American Youth Leadership Program: Cambodia
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by Kelsey Stamm, Program Manager

Montana summers are filled with great things for teenagers – sports camps, swimming, family reunions, sleeping – but for 20 Montana high school students, a month of their summer was spent on an educational exchange in Cambodia. Through the State Department’s American Youth Leadership Program, or AYLP, the Maureen & Mike Mansfield Center selected 20 talented young leaders and two innovative high school teachers to participate in an intensive environmental studies and cultural exchange program in Cambodia.

Some of the students had spent time in a developing country; some students had never set foot in an airport. But all of them had an interest in being immersed in another country, and connecting their experiences as Montanans with those of Cambodians, in order to view the issues they will tackle as future leaders through a global lens.

The goals of AYLP are to advance mutual understanding between the people of the United States and of other countries, prepare youth leaders to become responsible citizens, spark an interest in learning about foreign cultures, and develop a cadre of Americans with cultural understanding who are able to advance international dialogue and compete effectively in the global economy.

Following current events, the news of our world is often troubling: a lack of compromise in the political arena; escalating violence in Egypt; and an annual intensification of forest fires. But what I saw in our group in Cambodia was diplomacy and collaborative, creative problem solving at its finest.

I saw Montana students alongside their Cambodian peers planting trees in a rural village to combat climate change. I saw Americans and Cambodians together discussing the Khmer Rouge
genocide and working out what justice means for their generation. And I was with this group of students hiking through a leech-filled jungle, who instead of giving up and refusing to go on when their legs were covered in leeches, kept going and took care of each other – and in the process solidified in themselves the knowledge that they could triumph over adversity.

Not only did these students extend goodwill with an adventurous spirit that any Montanan, would be proud of, but they also gained new perspectives: on themselves, their lives as Americans, and their place in the global community.

Said one student, “We made many connections with environmental issues in both Cambodia and Montana, and were surprised to find many issues are parallel. I made connections between Cambodian students as well and feel amazed when I think about how we are so alike yet our lives are so different... The knowledge of these issues is very valuable to me, not only because it is interesting but because these issues are my generations’ future. It is us who will take care of them and continue learning to protect our globe.”

One of the high school teachers said, “I valued the opportunity to integrate with Cambodian adults and youth. It is so rare for anyone to have such a rich experience in a whole lifetime. To be able to spend so much time in another culture opens the mind and allows us to be much more tolerant of others...I don’t think we can truly understand global relations until we spend time in other places in the world so we can begin to see outside of our small view. Seeing Cambodia from an environmental perspective was a great focus for opening our minds.”

Watching these events unfold, I was reminded of the original purpose of this program, and others like AYLP. These students had an experience of a lifetime, one that transformed the way they see themselves and the world and how they act as our future leaders. And this is all made possible because of the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961.
The purpose of the Fulbright-Hays Act is to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange. These programs are designed to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations and promote international cooperation. Through these cultural and educational exchanges, programs like AYLP are meant to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world.

At the Mansfield Center, we aspire to meet the goals set out by Fulbright-Hays. We are offering the American Youth Leadership Program in 2014 and this fall we will be reaching out to high school students and teachers across Montana, to be part of the next delegation of young leaders to Cambodia.

For more information on this program or other international exchange opportunities, please visit our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield or call us at 406-243-2988.

On behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, I am Kelsey Stamm. Thank you for listening.