Travel course tests student’s language, knowledge

As a student of the International and Intercultural Communication program, a significant focus of my graduate education has been learning how to understand and work together with individuals from other countries and cultures. I began the program conversational in Spanish, yet found myself sometimes apprehensive about speaking aloud and was challenged by the concept of truly connecting with others who don’t share my same background or language. I’ve always been interested in international volunteer work and have a passion for Latin American culture. So when I heard about an International Service Learning course in Nicaragua over winter interterm this year, I packed a guidebook and my courage into a backpack and set off for a month-long trip through Central America.

The course, “ISL Nicaragua: Development Dilemmas,” examined how increasing tourism development and political changes in a post-revolutionary society have affected the livelihood of Nicaraguans. We were able to observe the inner workings of various organizations on the southwest Nicaraguan coast, including a privately funded charity foundation, a luxury tourism resort, a vacation home community and a local educational nonprofit. We were encouraged to befriend and interact with locals as much as possible, and stayed for the majority of the time at a small fishing village that is slowly and perhaps undeniably transforming to become a gringo surf town.

The number of foreigners developing infrastructure on previously undeveloped landscapes in Nicaragua is growing at a progressive rate, so it was interesting to study the dynamics between the outside developers and the affects of these developments on locals. Students also spent time volunteering for a U.S.-based nonprofit doing ecological conservation and construction projects, while others taught English at a local school.

I spent nearly two weeks with my classmates but also backpacked independently through northwest Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama for a few weeks. There, I was able to do some adventure travel activities, spend some time on the beach and continue to practice my Spanish skills. Throughout my time in Central America, I had several nights where I spoke entirely in Spanish. After having dinner and watching a futbol match one evening with my new Tico friends, I had an epiphany: I had just spent the entire night actually engaging in international and intercultural communication. It felt amazing to actually bond with others in a foreign environment and to be able to share small parts of our worlds with each other.

I’ve learned a lot, but I still have a lot to learn in both cultural and linguistic fluency. When speaking in Spanish, most of my jokes are self-deprecating jabs at my own blondeness or cultural faux pas, and I still struggle to read beyond an elementary reading level. However, I definitely believe that cultural immersion is an incredibly valuable experience for those of us who are studying international communication, and for me, this winter in Central America made the world a little bit smaller and more deeply connected.
Tibet in song: a broken record?

By Kara Davis

After two weeks in Dharamsala, my understanding of Tibet’s future is even murkier. After meeting with Tsering Tsomo at the Center for Human Rights and Democracy, a peer said to me that Tibetans must stop appealing to the human rights agenda altogether and shift away from a reliance on the United Nations, which, they argue, continues to fall short in its ability to respond to any sort of change in Chinese policy and practice.

The comment made me reconsider the role of human rights in Tibet and how, if at all, progressive change can occur in the area, whether resolving a middle way resolution on garnering complete independence for Tibet. If, as appears to be the case, the UN and the international justice framework in general cannot legitimately hold China accountable for its human rights abuses, to what body should organizations like TCHRD appeal? Are Tibetan voices calling for basic human rights standards for Tibetans in exile like India.

Alas, I find human rights absolutely intertwined with a middle way resolution for Tibet and do not believe that the rights agenda should be pushed aside (regardless of the so-called “pivotal rhetoric” of the international system). Even the emergent issues like environmental degradation in Tibet involve an element of access to resources, which constitute a human right outlined in the UDHR. I feel that the mistrust in the international rights system stems from the Western hemisphere because human rights infringements are not identified as such in places like America. The UDHR exists for the protection of all humans and should be implemented in practice by countries to protect its citizens.

The problem for Tibet, however, is twofold: the Chinese government does not provide any sort of human rights standards for Tibetans in China and Tibetans in exile remain in countries which, by law, do not identify them as legal citizens and therefore are not entitled to protect their rights. Accordingly, I find myself getting a defeatist attitude toward realizing the Tibetan situation with a human rights approach like my peer with which I spoke. But, I believe Lhansang Tsiring’s notion of “clarity of purpose” highlights these considerations that I’ve struggled with over the past few weeks in that it suggests a necessary shift in approach to provide forward momentum to the Tibetan cause. However, even this notion seemed flawed as I find it highly unlikely that every country for Tibetans in exile like India.

I named them because that’s what each cat does with you. Each cat has cycled through a few different names (renaming is maybe the pur- pose of pirate gold and every time I look at her, it’s a reminder of how little control I have in this situation. Getting animals spayed or neutered here is nearly impossible, especially in rural areas. Plus, paying thousands of pesos to fix these cats would be a claim of ownership. I see myself instead as a roommate who cooks all the meals.

Joanna is as wide as she is long. Ev- ery time I look at her, it’s a reminder that he’s the product of his mother’s situation. Getting animals spayed or neutered here is nearly impossible, especially in rural areas. Plus, paying thousands of pesos to fix these cats would be a claim of ownership. I see myself instead as a roommate who cooks all the meals.

Joanna’s pregnancy is very notice- able. She’s as wide as she is long. Ev- ery time I look at her, it’s a reminder of how little control I have in this situation. Getting animals spayed or neutered here is nearly impossible, especially in rural areas. Plus, paying thousands of pesos to fix these cats would be a claim of ownership. I see myself instead as a roommate who cooks all the meals.

Living in the Philippines has made me think about pet ownership in America. stray animals exist differ- ently than they do in the developing world. American pets are im- munized, given flea treatments, and taken to school, and have identification. Their owners walk behind them and pick up their poop. They’re spayed and neutered and sleep on couches. In the Philippines, the major- ity of dogs and cats are stray, and the ones that do have homes aren’t treated much differently than the strays. My campus alone has about ten strays that wander in and out of the classrooms during the day and root through the trash at night. I’ve managed to make friends with two of them, but the others still shun. I extend my hand. I’ve also had plenty of experiences where I was followed by a growl- ing, snarling dog that runs circles around me and nips at my heels as I walk home. I may not like it, but that’s why people eat dog in some parts of the Philippines. They’re everywhere and people are poor.

I don’t mean to sound callous. My American family refers to our dog as the “Queen.” She has her own Facebook page. Perhaps that’s why I was so reluctant to have cats. I’ve always been aligned with dogs in the dog versus cat decision. I have never had a dog tattooed on my side, which is a constant source of friction between Serge and me. When I get back to America, I’ll go to the pound and find a dog with big ears and I’ll take him home. We’ll play catch and I’ll feed him from the table. He’ll sleep on the couch and I’ll shrug off my dog fur allergy. I’ll name him once.

I finished my Peace Corps service in October of 2011, more than sixteen months ago. As a former Peace Corps Volunteers, my service has shaped the identity I’ve created for myself upon returning to the States. It has become important to me to surround myself with people that understand the world that you might miss if you were left to consider it on your own. I really believe this program has taught me what might have been an abrupt readjustment to my post-Peace Corps life.
Documenting human rights in Honduras

By Margie Thompson
DIRECTOR, IIC PROGRAM

During spring break I traveled to Honduras as part of a human rights delegation to document some extremely difficult situations involving corporate globalization, land rights, gold mining and mega-tourism development projects. I covered our trip, organized by Rights Action, as a journalist and photographer for Escribana, a women’s communication initiative based in Costa Rica, so for this trip I focused in particular on women’s perspectives on these issues.

Honduras was the original “banana republic” during the 19th and early 20th centuries with United Fruit Company and later Chiquita Brands who owned and controlled much of the land and country in Honduras and other Central American countries. Since the military coup in June 2009, the country has once again come to resemble a corporate colony, but with the added stresses of government corruption, narco-trafficking, organized crime and the pressures from the US government and military. Rampant crime and violence are an everyday occurrence in Honduras, including violence against women, with over 600 femicides (killings of women for being women) documented in 2012 alone. The homicide rate in that country is the highest in the world. But the government’s response has primarily involved increased militarization backed by the United States, rather than addressing the root causes of the violence related to vast inequalities, lack of employment and enormous cuts in social services and infrastructure.

Our human rights delegation visited the Siria Valley near the capital, Tegucigalpa, where communities are suffering from the health and economic effects of the now abandoned San Martin gold mine (owned by Goldcorp of Canada/U.S.) that left the soil and water severely contaminated with highly toxic heavy metals such as cyanide, mercury and others. Residents including children are sick with open sores on their bodies and their hair falling out, but neither the company nor government are willing to take responsibility. We also traveled to the north coast of Honduras which is the land of the Garifuna, an indigenous Afro Honduran group. Their communal lands are the target of aggressive transnational mega-development projects, which the people are resisting. They are paying the price by having their land blocked off with vast cement walls, water re-routed for vast luxury resorts with golf courses (requiring huge amounts of water) and assaults and arrests of leaders of the resistance. Efforts by people to foster locally-based development are ignored and even destroyed.

Also planned by transnational developers without permission of the Garifuna is a massive “charter city,” which will basically be an autonomous gated city of several hundred square kilometers with its own government council, selected residents (most likely wealthy foreigners who invest), private security forces, and with little power granted to the Honduran government to have input or intervene. Local residents whose land will be confiscated for this project will likely have to carry “passports” to re-enter their original lands.

Finally we traveled to the Aguan Valley which has been the site of violent conflict for the past several years but moreso since the coup, with wealthy landowners confiscating lands of small farmers (campesinos) for vast African Palm plantations to make bio-fuels. Any resistance by these campesinos has resulted in assaults, murders and disappearances involving private security forces of the landowners, along with police and military.

These extreme human rights abuses have received minimal coverage in the mainstream press in Honduras, as well as US media, despite the longtime connections of the two countries, with far more coverage by alternative media sources. But this situation in Honduras is not unique, as these conflicting forces of globalization and development are erupting around the world.

These are the types of complex issues that students in the MA in International & Intercultural Communication (IIC) may be faced with in their international and intercultural careers an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the forces of globalization, corporatization and communication, and the implications for labor, health and the environment are critical. This will enable IIC graduates to become leaders in addressing these complex issues, including pressing major powers to take responsibility for their actions that contribute to these disastrous situations, and empowering local people to design their own locally-based and controlled development initiatives.

Also, it is important to find ways to communicate people’s voices and perspectives about these issues in their countries through media and other communication venues to work toward making our globalized world more equitable and not solely top-down in its operations.