Broadening Perspective: A Montana Youth Leadership Program in Cambodia

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By Deena Mansour, Mansfield Center Project Manager

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana was founded 30 years ago to honor the life work of Senator Mike Mansfield and his wife, Maureen Hayes Mansfield. Before I launch into my topic, I would like to note that today, we join the family in grieving the loss of the only child of the Mansfields. Anne Mansfield passed away on April 24 at the age of 74. Our thoughts are with her daughter Caroline Marris and her family and friends around the world.

In a recent commentary, I shared Mike Mansfield’s strong interest in fostering youth. In his 1989 Message to Future Generations, he noted the importance of youth making the effort to understand people from around the world, and the importance of “accommodation and compromise, knowledge and understanding.”

In support of Mansfield’s vision, the Mansfield Center successfully competed for grant funding for the U.S. Department of State’s American Youth Leadership Program. This is a relatively new initiative of the State Department, designed to prepare youth leaders to become responsible citizens and spark in them an interest in foreign cultures. Our goal is to support Montana youth to develop cultural understanding so that they may advance international dialogue and compete effectively in the global economy. The University of Montana is host to one of only seven such programs in the country, and the only one for Cambodia.
As a result of this grant, the Mansfield Center is honored to support the travel of 20 high school students and two high school teachers to Cambodia for a month this summer. From a pool of nearly 160 applicants, we were honored to accept many future leaders of our state. They hail from towns large and small, including such communities as Opheim, Shelby and Ronan.

These 15-17 year olds are incredibly courageous to sign-on for this program. Most have never been out of the U.S. before. They have made a commitment to leave their family and friends behind for a month, relying on one another, program staff, and the support of strangers. They’ll experience heat like they’ve never felt, and eat food that they have never imagined. They’ll be immersed in a society that speaks Khmer: a completely different alphabet, vocabulary, and set of sounds.

We’ve heard from a number of them that others in their communities have questioned why they would ever want to do such a thing. In response, one student wrote, “I strongly believe that one of the most important things in life is seeing different perspectives and experiencing as much as one can of our complex world. Traveling to Cambodia would open my eyes to things I have not yet had the chance to see, and get me started in a lifetime of unique and wonderful experiences.” Another said, “...living on one of seven reservations in Montana, opportunities for many Native American teenagers are few and too far apart. When this opportunity presented itself to expand my outlook, I couldn’t have been more positive that this trip was something I was meant to do.... Researching Cambodians and hearing their stories, I kept thinking how Cambodians and Native Americans are not too different. I know I could create a relationship and connections with Cambodian people that could possibly last a lifetime.”

The focus of this group is on shared challenges in the environment and climate change. They’ll be taking lessons learned from our Montana environment, and contrasting them with new ideas learned
from Cambodian partners. But more than just natural resources, the group will be learning about culture and society, including some hard issues, such as the genocide of an estimated two million people during the Khmer Rouge era. Our Montanans will visit the Killing Fields of Cheung Ek, where the trees are marked with blood of babies and children, and the ground still littered with their bone fragments.

The group will not travel unprepared. An important aspect of this program is an intense six-month preparation period, in the form of readings, webinars, and speakers. One of the students, Angus from Ovando, noted how much he has learned about the Cambodian genocide, noting, “Education is one of the most critical factors in preventing mass slaughter. Most of the Khmer Rouge soldiers were uneducated youth that were susceptible to the influence of the regime. The modern youth of Cambodia should be provided a secondary education, even though that’s easier said than done. But children should also be informed of what really did happen during the regime rather than being neglected that information.”

In terms of educating our own children, we’re honored that the Mansfield Center is doing its part to broaden Montana perspectives.

You’ll be able to follow the students’ visit to Cambodia starting in mid-June, on our website at umt.edu/Mansfield. We hope you’ll join them as they experience this great adventure.

On behalf of the Mansfield Center, I’m Deena Mansour.