

BY DANA WILKIE

Promoting PEACE Through Partnerships

To find unique opportunities to get students more involved with peace studies, many colleges are partnering with peace organizations.





LAST SUMMER, a handful of nursing and education students from Indiana’s St. Mary’s College spent six weeks in Kyarusozzi, a tiny Ugandan village not even recorded on most maps. The young women slept in bunks set on concrete floors. Their duties ranged from educating villagers about AIDS to resuscitating newborns. Most came home with new clarity on how they could make a difference in nations with so much less than what they were accustomed to at home.

“It is so hard to paint a picture of what it is like at the clinic,” three of the students wrote in their daily blog to those back at St. Mary’s. “It just breaks our heart to see how much they are lacking in supplies that are so common to us. Blankets and towels are in abundance at the hospitals at home, but here there is not a single one. Because of the lack of basic supplies, a mother was forced to take off her child’s clothes to clean up the mess after the child got sick.”

These students probably would never have experienced Kyarusozzi were it not for an order of nuns in Uganda—the Sisters of the Holy Cross—who invite U.S. students to live with them a few weeks each year so the experience might bring texture and depth to the “peace studies” they are pursuing back home.

“Peace studies”—whether that means conflict resolution or pairing students with Rwandan war survivors whom they can help with money and letter-writing—is a growing discipline at colleges and universities. Increasingly, administrators are teaming with nonprofit organizations that work abroad to give students richer experiences—perhaps by designing a tourist business plan for a small Guatemalan village or reconciling the conflicting goals of Costa Rican farmers and those who would save endangered sea turtles.

“Part of the growth of study abroad was this hope that intercultural understanding would prevent some of the horrors we saw in WWII,” said Elaine Meyer-Lee, director of the Center for Women’s Intercultural Leadership at St. Mary’s. “As the world shrinks and the issues of the globe become so prominent, we as educators have to prepare our students to be more responsible global citizens. It’s our responsibility to focus on peace, conflict resolution, and socially responsible travel.”

At St. Mary’s, 53 percent of students study abroad. Four years ago, the center teamed with the Sisters of the Holy Cross—an order whose nuns have worked in Uganda almost half a century—to send nursing and education students each summer to Kyarusozzi, a small trading center in the western part of the nation. Students pay \$2,310, buy their own plane tickets, and earn one semester credit on east African culture and history and five credits of field practicum.

During this summer’s six-week program, students Kelley Murphy, Meghann Rose, and Remi White wrote a blog about living at the nuns’ convent among the villagers, learning the Rutooro language, washing clothes by hand, fetching water from a well a half-mile walk away, and working

Changemakers for Women, a campus organization at Mary Baldwin College in Virginia, is partnering with Women for Women International.



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in a hot and crowded health clinic with unreliable electrical power.

“It is humbling to think about how these women have to walk for miles and miles, barefoot with babies on their backs, so their children can receive the appropriate immunizations they need,” the women wrote in their blog. “There is nothing to sit on but the dirt while they are waiting for their turn. We have the luxury of just hopping on the highway and going into a doctor’s office to do this very same thing. It really put things into perspective for us. All the basic necessities for child care such as strollers, pacifiers, diapers, bottles, and blankets are not an option for these women and children.”

The students administered polio, measles, and tetanus vaccines, typically without gloves or alcohol swabs and sometimes from the backs of pickup trucks in the middle of rural roads. They nursed small children dying of malaria, helped women deliver babies without epidurals or pain medications, and crafted makeshift IV poles using strips of gauze attached to knobs on the wall.

A number of the students have gone back to work in Uganda and other African nations after graduating. Meyer-Lee hopes to expand the program to include students majoring in social work and communications and to hook students up with sisters who minister to prisoners in the country.

“We make sure that the students are under no illusion that they are saving the world, but rather stress how much they will learn and that they should continue to apply that learning in the future to contribute,” Meyer-Lee said. “There is no doubt that this invaluable partnership with the sisters has allowed us to offer essential education about peace and social justice that we would not otherwise be able to offer on our campus.”

Donna Anderson has found the same to be true at the University of Wisconsin at Platteville, which teamed with a nonprofit called A Broader View to help students meet their six-week field study requirements for a new minor in social and environmental justice. The minor was made possible by a \$37,500 gift from UW-Platteville alum Fred Leverentz and his wife, Sharon Grimes.

A Broader View has contacts in underdeveloped nations who can be invaluable to a U.S. student traveling abroad: They know the local people, the language, the culture, where it’s dangerous to travel, where the water’s safe to drink, and where to find the best medical care.

“We have an education abroad office, but we’re small and not able to administer programs in all the areas of the world for all the areas of study that serve our students,” said Anderson, the university’s education abroad director. “Most campuses now partner with [outside organizations] to set up programs in different areas of the world. Having someone on the ground who knows the local environment and knows the culture isn’t something we can do in all the places around the world that we want our students to visit.”

Laura Schreiber was the first University of Wisconsin student to finish the minor’s requirements. She traveled to the tiny Costa Rican town of Gandoca in the summer of 2011 to help leatherback sea turtles thrive off the Atlantic Coast. Schreiber spent her days cleaning debris from beaches—especially plastic bags that banana plantations use to wrap their crops, but which blow on to beaches and choke turtles who mistake the bags for jellyfish. She taught local schoolchildren about threats to the turtles and monitored turtle eggs to protect them from mammals, flies, and crabs. Nights were spent patrolling beaches to protect eggs from poachers, who sell them as an aphrodisiac.



“The world is getting smaller through technology, and we have much more exposure to different cultures,” said the 27-year-old Schreiber, who spent about \$3,000 on the program and is now a second-year law student at the University of Wisconsin, where she focuses on international environmental law. “As the planet reaches its capacity [to accommodate] the human species, problems are arising that affect us all. I think younger generations are realizing we must work together if we hope to sustain” the planet.

Making a Difference at Home

Some university “peace” partnerships don’t send students abroad, but instead—like the Changemakers for Women organization at Virginia’s Mary Baldwin College—help students sponsor those in other countries who need money and emotional support to move beyond poverty, civil war, or abuse.

Mary Baldwin’s program began after 15 students traveled to New Orleans in the spring of 2008 to attend former president Bill Clinton’s Global Initiative University, a program that requires students to make a tangible commitment to a health, human rights, education, or sustainability issue somewhere in the world.

A year later, the students decided to work through Women for Women International to sponsor women

who have lost spouses, children, or livelihoods because of war. Women for Women works in eight countries, giving war survivors food, shelter, clothing, and job training to help them become economically independent.

Through the “Changemakers for Women” group they created, the students vowed to sponsor 25 women over three years, using everything from bake sales to internationally themed tea parties to raise the \$27 a month needed to support each. During the academic year the group—which is purely student led and carries no academic credit—organizes programs such as book clubs and speaker appearances to raise awareness about the problems women face in postconflict societies. They write letters to their sponsored “sisters,” follow news reports about Sudan and Congo, and talk to roommates and friends about the status of women in the developing world.

“It’s one thing to read about war atrocities,” says Heather Ward, Mary Baldwin’s director of international programs, who notes that the organization has grown to 30 women working on degrees in international relations, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, or women’s studies. “But when the students sign on as ‘sister’ sponsors, they move from compassion to action. With the experience and skills they have now

Image of field work in Costa Rica from the University of Wisconsin at Platteville’s new minor in social and environmental justice. The university partnered with A Broader View, a nonprofit that helps students meet their six-week field study requirement for the minor.



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Berra Kabarungi, who after working with Women for Women abroad, was awarded a full Mary Baldwin College scholarship to study here in the States.

developed as activists, it’s unlikely that these young women will ever be comfortable in the role of passive bystander when faced with injustice.”

Sarah Anne Barrow, a Mary Baldwin undergraduate focusing on women’s studies and political science, has been vice president and recently president of Changemakers, which she says has forced her to re-evaluate her career goals.

“I’ve always planned on graduate degrees and a future career in academia, but after working with Changemakers for Women and reading letters from our sisters, now I want to do more,” she says. “Before I spend the rest of my life buried in research, I want to do my part to make sure women everywhere have the opportunity to go to school, not just those of us lucky enough to live in a country like the United States.”

Recently, the students visited a Women for Women regional office.

“It made a real impact on students because they recognized that doing the work of an international organization involves a lot more than the impulse to

do good,” Ward said. “These [Women for Women] staffers have a lot of hard skills, like data analysis or marketing. The students began to see how their academic work could prepare them for a career at a place like Women for Women.”

This past January, Mary Baldwin offered a full scholarship to Women for Women staffer Berra Kabarungi, who was a field director in the organization’s Rwanda office. Kabarungi plans to graduate with a degree in social work and marketing in 2014.

Connecting with Nobel Laureates

The University of Colorado at Denver works with the PeaceJam Foundation to send students to Guatemala, where they work with a foundation that Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchú Tum created—using money from her 1992 prize—to defend the human rights of the country’s indigenous people.

Denver-based PeaceJam connects young people with Nobel Laureates around the world to address is-



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sues ranging from basic needs, such as access to water, to human rights, and social justice.

E.J. Yoder, a university senior instructor in communications started the program with a longtime friend at PeaceJam. In May of 2010, she took her first group of students—six university women majoring in every discipline from business to international studies—to the tiny village of San Lucas Tolimán on Lago Atitlán, where students lived and worked at the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation Education Center that teaches Mayan middle schoolers.

“We wanted to put a program together work-

ing with a laureate because the laureates always need help and are always working on a shoestring,” Yoder said. “We picked Guatemala because it’s close to Denver and the airfare is within reach for students.”

The three-week program offers three semester credits and costs between \$2,700 and \$3,000. Students pay their own airfare and personal expenses.

The village lies along the picturesque Lake Victoria and is home to some 2,000 people whose livelihood depends mostly on fishing and farming—unlike most other villages ringing the lake that are making money off tourists. Students sleep in dorm-like rooms at the education center, which has a small restaurant and where the cook, Carmen, makes exquisite Mayan meals with the students’ help.

The first year of the program, a hurricane and volcanic eruption flattened homes and buried others in mud. Instead of following their planned curriculum, the students cooked and shopped for staples as some 80 families sought shelter in the education center. They took purified water to a town of 300 whose

water supply was wiped out. After returning to the United States, the students crafted a five-year business plan designed to transform the education center into a full ecological tourist site.

This past May, Yoder took 10 students—seven women and three men—who painted the education center kitchen and taught middle schoolers English, computer skills, and music.

During both trips, Yoder found she had to gently remind some students that “it’s really not about them.”

“International service is not your traditional ‘go and study a language and focus on the culture’ experience,” Yoder says. “And a Mayan community is very different from where [the students] come from.”

For instance, this past summer, some students—accustomed to eating as much as they like in the United States—didn’t understand that in San Lucas, there was a limit to the available food.

“That’s when you say, ‘Excuse me, what are you doing?’” Yoder says. “So and so hasn’t gotten their pork chop yet. Can you just back off a little?” Some also had this deep sense that ‘my time is my time and I can do anything I want.’ It took me gently nudging and saying: ‘Absolutely nothing today is about you. Everything today is about the people we are here to be with.’”

Maria Fenton, who visited San Lucas as a rising senior in 2010 and this past summer as Yoder’s assistant, decided after her two Guatemalan trips to pursue a career in court mediation for civil cases.

“Guatemala has been in a 36-year civil war and a lot of the culture...you can see the distress in the people,” says the 23-year-old Fenton, adding that the one thing she learned that will help her most in her career is patience.

“Being an American, you always feel like you want to produce and that there should always be something on the burner,” Fenton says. “In Guatemala, things work very slowly, and what I learned was to take time with what you’re doing and make sure it fits into your life. In mediation, you have to do the same—take the time to go through the process that the individuals need to come to agreement.”

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