Economic Empowerment Program Supports Montanans Competing Globally

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By Deena Mansour, Associate Director, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

In today’s Missoulian, reporter Martin Kidston tells the story of Ngo Ha, a Vietnamese professional currently in the U.S. on a Department of State program. Ha is here in Missoula this week, to explore ways to enhance her work to economically empower marginalized populations. Embracing our shocking negative temperatures despite coming from Hanoi’s mild winter, she is equally invigorated by the tremendous creativity she has shared with Missoula leaders in non-profit and governmental organizations. While in Missoula, Ha has shared experiences with representatives from such organizations as Watson’s Children Center, the American Association of University Women, and the ACLU.

Ha’s work in Missoula specifically builds on experiences shared since 2012 between YWCA Missoula and multiple non-governmental organizations in Vietnam. This relationship resulted in the travel of four staff members of the YWCA to Vietnam and Cambodia, through a Mansfield Center program funded by the State Department. YWCA Missoula’s support has enabled Ha and her colleagues to take the Secret Second thrift store model and adapt it for Vietnam, calling it Sweet Seconds. This mutually-beneficial partnership is an excellent example
of how the Mansfield Center works to support the people of Montana in gaining tools for different perspectives in their work.

The Mansfield Center is an academic unit of the University of Montana with a mission to serve communities throughout the state. While we are housed on UM campus, all program funds are procured from external funders. These external funds will have paid for the travel of more than 100 Montanans to Asia from 2012 through 2014. Countless more Montanans have been exposed to international partnerships, seminars, and conferences here at home. Our programs engage kindergarteners through professionals at the peak of their careers.

One of our centerpiece programs is the Economic Empowerment Fellows Program. Funded by the Department of State, 28 professionals from Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam will travel to Montana for a two-to-three week fellowship with Montanans in shared professions. Montana and Asian partners learn together, augmenting their critical skills in such areas as entrepreneurship, marketing, business development, and private-public partnerships.

President of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce Joe Unterreiner had this to say about hosting a fellow from Laos: “…this was a special opportunity to learn about a wonderful country and how they manage their business advocacy through their chamber of commerce. In the chamber profession, we are increasingly called upon to assist businesses navigate in an
international and export environment. This exchange has helped me and my organization improve our ability to do that in Northwest Montana.”

As Montanans become increasingly engaged in the global economy, the Economic Empowerment Fellows Program promotes mutual understanding and lasting partnerships, while building a global network of professionals able to work more effectively in an increasingly interconnected environment.

My colleague Kelsey Stamm and I just returned from travel to southeast Asia, where we personally interviewed top candidates from among more than 300 applicants. Consider some of these dynamic professionals we chose to come to Montana this year:

- Vietnamese Fellow, Ms. Tran, is a manager at Hanoi’s Baoviet Insurance Corporation. She hopes for a placement at an insurance company or bank to learn more about the balance between profitability and a commitment to providing insurance to underserved populations.

- Thai Fellow, Ms. Orn-anong, is the marketing director for a coffee business. She seeks to refine her skills so as to better empower indigenous women to engage in coffee production and quality control.
- Lao Fellow, Mr. Souvannalath, provides business training services to nascent businesses and non-profit organizations. He looks forward to building his skills in planning and development so that he can better advise his clients.

- Cambodian Fellow, Mr. Chhunn, is the owner of an eco-tourism company looking to learn from comparable tour companies here in Montana, so as to share customer service and growth strategies.

Our namesake Senator Mike Mansfield once said, “…knowledge is essential for acceptance and understanding. By examining the political heritage, the economic experience, and even the national myths that tie people together; by exploring the cultural, religious, and social forces that have molded a nation, we can begin to better understand each other and contribute to the knowledge and understanding that will strengthen our ties of friendship and lead to a better world.”

In working together toward Mike Mansfield’s vision, we encourage you to join us through the Economic Empowerment Fellows Program. For more information, please see our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield.

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