



UNIVERSITY of  
DENVER

INTERNATIONAL &  
INTERCULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION



# Perspectives.

SUMMER 2013

## Travel course tests student's language, knowledge

By **Brittany Burton**

CURRENT IIC STUDENT

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

IIC GRADUATE

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 incite 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 or 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 in their pursuit for a non-violent resolution, sounding more like a broken record than a choir singing for real change? I believe Lhansang Tsering'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 seems flawed as I find it highly unlikely that every



Tibetan, or even a majority, will align in solidarity over what should be accomplished in the following years. Even if the Central Tibetan Administration shifts its support to pro-independence, then the way in which to achieve that independence will undoubtedly be debated. Also, a violent approach to independence would absolutely affect international aid and social security, even in the sense of support provided by host-

countries for Tibetans in exile like India.

Alas, I find human rights absolutely intertwined in any possible resolution for Tibet and do not believe that the rights agenda should be pushed aside (regardless of the so-called ineffectiveness of the international system). Even the emergent issues like environmental degradation in Tibet involve an element of access to resources, which constitutes 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 required to protect their rights. Accordingly, I find myself getting a defeatist attitude toward resolving the Tibetan situation with a human rights approach like my peer with which I spoke. But, I believe that international law and the universal human rights agenda must be brought to the forefront and called-upon in situations like Tibet in order to improve the efficiency of the system and adapt its mission as rights abuses continue to unfold in ever-complex ways throughout contemporary history. As such, I would like to believe that the Tibetan's persistence toward their struggle with human rights might not be futile, even if their voices only resonate toward new considerations for the international rights framework and not toward the utmost resolution of Tibetan freedom.

# Stray cats as an indicator of culture

By Travis Lindner

CURRENT IIC STUDENT & RETURN PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER

*The following is from a blog I wrote while I was in the Peace Corps in the Philippines.*

I'm the only person I know who inadvertently has cats. I became a provider for my apartment's previous four legged residents when I moved in—a role I initially rejected. I began feeding them reluctantly, just leftovers and crushed-up crackers, enough to keep them alive but not enough to keep them from relying on it. This, of course, didn't work. They would root through my trash while I was away and open up my bags of bread and oatmeal and guiltlessly leave the remnants strewn across my apartment, working symbiotically with the ants. Eventually, I realized I was buying crackers just to feed the cats, gave in and started buying cat food.

I named them because that's what you do with animals. Each cat has cycled through a few different names (renaming is maybe the purest indictment of an unworthy pet owner). Currently I've selected "Joanna" and "Serge." Previously they were Echo and Peter Gammons, and before that, Franny and Zooley.

Joanna is creepy. She's completely black save for the patches of scabby pink where her fur surrenders to skin disease. Her eyes are the color of pirate gold and every time I look at them I hear the wailings of a million Filipino cat souls. I've never heard her make a sound. Serge's eyes are always bulging as if he's seeing something for the first time. "Oh my god! He's pouring hot water into a mug?" I could almost hear him exclaim. He's either frantically examining something or sleeping. From 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. he speaks in an endless stream of staccato meows, like he's sending sonar signals out to

detect other vessels. He follows me from room to room, but only so he doesn't miss out on any action. The truth is that he makes me laugh.

I've never actually touched either of them. Joanna and I have coexisted long enough that she winds around my ankles when I'm getting ready to feed her, although she could just be looking for something to soothe her sores. Occasionally Serge will land on me briefly as he flies around the living room, but then panics and flees after we've made contact. I don't encourage affection. I see myself as a justified curmudgeon. After all, I didn't choose this life. My cat food budget is creeping closer and closer to my human food budget and Joanna's perpetual pregnancy should tip the scales sometime this month. My lectures on promiscuity go completely unheeded, so I never miss an opportunity to tell Serge that he's the product of his mother's rickety morals.

Joanna's pregnancy is very noticeable. She's as wide as she is long. Every time I look at her, it's a reminder of how little control I have over my 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 differently than they do in the developing world. American pets are immunized, given flea treatments, go 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 majority of dogs and cats are strays, 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 shrink away when I extend my hand. I've also had plenty of experiences where I was followed by a growling, 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 tribute 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 even have 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. Like most Return Peace Corps Volunteers, my service has shaped the identity I've created for myself upon returning to the States. It has become important for me to surround myself with people that understand the way the world looks to them depends entirely on the lens they choose to look at it with. The IIC program offers the tools to understand the world around us, as well as a network of people that are capable of offering insight into that world that you might miss if you were left to consider it on your own. I really believe this program has softened what might have been an abrupt readjustment to my post-Peace Corps life.

## Perspectives.

Perspectives is published by the International & Intercultural Communication program of the University of Denver.

**Katie Bayne & Joanna Hamel**  
Editors

**Margie Thompson, PhD**  
Director, International & Intercultural Communication

**Please send correspondence and address changes to:**

International & Intercultural Communication Program  
University of Denver  
2490 S. Gaylord Street  
Denver, CO 80208  
e-mail: iic@du.edu  
Web site: www.du.edu/mfjs  
Phone: 303.871.2166

# 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 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 governance 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 Val-

ley 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.