Cambodia Connections and Internationalizing Montana Youth

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by Deena Mansour, Associate Director

Last week, my family hosted a gathering at our home for friends both old and new. I hadn’t seen our friend Joe in a while, and he asked how things were at the Mansfield Center. Ironically, on that day, we were welcoming home two Missoula professionals returning from working with youth in Cambodia, and sending off 20 Montana high school students and two teachers for a program in Cambodia. Things could not be better, on a day when we had such tangible expressions of our work to promote global understanding.

Just that day, Susan Hay Patrick of United Way, and Betsy Mulligan-Dague of the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center, were returning from our program in Cambodia. Under the auspices of the U.S. Department of State-funded Economic Empowerment Program, Betsy and Susan had traveled to Cambodia to share their work in leadership, and conflict resolution. As Betsy noted, “My time there was short, but I will carry these memories all my life….Nice to see so many young people concerned with resolving conflict around the world.” In between sampling tarantula and octopus, and visiting ancient temples of lost civilizations, Susan and Betsy worked with youth across Cambodia on shared concerns that bridge our two countries.

Also on that day, 20 Montana high school students and two teachers were departing for Cambodia. Part of the nationwide American Youth Leadership Program, or AYLP, the group represents a
cross-section of Montana, coming from such communities as White Sulphur Springs, Arlee, Baker, and Missoula.

Funded by the U.S. Department of State and managed by the Mansfield Center, our AYLP program is designed to explore the unique environmental challenges Cambodia faces, while fostering international dialogue on shared concerns and potential solutions. Since being chosen in December in a highly-competitive application process, the group has been studying connections between Montana and Cambodia in natural resources and societal issues, and surprised by the number of commonalities they’ve found.

On that day, the group started 30 hours of transit to Cambodia. For some, it was the first time on a plane. For most, it was the first time out of the country. While I don’t have the good fortune to travel with them, I’ve been eagerly following their daily blog. Here are some of the highlights so far:

Day 2: “We started the day with our normal Khmer lesson. Participants are practicing their new language skills everywhere they go....The students explored the market in small groups with their Cambodian friends, who showed them some of their favorite snacks, which involved crickets. There was a lot of cricket-eating going on today. Someone described them, as ‘better than barbecue potato chips.’”

Day 3: “Today we went to a monastery, where we were joined by our Cambodian high school partners and monks to plant trees. The monastery is attempting to reforest this area, as Cambodia has one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world. While the monastery was breathtaking, the really
amazing part was to see the dedication of the American and Cambodian students working together to plant trees in the hot sun.”

The group will continue their way through Cambodia, hiking forests, boating rivers, exploring the Gulf of Thailand, and biking through the Angkor Wat temple complex. They’ll be sharing thoughts on critical issues like energy, climate change, and urbanization. They’ll be learning about religious diversity, as they break the Ramadan sunrise-to-sunset fast with the Muslim Cham community, and further explore Buddhism. Each participant will also stay with three different host families, for a deeper look at life in Cambodia.

The program is exciting, but it’s no vacation. Participants commit to regular readings and webinars over the five months prior to their international departure. Being in Cambodia for nearly a month, they also have to exercise skills in cultural adaptation: not only in a very different culture with challenging language, food, and weather, but also with one another – peers met largely through email. Upon their return home, each will be armed with an outline for a community service project to implement, based on lessons learned over the experience.

In Mike Mansfield’s name, we are motivated to host this program to empower young people as positive forces in our communities, and engage them in international affairs and public policy, with a focus on the natural resource issues that are so germane to our state. AYLP supports Montana youth and educators in global understanding; leadership and responsible citizenship, and succeeding in the global economy.
As a result of our success with the AYLP program, we are honored to announce that the State Department has awarded the Mansfield Center with a second AYLP grant, this time for Thailand, and with a focus on food security. This fall, we’ll be getting the word out statewide to recruit another 20 students and two teachers. We will specifically include an outreach component for participants with disabilities and those from Native American communities, as each group is underserved in terms of international engagement opportunities.

For more information on our programs or to follow the AYLP group on their adventures, see us on the web at www.umt.edu/mansfield.

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