continued with afternoon tours around the capital city, interviewing and interacting with locals, and ended with dance lessons or informal reflections on the day's intense and informative activities. The lodging was simple and adequate, the food was more than I had hoped for, and the Cubans we came to know throughout our stay were true colleagues and most inspiring. They never lost sight of our groups' genuine interest in Cuba and our desire to participate in the "classroom" of the streets of Havana.

My most memorable experience came during our final evening in Havana. Our group piled into a couple of taxis, all American classic cars from the 1950's era and got dropped off at the "1831 Club" to apply some of the Cuban Salsa dance lessons we had just learned a day earlier. The dancing was so pure, so alive and so difficult to compare to any Salsa dancing I had ever experienced back home in Minnesota. There we were, warmed by the Cuban summer air, in Old Havana near the edge of the water. It was breathtaking as we got pulled into the dance scene. The Cubans simply moved each one of us gracefully and fluidly. We just danced and loved that it did not seem to end. I knew that this was what I had in mind that day that I first passed through customs. And as I passed back through customs the next and final morning, I managed to confuse yet another customs official. This time it wasn't my lack of composure but the small, strategic request to be sure that my U.S. passport finally earned that stamp from Havana, Cuba...legally. ~ Jenny Johnson, Lakeville North

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JNCL-NCLIS' website www.languagepolicy.org is a complete resource for federally funded travel opportunities and resources as well as legislative history and scholarship information including Fulbright-Hays. Check out the section on Principles for Managing Study Abroad Programs.

"L'homme qui sait deux langues en vaut deux"

A man who knows two languages is worth two men.

French Proverb JNCL-NCLIS@JNCLInfo #language

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