2019

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING 2019

SELECTED CASE STUDIES

- Cambodia
- Indonesia
- Kyrgyzstan
- Rwanda
- Vietnam

THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY
香港理工大學

SLLO 服務學習及領導才能發展處
Service-Learning and Leadership Office

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INTRODUCTION

By Nico Page

Beginnings and endings are the hardest, and writing this now encapsulates both. The introduction to our work this summer is the piece of writing I've saved for last, now that the draft of the book is nearly complete and a return to the U.S. is mere days away. But to you, the beginning of our trip lies just ahead in these pages.

As my flight was landing in Hong Kong in late May—the second flight in twenty-four hours on my way from Brown University, with a day-long layover in Zurich that was the strangest parenthetical in between—I recorded a short video on my phone. I took two tries, starting the recording and then flipping the phone around, propping it up on the seat in front.

I explained the project: arriving in Hong Kong for only a few days of orientation before turning around and splitting off into three groups filming in Vietnam, rural Cambodia and Phnom Penh. Ten days of work in the field, then returning to Hong Kong for a little rest. Flights to Rwanda and Indonesia for another two weeks of filming, writing, photographing. Finally, a month in Hong Kong for editing. And one of us stayed on even longer to travel to Kyrgyzstan alone, documenting the work in Central Asia.

I am full of questions, I told the camera. "What does it mean for people from Asia to go to rural Africa to do service, for example?" I mused from my tight seat, neighbor asleep beside me. My eye glances into and out of the lens, so at times the video speaks directly to the viewer. "What impact can we really make? How can we make bonds? Or is it worthwhile to make bonds with people for a week or two or is that more harmful? Is it better to just go in and do the work and leave and not try and create emotional connections that would be ruptured? How will the dynamic between the Brown students be?"

While I still don't know the answer to most of those questions, on that last point I didn't need to worry. This is Nico Page writing now. Throughout the book, you will find my voice intertwining and sometimes getting fused with that of Meredith Morran, who went on the same service trips as I, to Cambodia and Rwanda. The other voice in these pages is Lauren Shin, our expert photographer, who went to Vietnam and Indonesia. Besides the three of us, the journalist team—as we were called—had one other student from Brown: Lucas Schroeder. We all come to this project at different points in our education. Meredith and Lauren just graduated from Brown, I am about to begin my final year and Lucas just finished his first. Always behind a complicated, cable-haloed camera rig, he took on the greater part of the video responsibilities. While all of us filmed with what we had, from professional cameras to phones, Lucas actually did the work of going through the footage and creating something out of it: the summary videos for Phnom Penh and Rwanda.

Meredith Morran

Lucas Schroeder

Lucas' partner in the editing suite, who helped on the Rwanda film and edited the second short about Cambodia, was Yeok Cheah. A student at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University from Malaysia, Yeok is infinitely curious and always interested. He was with me in rural Cambodia and in Rwanda, and was always talking with people to ascertain tidbits of information about the student projects or the local culture. Completing our team was Aziza Albetova, another PolyU student from Kazakhstan. She and Lauren stuck together from Vietnam to Indonesia, climbing mountains and visiting pre-dawn markets, finding beaches and ways to entertain themselves on long nights without WiFi.

Lauren Shin & Aziza Albetova

Yeok Cheah & Lucas Schroeder

The writing and photographs that follow are the result of these last two months of traveling, thinking and working together. It was a collaborative effort at every moment, despite all of our differing views, histories and backgrounds. Sometimes, experiences were mixed, overlapping, intertwined. Sometimes the narrator was many places at once. Sometimes the narrator was stuck in the heat, sometimes the narrator had questions, sometimes the narrator was and is multiple.

Towards the end of that first recording I made alone on the plane, anticipating the difficulties we would encounter throughout the service-learning trips—but also trying to not be burdened by too many preconceptions and expectations—I set some intentions for myself: "I am going to try and take a very critical eye, but also a generous critical eye, and I hope that I can make something that reflects both the good that can be done but also how much needs to be better." I hope that together, we were able to make something like that, something holistic and complete, to do justice to the richness and complexity of PolyU's service-learning projects.

HOW TO USE AR ?

Selected interviews and highlights throughout the book are Augmented-Reality (AR) enabled, meaning you can hover over them with your phone using the GoSLLO App (download from the SLLO webpage at https://polyu.hk/xhYmC or use the QR code) to bring the scene to life.

To view the video, hover your phone over the photograph in the frame

AR

Interview with Dr. Miranda Lou

Executive vice president of PolyU

By Meredith Morran

“Make ours students globally responsible, social citizens.”

Though I was based in Phnom Penh for the majority of our Cambodia trip, towards the end of the week, we accompanied the staff team out to Kampong Speu Province for a day. That morning, we were given the opportunity to learn more about the projects Yeok and Nico had been covering throughout the week. After accompanying the staff's group for a couple hours, we were told that it was time to get back onto the bus and head over to a cafe for lunch. The news came just in time, because almost immediately after taking our seats, it began to rain.

We arrived at a cafe in town and disembarked the bus rushing to get out of the rain and inside to say hello to Yeok and Nico. We grabbed chairs at the table adjacent to theirs and said hello to Stephen Chan and Grace Ngai, from our office, who were also there. The two of them then introduced us to Miranda Lou, the executive vice president of PolyU. After placing our orders for lunch, we made our way outside to conduct an interview with Lou before our food arrived.

“I'm very honored to have the opportunity to join our teachers as well as our students in this year's service-learning program,” she began.

To watch Dr. Miranda Lou's interview, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

I asked her if she had ever visited students on the service-learning trips before. "It is my first experience" she replied, adding, "it is also my first visit in Cambodia." She continued, "in the last two days, I visited a number of service-learning projects together with our local partners as well as the teachers. I'm very impressed by what they've been doing." Noting the merit of the service-learning curriculum, Lou explained, "I think, for our students, we really provide a great opportunity for them to apply what they have learned, not only the application of knowledge," but also through teaching students to "work together and put forward very innovative ideas and solutions that can bring education to the local community." Lou also explained how on behalf of the university, she is "very happy to partner with the local NGOs here, who share similar values and philosophies of PolyU. And taking this opportunity, I would extend my sincerest appreciation to all of our partner NGOs and universities."

Lou also noted the lasting impact that she perceived the service-learning projects to have on the local communities, especially related to the relationships that have been formed over the years. "It's not so much about what we've done for them—because we come here once a year—," rather, it's about "the positive message, the positive values, and the positive energy that the students have brought to the local community."

Finally, aware that it was her first time visiting service-learning projects in action, I asked what her expectations had been coming in and if there had been any surprises so far. Lou said, "I heard a lot from what my colleagues shared with me about what PolyU is doing in terms of service-learning... but being here, having the first-hand experience, interacting with the students, with the NGOs, with the partner university—it makes a lot of difference." She continued, "personally, I'm very convinced about the value of service-learning, as well as service leadership. There's nothing more effective than having students put their hearts and minds together. Through the process they can serve the community, reflect and learn to be better people." She concluded, "and I think that's exactly the value the university would like to promote among our students – that is to make ours students globally responsible, social citizens."

Interview with Dr. Stephen Chan

Head of the Service-Learning and Leadership Office (SLLO)

By Meredith Morran

Our best scenario is that everybody becomes a professional in their own way, but retain their concern for the community, so that they can use their knowledge and professional skills to contribute to society.

One of the best ways to learn more about service-learning at PolyU is to speak with the head of the program himself. During our time in Cambodia, we had the opportunity to interview Dr. Stephen Chann, the head of the Service-Learning and Leadership Office (SLLO). Introducing himself, Chan said "I've been involved in the service-learning program at PolyU from the beginning. I started the office back in 2011." Chan explained how, at the time he was founding the office, the university "had the opportunity to do a major revamp of the undergraduate program, because Hong Kong was changing the university system from a three-year program to a four-year program." This serendipitous timing allowed Chan to implement his goals within the larger framework of the PolyU curriculum. "After a long discussion," Chan said, "the university decided to make service-learning credit bearing as well as compulsory." This means that undergraduates are required to take a course in at least one service-learning subject before they can graduate.

Our interview with Chan took place just days after we had the opportunity to follow staff-in-training on their tour of the projects in the rural Kampong Speu Province of Cambodia. I asked Chan to explain the value of this staff trip as well. "There are many aspects of the program," he said. The most visible of these is the compulsory course all undergraduates are required to take. But Chan also notes another crucial aspect: staff development. Since its inception in 2010, Chan says "we have built up quite a big program. Currently, we also offer about sixty-plus subjects to 4,000 students each year." He added, "you can imagine it takes quite a lot of manpower in order to teach those sixty-plus subjects, so one aspect—which we didn't quite realize at the beginning—is that we have to train the staff to teach service-learning." The team of staff-in-training that our journalist group followed consisted of twenty-two people from PolyU, as well as people from other Hong Kong universities that are currently considering adopting similar service-learning approaches to their undergraduate curricula. Additionally, the group included international staff from universities in the Philippines and Vietnam.

Chan explained how the staff participating in the training trip are also required to develop and present their own theoretical program by the end of the week. Chan says, "throughout the whole week, we meet with them after they have spoken with the students, teachers, NGOs, and then we discuss the many topics around the planning of the subjects, the designing of the projects, finding the funding, all aspects are covered." In fact, Chan told us how, in the morning before our interview with him, "we went through all 22 of the subjects and each of them made a presentation on their own project, of their own design." He explained how "everybody seems to be learning quite a bit from that experience and we are quite happy with the result," adding, "and you realize, that is a very important part of building up a sizable service-learning program. Without the teachers, nothing like this can happen."

> **"The solution has to be challenging, has to be meaningful, and has to have a real impact. We insist on that."**

Then, I asked Chan the following: what does service-learning mean to him?

"Service-learning, as the name implies, integrates community service with learning," he said. Then he noted the program's slogan: "serve to learn—that is, we learn through the community-service—but we also learn to serve, so the two come together. In fact, we are very insistent on a proper balance between the community-service and the learning part." He continued, "the community-service is something that we feel that we have to do in order to address certain social issues, be it poverty, health issues, lack of energy, lack of education." Then, Chan explained how the service is implemented. "We take an issue and design a solution to at least one aspect of it." They must meet certain criteria: "the solution has to be challenging, has to be meaningful, and has to have a real impact. We insist on that."

Operating concurrently with the service, Chan explained that there also has to be "certain academic content and a chief learning objective," adding how their ultimate goals are for students to "tie the academic knowledge to serving the community, achieve empathy with the people in need, and being able to articulate the process." He concludes, "we aim at balancing the needs of the community. That is the service." Those needs are then balanced with "the needs of the university and of the students. That is learning. They are equally important; they cannot be separated. That's our concept of service-learning."

From his clear, detailed explanation, I could tell that Chan was incredibly passionate about the program he had worked so hard to establish. The 2019 service-learning year brought seven projects to Cambodia. As journalists, we were fortunate to have the opportunity to accompany them. The following essays and interviews synthesize our experiences to provide a comprehensive overview of the program.

I asked Dr. Chan one final question— what was his most memorable experience related to service-learning?

Chan smiled, "over the years, there have been many, many memorable moments. There are just too many." But he did have one memory that has stuck with him over the years. "There is one moment that happened quite early that keeps sticking in my mind whenever people ask me about memorable experiences," he said. "I remember it was either the first or the second time that we took students to Cambodia." In preparation for the trip, Chan described how "we went through a number of lectures and workshops to get the students prepared." However, on the last class, something unexpected happened. "Just as we were supposed to get the students ready to come to Cambodia, after the class was finished, we found that one of the girls was missing. Her bag was still there in the classroom, but she was nowhere to be seen." Worried, they went looking for her. "It turns out she was crying somewhere, because she was really anxious," Chan said.

After speaking with the student, Chan explains how "she was under a lot of pressure." She was worried that the environment in Cambodia might be especially challenging and "she was afraid what might happen and whether she could handle it." Noting the student's anxiety, Chan explained how, as the leader of the program, he "also became anxious," adding how he was worried that, "if we took her to Cambodia and she couldn't handle it, that would be very bad for her, but also for the whole team. But then, if we did not take her, it could be a major defeat for her." Chan's staff team was up against a serious challenge: "what to do?"

In the end, they sat down with the students and, after a long talk, everyone decided that she would proceed with the project and accompany her classmates to Cambodia. "Once she was there, once she got into the process of running a workshop for the local kids, she became very comfortable with it. in fact, she struck up some relationships with some of the local girls and they had a very good time. But," Chan said, "the story didn't just end there."

Chan told us how "she finished and she went on to do other things." But the following year, when the next cohort of students arrived to sign up for service-learning, Chan discovered something interesting. "We interview everybody before deciding to pick a student and then we asked some of the students who came, you know, how did you find us? How did you get interested? And then they said, 'oh, well this friend, who had been here last year, she recommended this to us.' It turns out she started recruiting students for us." Chan was smiling, "the last thing I heard is that she graduated and that she started working for an NGO."

"So, that's a memorable story," he said, concluding, "but our objective is not to turn all of our students into social workers. We do not want them to give up on their major and go work for an NGO full-time. In fact, our best scenario is that everybody becomes a professional in their own way, be it an accountant, an engineer, a language instructor, but retain their concern for the community, so that they can use their knowledge and professional skills to contribute to society. That is even more powerful than turning everybody into social work."

"So that is why that story stuck in my mind— and there are many others."

AR

To hear Dr. Stephen Chan discussing some of his most memorable experiences working with the Service-Learning and Leadership Office, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

CAMBODIA

A Khmer Crash Course

By Meredith Morran

Cambodia is a Buddhist country located in Southeast Asia. The current population is estimated at 16 million people and the country's official language (and the people's name for themselves) is Khmer. Cambodia is known for the impressive Angkor Wat temple complex, measuring over 402 acres, located in the town of Siem Reap. Phnom Penh is the capital — where our service-learning trip began.

So, yes, those are a handful of the most popular statistics any travel site can surely tell you, but if you accompany the PolyU students on a service-learning trip to Cambodia, you'll also likely learn the following: one, Cambodia is hot. Very hot. So hot, that our journalist team was sweating almost before we stepped off of our airplane. Two, PassApp and Grab are two great apps for calling tuk-tuks to travel around the city. Three, there are multiple hotels in Phnom Penh with the name "Frangipani," so don't worry if you drive by a couple before reaching your destination. Four, the King of Cambodia is a trained ballet dancer (just some of the many fun facts we were pleasantly surprised to learn ourselves).

Our time in Cambodia began as a group of four journalists: Nico, Yeok, Lucas and Meredith. Not only did we accompany PolyU students on their various service-learning projects, but we also toured Phnom Penh, learning about the culture and history of the country. Towards the end of our first week, we broke off into two subgroups: Lucas and I stayed in Phnom Penh, and Yeok and Nico headed off to Kampong Speu Province, a rural area two hours west of the city. From our base in Phnom Penh we worked with students from the following groups: the English Learning Centre, the School of Nursing, and the School of Optometry. In Kampong Speu, Yeok and Nico worked with: the Technology for Development Team, a second group from the School of Nursing, students from the Electronic Engineering Team, and finally, a team of Computing students.

Here's what we learned.

From Inside and Out

By Nico Page

Two insightful interviews with students offered perspectives on Cambodia's history and future, from inside and out. Farhan Khalid is a student from Pakistan studying at PolyU, and he came to Cambodia well-researched. Monytep Lak studies at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and was born and raised nearby. We interviewed them separately, but within minutes of each other, at their hotel during a midday break from work.

"When we first arrived, we were in the capital, Phnom Penh," Farhan began. "The capital is really developed; I didn't see any signs of poverty over there... but after coming to Kampong Speu Province, and also in the village, I saw the real picture that Cambodia has to offer. One thing I saw about Cambodia is that although their GDP is around 26 billion dollars [he was close, in 2018 it was actually 24.57 billion USD], which is very low, in the city I saw a lot of people driving expensive cars, like SUVs, which is not normal for a country having such low GDP. So I asked one of the locals, 'why is that?' and he told me it's because of the class division and also because of a lot of corruption."

There is a particularly difficult chapter in Cambodia's history, from which many of today's problems arise. Perhaps you've heard the dreaded name before: Khmer Rouge. This Maoist-inspired revolution came on the heels of years of instability, punctuated by American bombs that fell over from the Vietnam War, to cut supply lines and throttle the communist spread. We learned this history before setting out to do any service.

"So, I think it was on the first day we were here, we went to S-21 [Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum], a prison in Phnom Penh. It was used from 1975-1979 during the communist revolution they had. A lot of people were tortured over there; it was the Cambodian Genocide."

Farhan paused. "When you walk in the prison alone— when you're alone inside, there is an eerie silence and you get a very sad vibe, so it hits you then. But if you're in a group, if you have friends around, even if there's another person in the same room as you, you don't feel it that much."

It has been forty years since the genocide ended, and far less since the country returned to stability. However, as Farhan observed, "right now they seem to be recovering and they seem to be progressing. I think they are moving in the right direction and also showing to the people—showing to the world—that this has happened in the past, so people can learn from the past, and can learn about human dignity, and so things like genocide, or maybe even the Holocaust that happened in Germany, can be stopped from happening in the future."

Monytep shared a rich vision for her country's future moving on from the Genocide. "My dream is, I really want to see Cambodian people develop their skills, to take what they do now and I really want to see them do more... to upgrade their skills and have really good results." She told us how the Khmer Rouge killed "smart people, and people who graduated and army people and doctors, people who had knowledge... so after that, the Khmer Rouge made, especially the old, people really scared and they wanted to hide their talents, wanted to hide their skills, wanted to hide their knowledge." She sees this lack of local knowledge as a prime reason for Cambodia's struggles today.

Traditional methods of farming and working are still practiced in parts of the country, and Monytep wants to work for the government, or an organization, traveling throughout Cambodia to learn from those elders. "Some people from other countries, they really don't understand the situation in Cambodia. They just think they need to teach people here what they do in other countries, but they don't understand how the farmers feel, how people feel, and they don't understand what Cambodians like doing and what their skills are."

Pushing back against these insensitive forms of foreign aid and globalized promises of homogenous development, Monytep told me that in her vision of working with elders, "I really want them to improve their skills but not change their habits... some people think Khmer people are really rude and really selfish but inside they are really sweet, they are just scared because they've been through a lot of war... Especially people from countries that do things really fast and quick-quick, when they come to Cambodia it's really slow. It's not because people are lazy but this is their habit."

We saw some of this slower lifestyle in the villages in Kampong Speu, where we had time to talk with people extensively and understand their situation. I made rich connections with both Cambodian students and villagers, and really appreciated the sense of calm. Monytep had parting words to continue challenging stereotypes about her country, saying, "I just want to let everybody know that Cambodian people are really good people, and they have food and are friendly, but they're just scared." Though they may, with very good reason, be scared of the past, the people we met seemed fully invested in a future that the PolyU students were doing their small part to build.

KAMPONG SPEU

By Nico Page

To watch the service highlights in Kampong Speu, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

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In the constant shifting of motorbikes around our bus—this is what it feels like to drive in Cambodia, always surrounded by the bobbing of helmets, I began noticing a few of the child-sized license plates now stated Kampong Speu on the bottom edge. The bikes registered in Phnom Penh began to thin with the city as we joined the growing rush of workers who commute from rural province to capital. We were on our way, heading nearly due east, to the small city of Chbar Mon, in the center of Kampong Speu Province.

Later, sitting under a short tree one evening, we learned that, while some may still be farmers, most people in Kampong Speu work in Chinese factories nearby or out in Phnom Penh. Chanbopha Ken, a community leader who you will soon meet, told us that "for one month, they pay 200 or 300 USD. It depends on your knowledge. If you don't know Chinese, if you don't know English, you just get $150. If you know, you can get $500 or $1000." Those factory workers were the riders of the motorbikes all around us, the people that collectively are referred to as "rural-urban migration."

I find the United Nations calling this "the pouring out of individuals from rural Cambodia into jobs within the burgeoning number of giant garment factories that now surround the city of Phnom Penh, taking the place of what was agricultural land not long ago." The pouring out: the capital's population doubling in size in less than ten years, the villages losing their working-age youth. We would learn all of this during our five days in Kampong Speu, but as we arrived that afternoon, we were just trying to get our bearings.

Four teams of students—Nursing, Electrical Engineering, Computing, and an interdisciplinary student-led team called Technology for Development, or Tech4D—were split between various hotels and guesthouses along the highway running through Chbar Mon. Driving in, we looked around for the names of their lodgings, for the restaurant-cafes where they ate lunch each day— our primary method of getting from one project to another during the workday. Eventually it all became so familiar we could walk up the dusty road and dependably arrive at a clustering of buses that meant we'd found PolyU service teams.

01

Department of Computing

in Kampong Speu, Cambodia

01

Department of Computing

COMP3S02 Socially Responsible Global Leadership in a Digital World

On top of the rounded peak is a building that looks like a temple. It shakes in the 60x zoom of the handheld camera, slowly begins to shrink. The trees melt together, brightening and erasing the blue of the sky into an overexposed haze. Maybe some clouds appear, maybe they are the brooding kind with purples and brilliant whites, maybe just like stained fabric stretched thin and dusty from use. All of these clouds and more can appear in the sky in Cambodia.

Once the trees become a hill, it becomes the background for curved tiles along a long, straight roof. Its other edges appear and on either end, large white trunks that move up and out, with golden trim. Now the whole building is a flat rectangle, marked by regular pillars and windows and classroom doors. There is always a child hanging out one of these holes.

On the five steps up to the building and on the yard that's pouring in from the right edge of the picture there are big kids. They wear purple shirts and they pound and they sand and they tie and they think and they talk.

They are building: a rainwater collection and purification tank, a tire swing, a wall of musical instruments, a set of two swings with different strength pulleys, raised garden beds, a balance beam playground, a rope climbing net.

In the Computing team's bus each morning, they asked the driver for the same song— a Cambodian rap song that hit the bass loud and hard and got everyone ready for a day of work. "YO!" they would exclaim in unison as the beat dropped, bouncing in the hard bus seats. Soon they would quiet down and settle in for the hefty drive out from Chbar Mon. They were serving at a small primary school, between wide fields and wandering cows. Computing was here last year building auxiliary classrooms: two colorfully-painted repurposed shipping containers.

There were other pieces of past work visible around the yard, like a wood-and-tire seesaw the current PolyU students would try to balance and sometimes wrestle on. Their laughter and banter somehow overcame the constant sounds of hard work. Hammering, hand-sawing and drilling wound together with conversations in Cantonese, English and Khmer; soccer balls being kicked and children playing. As I sat recording video, it came together symphonically and I hoped the microphone could capture the mix as I was hearing it.

From the top of the container-classroom, standing by last year's solar panels, I watched the students below argue about how to fit a square pipe into a round one. They were having difficulties with some of the materials for their water filtration tank, and stuck out here, at least thirty minutes from town, there was little to be done. They left the tank on its concrete pedestal under the sun and sat on the school steps to draw up a new design, and then began brainstorming for the lessons they'd be teaching the kids soon.

Some very small children stood nearby observing. Multiple hammers in no rhythm, a bucket overflowing with plastic water bottles, a black motorbike. Little clouds of butterflies. An RUPP student sat next to a PolyU student teaching him to sand more efficiently. They rubbed the metal file quickly along the edge, curving slightly as they went to round the edges. This was a constant on the school yard: while the PolyU students had the larger design schemes in mind and certain crucial technical knowledge, I frequently saw them handing their power tools over to the RUPP students for quick, on-site lessons.

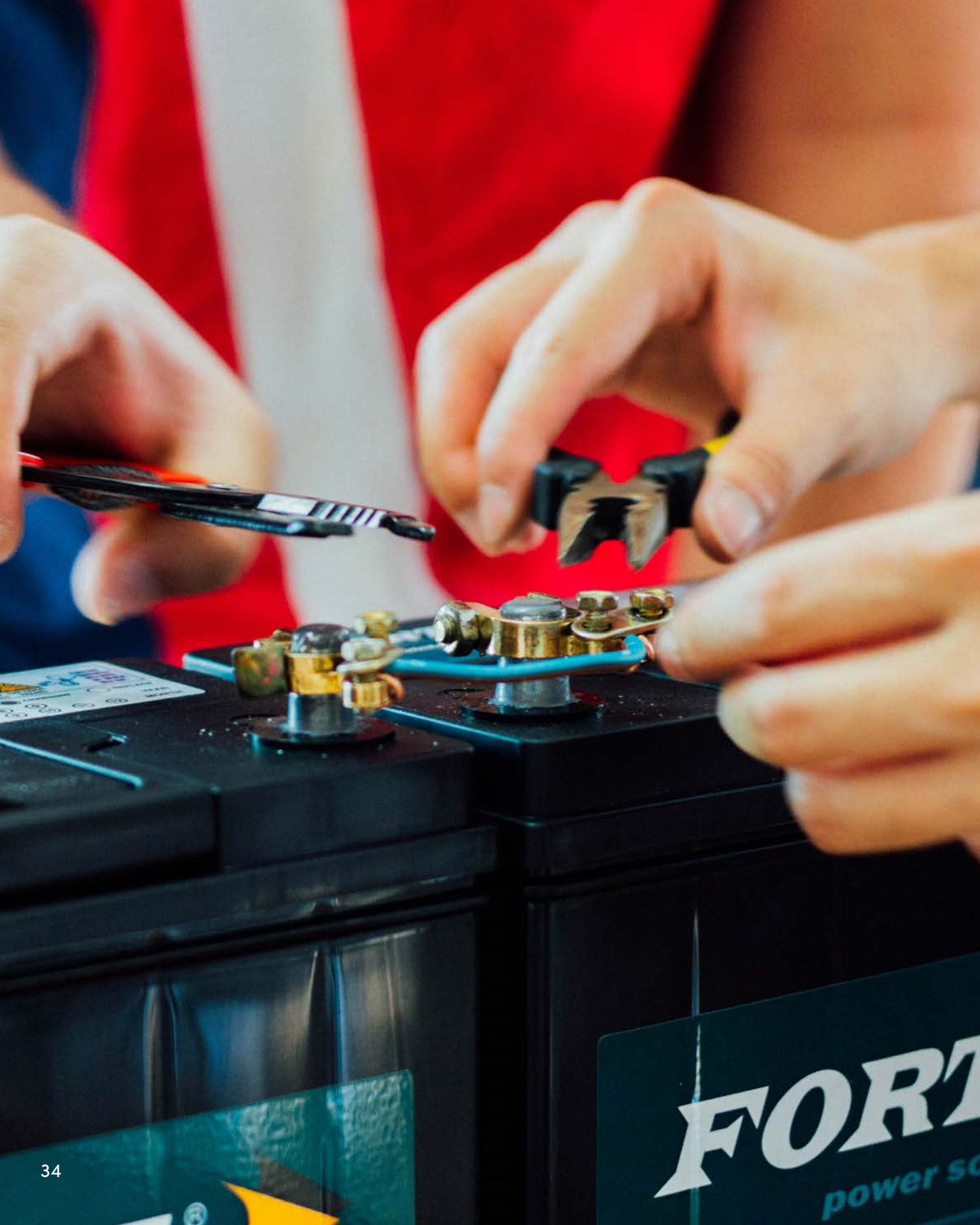
"My experience has been great, because I think the RUPP students—RUPP is the university here—we've been collaborating with them and I think collaborating with students from different cultures, different backgrounds, really helps me learn a lot." Shielded from the noise of the yard by the container, Yeok and I spoke with Donghyun Kim, a Korean student from the Computing team. Collaboration isn't always easy, however, as "the difficulties we've encountered so far is the communication with the RUPP students... but as we've gotten closer, we've figured out how to communicate with each other."

"The biggest thing I've learned so far is to experience as much as possible... just get out there and communicate with different people and try to learn as much as you can. So, for example, I've been trying to learn basic Khmer, which is the language of Cambodia. I've learned some words to communicate with the local people, and just by saying 'hello,' they opened up to me pretty quickly."

School children lined up in front of the evening sun as it worked its way through low clouds, bringing them light pinks and pale yellows. On an unsteady count of three, little arms pulled high and back, tensed, and propelled a swarm of paper planes forwards. The sky exploded with bright shades of construction paper and sounds of delight. PolyU and RUPP students rushed in, trying to stop the little aircraft from being snatched right back up— they wanted to see which went furthest.

"No matter where we are, in what part of the world, I think kids are always the same. They always want to do things for fun, they want to enjoy their actions, for example, they want to enjoy the lesson... and I think today's workshop was a confirmation for me that in teaching kids you should include something fun," Adilet Daniyarov told us sitting on the steps of the school as the buses idled nearby and students prepared to leave. We interviewed him alongside a RUPP student named Sothea Phal and another Computing student from PolyU, Andrew Thenedi. They all expressed having felt uncertain and inexperienced with the children at first, but after a little while in the classroom, teaching got easier.

Andrew expressed enjoying "the atmosphere in our team, we are not just getting things done, we are actually enjoying the process of teaching; we actually want to deliver, for example, the facts of the parachute and the balance of the plane... our team was combined from PolyU and RUPP and I think that our ideas were very diverse, actually. For example, we have these ideas that we share a bit, and then we have someone who brings up a new idea and opens up more doors. I think that because we are from different backgrounds, we all have different experiences, and that's why we get so many insights." Sothea continued, "we can learn from each other, in everything it's a good experience for me. I have to say thank you so much to the PolyU students." After Andrew shared his thanks as well, Adilet shared some of his general takeaways, saying "this was a nice opportunity for us to explore a new culture. Personally, I saw Cambodia from a totally new angle and was really impressed with its culture and history and local people— so thank you." They stood up quickly as the mosquitoes emerged and the buses got ready to pull away. We snapped a group photo on Yeok's dying camera, grabbed our bags, and left the school.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02

Department of Electrical Engineering

in Kampong Speu, Cambodia

Department of Electrical Engineering

02

EE2S01 Low-cost Energy Infrastructures for Developing Regions

I still haven't written about the heat. It is in every word of this, like the words might melt from the page or start sweating. Now, there is a sun in Cambodia so hot it feels like it should dry up the humidity, but in fact, the water filling the air and the light crisping the sky are co-conspirators, inescapable. In memory, everything is bright: the students shine in their sweat, wet shirts pooling dark and pulling down, while an arm is raised to wipe the forehead slick. But the sun is also a tool in the students' hands.

The solar panel team, from the Electrical Engineering department, donned blue tees with PolyU's logo. They were dropped off at the school where Computing was building, but from there, they carried their panels, wooden planks, power tools and meters upon meters of wiring into the dirt paths patched with mud, sinking into the overeager greenery. Tin-roofed houses and thatch-roofed porticos were scattered throughout the fields in small clusters. Notice: a different sort of structure, somewhere central in the cluster, from which white lines extend and pull each house in. Its roof is a slant of muted blue-gray, a collection of little rectangles graph-papered into sun-soaking cells. The panels rest atop a wooden skeleton about the size of a queen bed, and just taller than a person.

There were three of these solar stations, built last year. One was intact, one had a broken controller box and one had fallen to pieces. The students carefully took apart the broken installations, carrying panels into the shade to rest and be tested until they spun fans and lit bulbs, meager in the noon. The third structure's old wood was cleared away and a new skeleton went up in its place, new wires hung from its belly and out across the sky.

Lam Kwok-ho, or Koko, the teacher of the Electrical Engineering team, referred to this as the old village. Yeok and I missed them on their first day of work, when they managed to install solar panels and wire up a whole new village, so we only found their blue shirts amid the plants conducting repairs and adding a few new houses to the local grid.

We spoke beside a house on stilts with fresh, bright tin, watching a villager standing on the roof waiting to attach the solar panels. Koko's large tan hat flopped a little from side-to-side as he told us about the project and shared his feelings. "I think it's meaningful, especially when I see the villagers smile. They are really happy after the installation of the system. And in the new village, some villagers sent coconuts and mangoes to the students. They are so happy they have the lamp to use, because in general they can just rely on candles after the evening. And in the afternoon, why do they always sit outside the house? It's because inside this kind of house it's very, very hot during the afternoon. There is no fan inside. So this trip for me is very meaningful, I am happy to do it."

Besides installing light bulbs in the houses they wired, the students gave the families a small fan. Testing out the panels before hoisting them up to the roof, they gathered around the fan with outstretched arms and open faces, taking in the moving air. An elderly man sat nearby watching, a young woman breastfed her baby, a boy lay out in the sun nearby slowly eating rice and looking at the sky.

The students seemed to split the tasks amongst themselves autonomously. A PolyU student sat soldering connections to the panels and teaching a young woman from RUPP to use the iron. Someone else got up on a ladder to zip-tie wires together. A request for a hammer began a conversation about the names of different tools in Cantonese and Khmer, the students laughing at similarities and differences—the word for axe was nearly the same! In a dark room nearby, hands in white cloth gloves carefully ran wires along the ceiling and wall. A switch was tied to a pole in the center of the space, tested and suddenly, light.


Pig
ONE IN TEN UNHAPPY LIFE

03

Technology for Development

in Kampong Speu, Cambodia

03 Technology for Development (Tech4D)

A Student Self-Initiated Service-Learning Team

After thirty minutes at high speed, with the horn held down at every motorbiker passed, the road turned to dirt, and soon we pulled up beside the Bopha Foundation for Community, in the village of Angtunloub. The community center is named for its founder, 24-year-old Chanbopha Khen, who everyone calls Bopha. She began adopting children from the street when she was 17. Now five call her mother. Three years ago, beneath a tree next to her house, she started sharing what she was learning in school with the neighborhood children. With her parents' help, she soon turned the land across the street into an afterschool community foundation, where everyday, kids come running and biking to play games, read books, and learn English and Chinese from Bopha and a few other volunteer tutors, including her brother.

The Tech4D team was greeted by a group of ducks as we walked through the gates, past the foundation's big blue sign. The students carried in planks of wood and boxes of tools. A pair in matching, custom-made Tech4D shirts (their logo an outlet formed by a "T," a "4" and a "D," turned on its side like a smile) each held onto the handle of a big blue plastic bag full of paint bottles and soon-to-be circuits.

Bopha's foundation was on a beautiful, spacious plot of land. A large wooden porch on low stilts with a thatched roof hung hammocks in the middle of everything. To the right, a low tree shaded a round table surrounded by benches, a perfect central workstation. Repurposed plastic bottles full of dirt hung from the branches, sprouting little plants. Laughter and the squeak of metal from a swing set nearby. A shipping container classroom a little further back was setup as home base for the team's materials and tools.

This year's project was a set of games and toys to help teach concepts in science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM). Three students sat around a low table hammering tall nails into pieces of wood painted with a digestive tract. A small crowd of children formed around them, watching, tickling and showing us how they could count to ten in English. A few days later, the wooden digestive tracts had their debut at a PolyU student-led lesson in biology. Guide the little ball from the stomach, through the nail-lined intestine-maze, and out the other side. Another painted wooden board was wired up to a plastic heart. Press the heart to pump power through string lights, illuminating the veins and lungs. The children sat in little plastic chairs to learn about the body, playing with the handmade games and reaching high to velcro laminated paper organs to PolyU students wearing special vests. One small boy found he couldn't push the heart button as quickly as he wanted with just his hands, and brought the red plastic up to his own chest to pump stronger, heart on heart.

To teach a different lesson about power, two bikes were turned into stationary manual energy generators that displayed the riders' energy output and time on a student-built screen between the handlebars. Though their legs could barely reach from the seat at its lowest to the pedals below, the kids strained their little bare feet and pumped like they were racing, so fast one bike faltered. A student equipped with a handy tool belt was right there to fix it, moving the wheel back into place and carefully tightening the screws. Who knows if in the long run the kids will really want to ride a bike that stays put when they already pedal everywhere, but I am sure some curious child will wonder about how their legs can light up the screen, and that is enough.

I sat for a break at the table beneath the tree. While a PolyU student and an RUPP student painted diligently by my side, MC Chan put down her video camera for a moment, after snapping a cute picture of her friends. "I'm in my third year here, so for this year I have more experience than previous years," she told me. "For the hot weather, or the dirt, blah blah blah— I'm already used to that." She wore wrist-length white arm cuffs under her Tech4D shirt for protection from the sun. Impressed by the variety and quantity of projects, as well as the speed with which they were advancing, I asked her how the team functioned. "Last year we had a tutor guiding us, but this year, we are really student-initiated. For the old members, we have to manage more things than last year, like planning the schedule and guiding the new members on how to do everything, basically." However, since they are student-initiated, they were also incredibly committed and invested in the work— and it showed.

Besides the biology games and physics bikes, the students designed all sorts of interactive toys, incorporating lessons about geography, geometry, music and color. There was a large map of the world dotted with string lights highlighting major countries. By spinning two different wooden handles, the kids could compete to illuminate the whole map, starting from Cambodia. Fan Fung, a true veteran of Tech4D, explained to Bopha how the game was played as they each stood at one of the handles, getting ready to play: "on the right hand side, I think it's the lower route, and on the left-hand side, it's the upper route. So who is faster to get to the end— the end for the lower route is Chile and the upper route is America."

"Until the lights all light up?"

"Yes, until all lights are on."

"Wow. Tonight I won't sleep!" Bopha said as she gripped the handles and began spinning, activating the little dynamo generator and lighting up Indonesia.

There was a large pond behind the fence at the back of the property, near the tassel-covered classroom where the kids learned English. In the evening, as we were finishing up our work and loading back into the bus, Bopha ran around shepherding escapees back to the chorus of sparrow voices counting in unison. Bopha has a job and is in her final year of university studying management. She helps her parents with their cows and rice farm, and has a mango farm in the mountains. She says her greatest passion is helping her community, and has made a promise to herself to continue the community foundation as long as she can.

"Bopha is a really tough girl. The first time I met her, I was so impressed by her attitude, because a girl growing up in the village who wants to make something different is really hard. Most of the women in the village can only do similar things, like staying at home and taking care of the kids, and maybe working in the factory? So I'm so impressed that she could want to make something change and improve her village," MC told me. Last year, she made a short documentary about Bopha.

A final meaningful project involved the pond. As an alternative to the groundwater or unpurified rainwater the children usually drank, a Tech4D team decided to build a sand and gravel filter. Pour water from the pond in through the top of the large blue barrel, and wait for it to trickle through the earth. Open the spout at the bottom so just a trickle comes through—not too open, or the water won't leave behind its contaminants. Fan held up three plastic bottles for me to see: the first was brown and filled with sediment straight from the pond, the second was the perfectly clear result of their filter, and the third was a bottle of groundwater for comparison. The last two were nearly indistinguishable.

For a moment I think this is a sort of utopia. A neverland. Teenagers and under-25-year-olds taking care of the smaller children, young not-adults running everything. We play and take photos and share, often badly. Fight and tousle. How else would we build a better place? The kids are siblings, neighbors, maybe even enemies, and they all gather here. But they are not barefoot by choice. Why does it seem community comes at the cost of poverty, precariousness? Or why does "development" mean this, as it is, likely disappears?

A kid cries. We take a while to notice but now someone holds him and it will pass. Bopha wants to keep this place until she passes. She promised herself. Her brother has a ghost inside telling him to die and we are leaving—tomorrow what will the children think of us? Back to Hong Kong where I'm told kids two years old are interviewed to enter preschool. They study so, so much.

Here everyone makes fun for themselves and each other. There is so much to be done that does nothing: riding bikes, swinging standing or two to a swing, trying flowers through the kaleidoscope, playing the same song on the xylophone until all that's left is to run the mallets up and down the scale.

04

School of Nursing

in Kampong Speu, Cambodia

04

School of Nursing

SN2S03 Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities

After getting off their buses outside of the Bopha Foundation for Community, the Nursing students separated into groups of about six—two pairs of PolyU students and two students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)—and went off along dirt roads and paths in different directions. They had a simple map, rectangles and circles drawn lining a road, with each house numbered. At our first stop, the only people home were an elderly grandmother and a shy young boy.

The woman was sitting beneath a tree in front of the small house, lightly shaded from a sun that still burned through the leaves. Once she'd understood we were there to help her, she told us she was nearly blind. We squatted around, drawing closer, unable to do much more. Farhan Khalid, a Mechanical Engineering student, took the lead on the health assessment alongside RUPP student and interpreter extraordinaire Monytep Lak. Later, we sat down with both for an in-depth conversation about the project.

To hear Farhan talking about his service-learning experience, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

AR

"We are out here to help people, we are giving them primary health care," Farhan clarified to us. "We are teaching them about a healthier lifestyle they can lead in terms of dietary planning, or maybe smoking cessation, and also alcohol and in terms of physical exercise. On the first day we arrived in the village we did a survey in which we inspected what are the living standards of the houses, where do people get their water from— just a basic survey. On the next day we went out to a few clients and, well, there were many problems at first because, well, from my personal experience, some clients were expecting us to maybe give them some medicine." This was a constant struggle, but since the students are not actual doctors—in fact, as is the case with Farhan and many others, they aren't actually nursing students, either—they cannot actually prescribe anything.

However, to Monytep, a Community Development student, there is great value in this undertaking. "I want to be a person who can help a lot of people," she told us. "I think the PolyU trip is really great because we can learn more about Khmer people... It's my first time here in Kampong Speu and in the future I will work with people, so I really want to have more experiences with people, especially old people, because I really want to know what they are doing, how their health is and what they feel inside, what kind of person they are."

Back under the tree with the old woman, we did begin to see a little bit into her life. “She says all of her family went to the factory to work, she only stays with the grandchildren,” Monytep told us. “She had a lot of kids but now only one is left.” A bright blue plastic sports drink bottle hung from a branch above her head, filled with dirt, and Monytep lightly spun it around as she spoke.

Farhan wrapped the woman's arm in a blood pressure cuff while a classmate slipped the end of a stethoscope underneath, and they began to hand pump. "Tell her it's a bit tight, but to stay calm," Farhan said. The cuff filled around her loose skin. Take her pulse, help her to her feet for weight and height. As she sat back down she told us she was too weak to walk that day because she had no money for food. Otherwise, she was in good health, but the hunger keeps her down. Sometimes she just sleeps the whole day.

Unprompted, we heard the story of how her family was forced to take out a loan to pay a bill, so that they are now impoverished and in debt. A few tears; she brought the loose folds of her skirt up to her face. After translating, Monytep asked if the students had any questions. "Can you ask her if we can start the health survey?" They had to meet their quota of six clients per day.

Some of the Nursing project's recommendations have made a lasting impact. Farhan told us the story of a woman he met who had spoken with students in 2017, and "she still has their exercise plan and told us she practices it every day." Farhan himself hoped to make such an impact when he tried to help a man who said he smoked "around twenty-one cigarettes per day." In order to convince him to change, the students told the man about the dangers of second-hand smoke to his daughter. When Farhan came back later, the man had certainly made an effort, going down "from twenty-one cigarettes in a day to six, that day, I think my service to him made an impact and I was a bit happy."

Another important aspect of this service was understanding the local conditions and circumstances. On the day we interviewed Farhan, they had just returned from a visit "to the main market in the city." He said, "we tried to look for the prices of different vegetables, fruits, meat and different necessities of life, so we can better approach our clients later on when we're doing our health promotion."

A motorbike bumped along by us on the dirt road. The students discussed how they could follow up with the old woman, give her the nutritional and lifestyle advice they were tasked with designing for her family over the next few days. The difficulties were twofold: the grandmother was not the head of the household—her daughter took charge of the family affairs—and the family was struggling so much with money that it was difficult to come up with relevant meal planning ideas. How do you advise someone to eat better when they can barely afford food at all?

The clouds were big and dramatic, their shrugging puffiness a distinct contrast to the flatness of the land. The open above was punctuated by the sharpness of palm fronds, the roundness of coconuts and students' umbrellas raised high against the sun, and the height of the occasional two-story house. Stilts here and there gave them an extra sense of elevation.

We sat between the tall wooden poles of one such house, shaded by the overhanging second floor. The man was in his middle 30s, unemployed, not particularly happy about being home on a weekday. A boy lounged nearby with a finger-sized, deep-red gash freshly cut into his cheek. He didn't seem to pay the cut any mind, trimming his toenails with a bare double-edged razor blade. Beside him were the enormous clay pots, shaped like squat vases, that throughout the village collected rainwater for washing, cooking, and drinking. Farhan had told us this is a problem, because "they don't even boil the water, so some of the diseases are caused by that and in Cambodia, well, it is a tropical country, so there's a lot of malaria and dengue over here."

Meanwhile, the man rated his health as a five out of ten, saying he felt unwell and shaky. On the scale of deep sad face to full smiley face, five's mouth a neutral flat line. The students asked how many fruits and vegetables he eats, how he cooks his food, if he uses MSG. He doesn't, though due to the seasoning's ubiquity and low cost, many of the villagers do overuse it. Most of his food is stir-fried. He used to work in construction, building houses, and said he worked out more then. Now his back was sore, so the students taught him some stretches: arms out in front, then raised high above your head. Hold them behind your head and bend, touching elbow to opposite knee, an abdominal strengthener.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, just stiff these first times." He told us he wants to do them every day.

"That's very good. Just tell him our assessment is done, and thank you for his time. We hope that he'll do these exercises and maybe we'll see him next year. Maybe, say maybe."

As we left the property, we passed a small shrine that looked like a bird house, sitting on a medium-sized pole. Painted in bright colors on the outside, it was empty inside, but an offering of bananas sat at its tiny door.

Interview with PolyU students

Tammy Fuk Yee TONG (Student Leader), Yerkin ZHANSAYA, Uskumbaeva ARUZHAN, & Alvin Shaoyang LI

“I will not regret that I took this service-learning.”

Alvin: I think the grade doesn't matter, actually, because, after the service, we know each other, I've made a lot of friends, that's the first point; and also, like, I know I have a lot of really deep feelings about this work. So, I'm happy to know you guys and to know the— explore this world that is new for me, actually.

The light voices of day's end filter through my microphone's windscreen as school lets out. The PolyU students sit in their reflections, not quite answering each others' questions, adding in their own.

Zhansaya: We have to help people by persuading them to change their habits—in order to improve their health conditions—but aren't you guys afraid that you made such a big effort to make all of those health promotion plans and analyze their cases but actually you won't be able to persuade them just by one visit? So, what do you think about it?

Alvin: We just do what we can do, and the rest of the things, we just leave it to time. Sometimes it's— no one can get it all.

Tammy: After this service-learning, what impressed me most is civilization. That's what you're talking about. Things need to be changed by time.

Aruzhan: I think that, like, all people need some time to make a difference in their lives, so we should not expect instant change of their views on their own health. That's why, even though you will not see that they are persuaded at your first time, maybe next service-learning students will come and then they will push them to make a change and then they will be ready for that in the second time, so— but even though it is not possible to make a big change, I will not regret that I took this service-learning.

PHNOM PENH

By Meredith Morran

AR

To watch service highlights in Phnom Penh, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

By the second week, service-learning in the field had officially begun and Phnom Penh remained the center of operations for Lucas and I. We kicked each morning off with a glass of mango juice, a slice of toast and a piece of dragon fruit, after which we'd board a bus, a taxi—or sometimes a three-wheeled tuk tuk—and make our way to the service-learning sites. We followed teams from the School of Nursing, the School of Optometry, and the English Learning Centre.

While staying in Phnom Penh, I slept in a room on the tenth floor of our hotel. Every night, as people made their way upstairs to bed, I was always the last person left in the elevator. Though these temporary moments of aloneness only lasted about thirty seconds, I often found myself taking a deep breath and thinking about my day, about what I had learned, about my time in Cambodia on the whole.

I thought about the Som Rong homestay where I bonded with PolyU students over lunch and soft drinks and getting caught in the rain. I thought about my time at A Greater Hope orphanage, where I spoke with one of the founders, Ream Carson, under the shade of a large tree. I thought about her personal testimony of the genocide. I thought about my time at the Emmanuel Community School, where I was constantly surrounded by energetic children running through the halls screaming with joy, arms raised over their heads. I thought about the tears they shared with their PolyU teachers on the final day. I thought about the beginning of my time in Cambodia, which remains a blur, and the bittersweet ending, which I'll likely never forget.

The coming pages outline the nature of each 2019 Phnom Penh-based service-learning project. In addition to providing an overview of each department I have also recorded many of the deeply interpersonal moments and shared experiences I had the distinct opportunity to witness.


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05

School of Nursing

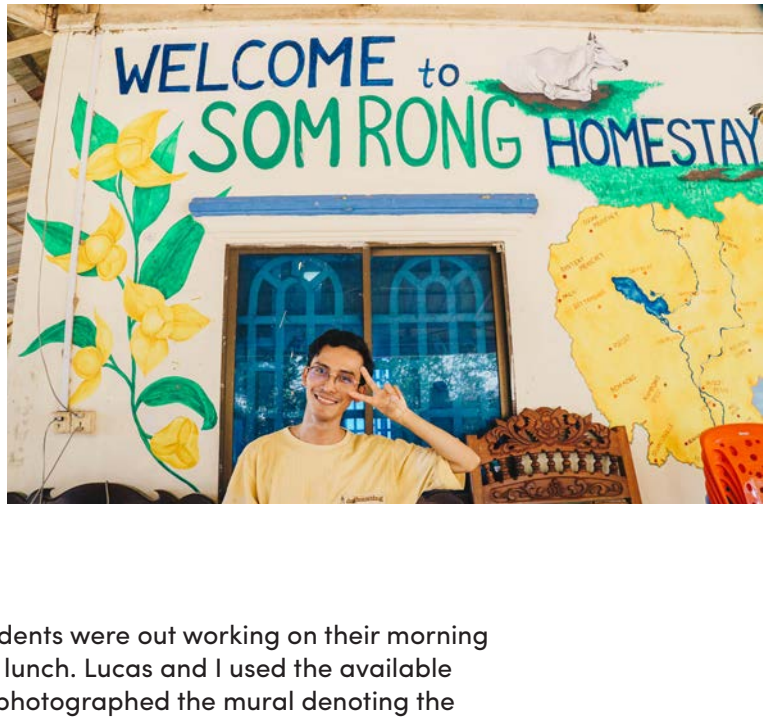
in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

05

School of Nursing

SN2S03 Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities

At the start of the week, Lucas and I rode out in a car to the Som Rong Homestay; we'd be accompanying the nursing team on their day of service. The plan was to observe the PolyU students while they conducted surveys and delivered health advice to Cambodian people living in slum areas outside of the city.



When we arrived, we were told that the students were out working on their morning surveys and they'd be back in an hour to have lunch. Lucas and I used the available time to observe the homestay more closely. I photographed the mural denoting the name "Som Rong" in green and took additional images of the street with motorbikes periodically racing by. After collecting these images, Lucas and I sat down to escape the heat and plan out our day. We'd start by visiting the various homes that made up the homestay. Afterwards, we'd try to sit down with students and conduct a handful of interviews. Finally, we'd accompany the nursing team to the slums for their afternoon surveys. It was a plan. We downed some water and waited for the nursing students to arrive.

Shortly after, they were unloading from the bus. After their meal, the students were given over an hour to rest, recuperate and stay out of the bright sunlight. We asked if we could take tours of their rooms. They agreed. First, as we crossed the street from the dining area to the house where many female students from the nursing team were staying, the students informed us that the rooms for the female students were much hotter than the rooms for the males, which made sleeping more difficult. There was some lighthearted banter as the male students poked fun at the female students, considering themselves lucky to have dodged the hotter accommodations. But I could also tell that staying in these hot rooms had also become a source of pride for the female students, who were now successfully managing these new, unfamiliar living conditions.

Continuing up the stairs, with the permission of the home owners, Lucas and I made our way into the first room. It was, indeed, quite hot. We tried to remain near the fan as we captured images of their setup.

After we were both sufficiently soaked in sweat, we made our way back downstairs and down the street to visit the male team's homestay.

Climbing more stairs, we entered a second room. It was dark; windows were kept closed to keep the temperature down. The students turned on the fans as we followed them inside.

Here, we sat down to talk to the students more thoroughly. We asked if someone would be willing to do an interview and everyone laughed, happily volunteering their classmates, while simultaneously avoiding the spotlight themselves. One of the PolyU students whose name kept being said was Isaac, a fourth year nursing student, who filled one of the "student leader" roles on the Cambodia trip. Isaac agreed to an interview.

Interview with Issac

PolyU student leader

“I’m expecting more challenges and interesting things in the coming days.”

“It’s my first time in Cambodia,” he told us. “I joined this trip as a student leader to help the teaching team and to facilitate the service-learning.” We asked Isaac about his first impressions of Cambodia. “I think it is really interesting here. I think the people, the locals, are very nice. They always say hi to me.” Laughing, he added, “the weather is really hot. I keep sweating a lot.”

Isaac explained how this was a unique trip for him. Working as a student on prior service-learning projects Isaac described, “I just had to follow the instructions of my teacher” however, his role as student leader this year was more involved. “I have to empower the students and instruct them when they have questions.” He said that one of his major takeaways from the trip this year was going to be communication skills. “I have to be clear with what the teachers are saying about our plan and what we are going to do next. I have to give precise messages to the students.”

Isaac then explained how service-learning has been a moving experience, especially given his major at PolyU. “I’m a nursing student and I’m a nurse to be,” he said “so helping others is really meaningful.” Grateful for his opportunity to receive a university education in Hong Kong, he added “I have a responsibility to use my abilities to help others around the world, to help my Cambodian friends here.” He concluded, “it has been a great experience for now and I’m expecting more challenges and interesting things in the coming days.” The other PolyU students in the audience started clapping. Isaac turned away, laughing humbly. We thanked him for the interview, shut off our cameras, and turned on the fans.

Interview with Supan

Local Cambodian

When we arrived at the main group area, Lucas pulled me aside, suggesting that we ask an RUPP student if they could help us translate so we could interview Supan. One of the RUPP students nearby happily agreed.

We grabbed a chair for Supan and set up our shot. First, we asked for her name and a brief introduction. “My name is Supan and I am 58 years old. This is my birthplace.”

> **“I really like taking care of them as if they were my sons.”**

We nodded, recalling the pictures of PolyU students from previous years that we had observed on one of the walls of her home, we asked her how long she had been hosting nursing students who came to Cambodia for service. She told us that she had been participating in the homestay program since 2016. “I am really happy,” she said, “I like them, I love them. I really like taking care of them as if they were my sons.” She described how she’d “wait for them to come to sleep at night,” adding, “I go in to check the mosquito nets and the mattresses and whether they sleep well or not. I say goodnight to each of them.”

Then, we asked more specifically about the pictures of the students from previous years. “The pictures on my wall are the old students that come here. They take pictures and give them to me like souvenirs, like memories” adding, “Because I am like their parent, like a mother and they are like sons and daughters.” Tearing up she said “I cry when they leave.”

She went on to share more personal details of her own life, informing us that she has a thirteen year old son, but that he lives in a different house with his father. For her, this has become a source of great loneliness. “I just want someone to make noise in the house,” she said. Over the course of the interview it became clear how special the visits by the PolyU students were to her. Remarking on the familial bonds formed annually, she restated “I love them like they’re my children.”

Supan concluded by telling us of her wish that the PolyU students would stay for even longer than one week. “I love everyone and I welcome them,” she said, “arkoun.” Supan’s love was infectious, as was her sadness. Lucas and I found ourselves both deeply moved by her interview. I asked if it would be alright for me to take a portrait of her, hoping to adequately capture her spirit. She agreed, posing by holding out her hand. Yet another symbol of love.

Interview with Ivan and Kimchhy

PolyU and RUPP students

After the interview, we turned towards our audience of students, asking if a PolyU and RUPP student would be willing to do an interview together. We were interested to hear about their experiences working with one another.

Ivan and Kimchhy took up our request kindly. We seated them under some nearby trees and started by asking them to introduce themselves and explain what they had been working on.

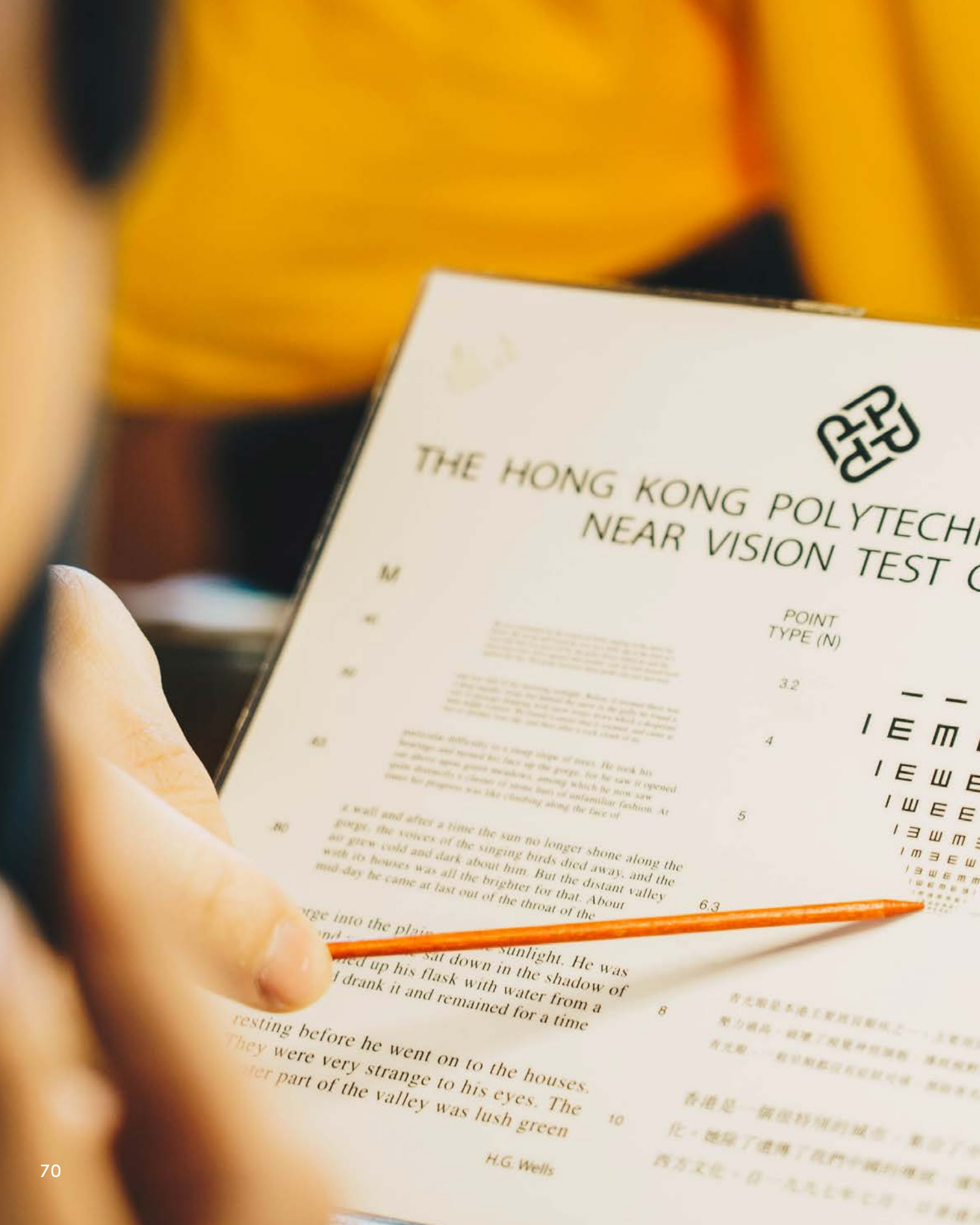
> **“What I learned first is through relationships.”**

Ivan explained, “basically, our program is about going to a slum in Cambodia and visiting them and doing a health survey. Then, we give them some comments on their health. We help them to test their blood pressure, their heart rate, their breathing rate and their BMI.”

Curious, I asked about the collaboration between PolyU and RUPP students. “I am the RUPP student,” Kimchhy said. “Our position is the translator. For me, I translate what the Hong Kong students say to the Cambodian people.” She added, “I think the translator is our most important tool, because we need to ask permission from the community, and if they say they cannot do the survey, we will move on to another home and ask them.” Nodding along, Ivan agreed “I think it’s quite a tough job as, after all, English is our second language for both the Cambodian and Hong Kong students,” adding “you all have really done a great job.” At that point in the interview, Kimchhy turned to him and they gave each other a thumbs up.

Then, responding to a question about what they’d both learned, Kimchhy said “What I learned first is through relationships. Now I can know another culture, like Hong Kong or Korea because our group has many students.” She added that the second thing she’d learned was all about preparation, noting that they had to “prepare how it would be before we go to the survey and prepare how we would communicate.” Finally, she said that living in Phnom Penh she never knew that the “community had the poor part like the slums. I never seen that before.”

This interview underscored some of the many modes of knowledge--and ways of sharing it-- that are exchanged throughout the service-learning trips.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They were very strange to his eyes. The
er part of the valley was lush green
H.G. Wells

06

School of Optometry

in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

06

School of Optometry

SO2S01 Learning through Providing Eye Care and Vision Health to the Community

In addition to the projects pursued by the School of Nursing teams, The School of Optometry brought a group out to Cambodia this year. The optometry team worked with children at A Heath for Wisdom school in the Takéo Province.

Over dinner on Tuesday, Renee told Lucas and I that the following morning we'd all need to "get up early." She said that we'd be driving out to visit A Greater Hope Orphanage and their partner school, A Heart for Wisdom, where we'd accompany the optometry students who were performing eye exams on the Cambodian students there. "It's a two-hour drive," Renee said. "We'll leave at 7 AM." Early indeed. That night, I went home and made sure to charge my camera batteries so I would be ready to go first thing the next morning.

On the car ride out to the school, we got to see more of the Cambodian countryside. I took it all in, before nodding off for the rest of the ride. Upon our arrival at A Greater Hope, we were met by Kit Carson, one of the school's directors and founders. Kit, a California native, led us to the outdoor playground area, our first stop on the morning tour, where he told us to wear plenty of sunscreen. "We're near the equator," he said. "It's easy to forget, but you can get a sunburn after just twenty minutes out here."

We were led around the school's grounds and then into the orphanage area. After introducing us to the workings of the orphanage and school, Kit checked his watch. It was almost snack time for the kids. "I need to get back to help out in the kitchen," he said. We thanked him for the tour and planned for a more extensive interview during the students' afternoon break.

We walked back through the playground, already dripping with sweat, and entered school's open air hallways. Small water misters hung overhead, providing momentary relief from the heat. Kids walked through the courtyards with sodas and icy drinks. We peered into one of the classrooms near the back and found the optometry team setting up their equipment.

The eye-exam area was spread across three rooms. Some classrooms were used to test visual acuity, helping determine if any children were near or far sighted, weather any of the students would benefit from eyeglasses. Other tests checked for colorblindness, still others examined overall eye health. At one of the last tables, I observed someone wrapping a pair of clear glasses with plastic wrap, purposefully creating creases across the lenses. I asked him what he was preparing. “We use these to simulate different kinds of eye diseases,” adding, “they’re for educating the children, so they can catch any problems with their eyes early on.” The obstructed lenses now made perfect sense. He set them on the table next to some photographs that would also be used for the testing. I walked into the second room.

I observed more optometry students in brightly colored yellow t-shirts, busy finalizing all of their examination stations. I was told that Hong Kong Polytechnic is the only university in the city with a formal optometry major. It was also noted that, unlike many of the other service-learning projects which were often made up of students from a variety of disciplines and majors, nearly half of the students on the optometry project also majored in optometry at PolyU. They handled the exam equipment dexterously, indicating that their training had extended beyond this single, service-learning course.

Next, the students began to file in. I watched the careful maneuvers that followed, impressed by the division of roles that the optometry students occupied. Like other service-learning projects, there were RUPP students assisting as translators, clearly explaining the tests to the children, instructing them to cover one eye then the other, read off the letters on the chart. The PolyU students adjusted the test glasses, examined the students pupils, and shepherded them to the next station.In addition to the technical skills displayed by the PolyU students, I was also impressed by their efficiency. During our tour, Kit had explained how the Heart for Wisdom school had grown over the years, now servicing over 750 students. The goal for the optometry team was to provide eye exams to each of the students, as well as many staff and teachers at the school, all over the course of one week. Clearly a massive undertaking. Given these metrics, one of the most important roles for the PolyU and RUPP students occupied were those who helped guide the children from examination table to examination table. Additionally, two students sat at the front of the first classroom, recording names, results and prescriptions. Everything was accounted for, they had planned well.

The students patiently lined up outside each classroom, playing with each other quietly while they waited. Whenever I'd walk by with the camera, I'd be met with smiles and waves. They frequently wanted me to take their pictures. After which, I made sure to flip the camera around and show them the screen. Their eyes would light up and they'd often laugh upon seeing themselves. Usually, they'd get the attention of a nearby friend and request to have a second photograph taken, this time together. Before walking off to the next area, we'd exchange high fives— they loved high fives— usually slapping my hand harder a second time. An expression of endearment at its finest. It quickly became a day full of high fives.

Interview with Horace Wong

Chief supervisor of service-learning trip

Later, during the students' lunch period and afternoon break, we began pulling members of the PolyU team aside, requesting interviews. In one of the interior courtyards of the school, we met with Horace Wong, who was working as one of the chief supervisors during this service-learning trip.

> **This screening trip is a memorable trip to me,**

"Our team consists of 29 people," Horace told us. "Four are supervisors, ten are from the school of optometry and fifteen are from other disciplines." He continued by explaining how, before arriving in Cambodia, everyone participated in "laboratory sessions that trained them on basic skills."

Horace described how this trip provides an invaluable education opportunity for PolyU students and the Cambodian students alike. "The PolyU students they can expand their horizons," he said, "they can learn more about eye disease," adding "and they can learn more about different cultures and different populations." Additionally, "the Cambodian children can receive some eye tests and we can screen if they have eye problems and if they need any eye glasses."

Horace added "this screening trip is a memorable trip to me," telling us that the service has not always been as straightforward as expected. "Compared with the eye exams conducted in Hong Kong, conducting exams in Cambodia is not an easy job. For example, we do not always have electricity on the rainy days and for example, the light levels in the classrooms are not always sufficient to conduct the visual screening." To account for some of these difficulties, he noted that their team had to adapt "because the light is not always enough, we needed to solve the problems when we design our floor plan."

At the conclusion of his interview, Horace said, "this trip is valuable to our students, because they can appreciate the different culture. The culture in Cambodia is very different from Hong Kong." We thanked him for the interview and he made his way back to the classrooms to prepare for their afternoon exams.

Interview with Kit Carson

Director and founder of A Greater Hope Ministry

As we finished breaking down our setup for Horace's interview, Kit came by to tell us that he and his wife, Ream, were ready for an interview whenever we wanted. We walked to the front of the school and setup a nice location underneath some trees.

> **I'm really appreciative for the team coming.**

"My name is Kit Carson and this is my wife, Ream Carson. We're the directors and founders of A Greater Hope Ministry," Kit began. "We're here at our Heart for Wisdom school. We started this school back in 2010, trying to meet the needs of the orphanage we were running. We started with preschool, maybe fifteen children. It's been a little bit more than ten years and now we're up to 750 students, graduating through 12th grade." Kit added, "for the last two years, the school has been number one in the province." We were impressed upon more details about the school their story. "We're doing quite well, the parents are very happy," he continued, "we have a wait-list of over 200 students trying to get in because we're out of space and it's a good problem to have."

After telling us more about the school, Kit commented on the collaboration with PolyU, "this is our first year working with PolyU," adding that it's also "the first group that has come out to do optometry and work with us in eyeglasses." Kit elaborated on some of the metrics provided by the PolyU team, "I think about 175 of our students have needed assistance," adding, "I think it's been quite helpful for the students to be able to understand that they cannot see and to have those problems fixed."

Then, Kit shared how the project has also had a deeply personal impact, explaining that he and his wife Ream also "found out that our own daughter cannot see out one of her eyes, so it's been a blessing to at least realize that and to take the steps to try and get that fixed."

As Kit neared the end of his remarks, he turned to Ream, asking her directly how she thought the service was going so far. "I'm really appreciative for the team coming." Smiling, she said, "everything is going very well and the kids are very happy and the families are very happy too."


FISH
Sparkling
keep your dear teacher and your dear friends happy
say please thank you and sorry

07

English Language Centre

in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

01 English Language Centre

ELC2S02 Serving the Community through Teaching English

Our early days of the trip were shaped by the bonds we had begun to form with the ELC team, enhanced by virtue of a shared location: The Frangipani Living Arts Hotel. In fact, by the end of the week, Lucas and I had grown accustomed to morning check-ins with the ELC students. Over noodles, toast, coffee and mango juice, we'd eventually make our rounds, talking to the various students scattered around the hotel lobby. Despite waking early to eat and leave for a day of teaching, the ELC students were often engaged in lively breakfast discussions. There was laughter, chairs were shuffled from other tables, students called to one another from across the dining area.

After breakfast, the PolyU team rode a bus to Emmanuel Community School. On these bus rides, students from the local university: The Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), accompanied the ELC teams. The RUPP students joined in the service-learning program to assist the ELC students, act as translators, and facilitate cross-cultural, multilingual discussion.

Bus rides proved just as lively as breakfast. At 8am each morning, with music blasting, the bus weaved its way through the streets of Phnom Penh. PolyU and RUPP students would sing along, sometimes spontaneously rewriting lyrics and making up their own songs together.

Once they arrived at the school, the teams of PolyU and RUPP students were tasked with presenting lessons to primary school children. These lessons mainly consisted of stories, songs and games designed to help the Cambodian students learn English.

Early that week, I entered Emmanuel Community School—camera in hand—for the first time. The entryway was quiet, as some PolyU students led me down a hallway towards the classroom area in the back. Peering through the doorway of each room, I could see students standing, singing and gesturing along to the songs the PolyU and RUPP students were leading at the front. I could hear laughter and see smiles from both sides of the classrooms.

Shortly, after making my way around each classroom it was time for a break. Recess! The students jumped from their chairs and entered the enclosed courtyard area in the center of the building. Screams—literal screams—of joy filled the space. It was almost overwhelming. No, it was overwhelming. And simultaneously incredibly endearing. Almost immediately after recess began, PolyU students had children on their backs, large groups had linked hands and were spinning around in circles. I noticed two PolyU teachers look at each other, wide-eyed as the students lead them around in circles with increasing speed. Chaos at first sight. I tried to dodge the crowd as I made my way around with the camera, zooming in from a distance to avoid being knocked over in the process.

As the end of the week neared, on the last day of service, I walked downstairs for breakfast before boarding the bus to visit Emmanuel Community School for the final time. Immediately, I noticed a shift in the ELC team's now-typical morning ritual. As I rose to pour myself some water, I said hello to one of the students, asking how she slept, how she was feeling, to which she responded by sighing. She told me that everyone was sad, that people were not really talking to one another, that they didn't want to leave. Mostly, they didn't want to say goodbye to their students. This came as no surprise. I told her I was sorry. From the first days of service, we could have all predicted this bittersweet ending.

After this somber Friday breakfast at the Frangipani, we arrived at the school for the ELC team's final day of service-learning. The morning lessons were filled with similar laughter and smiles. Recess was just as hectic as it had been on Tuesday, though I noticed students gravitating towards specific PolyU instructors. After lunch, Lucas and I pulled aside a few of our ELC friends to check in about how they were feeling about the program soon coming to an end.

Interview with Anastassiya

First-year applied biology student from Kazakhstan

To watch Anastassiya's interview, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

"Everybody is very sad, but at the same time very happy."

Anastassiya, a first-year applied biology student from Kazakhstan, walked with us downstairs, where we set up our cameras in a well-lit part of the main hallway and began asking questions. She started by saying that on the final day, "everybody is very sad, but at the same time very happy." They had a surprise for the students later in the afternoon— they'd be teaching them some songs as a parting gesture. "It was going to be a chill day in terms of teaching," she said, "but also emotionally hard."

When asked more about the students specifically, Anastassiya laughed and told us, "a lot of the kids already follow me on Instagram." Many would message her each morning before she arrived asking, "teacher, teacher, are you going to come today?"

Remarking on the duration of the program, she confirmed that, "even though it's only five days, we already have this connection." In fact, as Lucas and I continued with the interview, many kids had gathered to watch nearby.

Throughout our interviewing process, Lucas and I had also grown accustomed to asking PolyU students what "service" means to them. We liked gathering and comparing their various perspectives. Anastassiya gave an especially insightful answer.

She began by pushing back on the term service, saying that she did not want people to think she was serving the local children because she was more intelligent. She remarked on the ways that the knowledge that had been offered throughout the week was reciprocal and co-created. “Service is like sharing,” she said, “it is sharing your emotions and your experiences.” Speaking to the spirit of the children, she noted their eagerness to learn, “despite any circumstances, they’re very positive,” adding, “I think I’ve learned much more from them than they’ve learned from me.”

Towards the end of the interview, we asked Anastassiya how she had picked ELC for her service-learning project—did she have any prior tutoring experience? “I took this subject in the first place, she began, because I’ve always thought that education was one of the main ways to help a country.” She was smiling, “I know that it’s bad to have a favorite student,” she said, “but I do. He’s the smallest boy in the whole class,” she told us. “He is also the most active in the class and he just told me that he’s learning Chinese all by himself, just by watching videos on YouTube.” She continued, “kids like him, the whole class, all of the kids that we see here, they just show me in real life that kids are actually the future of any community and any country.” She said that this program has inspired her to keep teaching when she gets back to Hong Kong, “especially with children of immigrants,” she concluded. After her interview, we snapped a quick photo and she was off to play more with her students during the final hours of the school day.


Choi
Carol Zhang
Judy Chang
I Love you all
사랑해요

Interview with Anna Ho

Teacher of ELC2S02 & ELC2S03

At 10:30am, Lucas reminded me that we had to get set up for one of our final interviews. We'd planned to speak with Anna Ho, one of the directors of this year's ELC program. We'd met Anna a few days prior, when she introduced us to the filmmaking students from her ELC 2SO3 course. Excited to meet fellow filmmakers, we interviewed their group about the projects they were working on with local NGOs. And we especially enjoyed our conversations with Anna— from our first days meeting her it was clear that she was very passionate about PolyU's service-learning curriculum.

Breaking off from the others, Lucas and I gathered cameras, tripods and microphones and looked for a place outside to set up the interview. Though it was still morning, the day was already beginning to heat up; we opted for a spot in the shade. Anna met us shortly after in a brightly colored dress she had purchased at a shop nearby.

> **University learning trains your cognitive side, but service-learning trains your heart.**

She began by synthesizing this year's ELC projects and providing an overview of the history of ELC's service-learning courses. "ELC 2SO2: Serving the Community Through Teaching English: this course has been offered since 2012," she informed us. Over the years, ELC students have worked in Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan and Cambodia. "With 38 students, team Cambodia is the biggest." In addition to the ELC 2SO2 course, Anna also told us more about the digital storytelling course, ELC 2SO3, which she herself taught. "In the course of running 2SO2, I had many chances to meet many amazing people," Anna said, "they told me a lot of amazing stories and they told me about the challenges they encountered." She explained that from speaking with people during her early visits to Cambodia she always knew she wanted to do more, but was often limited by resources.

Despite these limits, Anna followed her ambition, explaining how "there are many capable people that can help these NGOs, people just need to hear their stories." ELC 2SO3 was devised with these goals in mind. "I asked my students to develop a digital story about the NGOs," adding, "with the objective of providing support from all over the world." On their trip to Cambodia, Anna's students gathered material and footage, producing short films to promote the work of local NGOs. They planned to give their final cuts to the NGOs, with the hope that these local groups could use the materials to reach wider audiences and gain global support for their service work.

Remarking on her experience as an educator, Anna said, "in the past semester it was an experience amazing working with these nine students." She told us how the day before she had accompanied her students, who presented their materials to the local partners. "Yesterday, when I was there with my students while they were presenting their draft videos to the service partner, it was a very emotional moment for me," adding, "it was like a moment of truth." She told us that she is looking forward to seeing the final products. Anna said that she hopes that the students have "gone through an amazing journey themselves."

We concluded by asking Anna what service means to her. She told us that, to properly answer the question, she needed to share some of her own story. "I think I have benefitted a lot from doing service-learning," she said. "I started doing this when I was in university myself, my students' age." She explained how she helped one of her professors facilitate service-learning projects in mainland China. She reflected on that early experience, "I did it for fun, but then I suddenly found out 'wow,' I had gained so much from that experience. Then," she said, "I became a university teacher and wanted to share that with my own students." Finally, she concluded, "university learning trains your cognitive side, but service-learning trains your heart." We couldn't agree more.


DAHOOD

VIETNAM

By Lauren Shin

At five in the morning, most people still slumber deep within the sheets of their beds. At five in the morning, I, however, sat in a wooden motorboat watching the orange sun rise over the Mekong River. Every shade between pink and purple draped over the sky, reflected across the glistening water. Mason, a student from An Giang University (AGU) serving with PolyU's Vietnam service projects, had kindly offered to take me to the Mekong Floating Market, one of the country's most beautiful sights.

My head was buzzing and my eyelids were heavy. These were signals from my body that it was definitely too early for me to be awake at such an hour. However, as our boat bobbed past other fishing boats and floating houses, I realized that the locals had started their days long before I even turned on the lights. Boats kissed one another, connecting person to person as they traded harvested pineapples and coconuts. A man stood at the front of his boat, practicing various morning stretches. A woman sped up next to our boat, offering hot bowls of pho that she had been selling on the water for the past thirty years.

Back on land, motorcycles sifted through large intersections, and food stands selling coconut pastries guarded every street corner. We were staying in Long Xuyen City, a small city in the An Giang Province that was just a five hour drive away from Vietnam's capital, Ho Chi Minh. An Giang is located in the Mekong Delta, tucked away within southwestern Vietnam. It is known not only as Vietnam's agricultural heart, but also as its Mecca due to the province's large Muslim population.

Throughout my life, I had only ever heard about Vietnam in the context of war and western subjugation. Vietnam had been colonized by French imperialists in the 19th century, and didn't declare their independence until 1945. Shortly after, Vietnam struggled to cultivate a clear political identity, its landscape torn apart by American intervention during the Vietnam war. I knew going in, however, that there was much more to this country than what I had read in my textbooks.

I was given the opportunity to understand some pieces of this complex country by following PolyU's Department of Applied Social Sciences and the School of Nursing during their service-learning projects. I was at first unsure how well we would all immerse ourselves within merely ten days. But soon enough, our mouths watered at 7 AM for boiling bowls of pho, despite the scorching hot weather that already made our bodies sweat. Pungent smells of sour fish sauce became our oxygen, despite how the scent made us immediately cringe. However, it was the people here—the teachers, the AGU students, the villagers—who made us feel especially at home in a foreign place.

Interview with Doctor Tien

Director of human resources in community development at AGU

From service-learning, they will learn the needs of the communities.

One individual who made us feel especially welcome to Vietnam was Doctor Tien. Doctor Tien was integral to connecting PolyU and AGU for the service-learning programs. He is the director of human resources in community development at AGU and is passionate about cultivating students to become global citizens. With prior experience majoring in Education Studies and working for AGU's International Office, Tien wants to help local community members use education to become more globally engaged. When he heard of PolyU's Service-Learning program, he couldn't wait to get involved. He reached out to the PolyU staff himself to recommend ways in which the program could better empower local communities. He also worked on distributing preliminary surveys to understand what kind of benefits his students receive from these projects. The goal of such surveys was to combine teaching and civic learning in order to better meet community needs.

He is most excited about the School of Nursing (SN) to provide future opportunities and help to disadvantaged communities. He already had exciting ideas for the future, including linking PolyU's School of Nursing with the medical college of An Giang Province. Dr. Tien mentioned that while the nursing projects have taken place in Tiger Island for the past few years, the commune has fortunately become richer and better. The SN team will now relocate to another community in need within the Can Dang Commune. Relocation has, however, posed some challenges.

"When we move from one community to another within the An Giang Province, we are leaping from two very different cultures and traditions. This is quite a sensitive issue in my local government in terms of security. We have a hard time persuading them on why we need to keep moving to new communities that need more help."

His ultimate dream is to implement civic learning programs all over the world, maybe in some areas that are more in need.

"Not only could we help the local people here, but we can help the medical landscape here by enhancing our knowledge in medicine and transferring knowledge to the local people. I feel very appreciative that even one of the PolyU staff recommended me to collect some financial support to build a clinic for a poor community here. Perhaps some PolyU students could come teach there, and the locals can learn new methods and practices from Hong Kong people."

Empathy was extremely important to Doctor Tien. He said that his biggest hope for the students is that they become trained to have an open heart, and to use that heart to help those less advantaged.

"From university they will learn academic knowledge. But from service-learning, they will learn the needs of the communities. I hope they have a good heart, a heart big enough where they don't want to leave to a big city, but instead to stay here and help others around them within their community."


LỚP HỌC THÂN THIỆN
SẢN PHẨM

08

Department of Applied Social Sciences

in Vietnam

08 Department of Applied Social Sciences

APSS2S09 Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs

The Department of Applied Social Sciences (APSS) service-learning program involved PolyU students collaborating with local students who studied at An Giang University. 42 PolyU and 24 AGU students were divided into small teams according to their skills and interests. Each team was responsible for designing their own lesson plans, helping local Vietnamese children understand their emotions, strengthen self-esteem, overcome adversity, and develop healthier identities. The PolyU students were mainly responsible for developing course content, while the AGU students were integral to translating these lessons to the children. Classes were taught at two locations, the first taking place at a local primary school in Tiger Island, the other taking place on AGU's campus, attracting students from various primary and secondary schools in the area.

The PolyU and AGU students began their service at Tiger Island, a small island only accessible through short ferry ride across the Mekong River. Located in the My Hoa Hung Commune, the island was formed by the raised silt of the Hau River.

The first day of classes took off in celebration of Vietnamese Children's Day. The courtyard was crowded with boys and girls wearing white shirts and red ties. Their teachers attempted to organize them in single file lines, however, their curiosity pulled them out of these lines to get a glimpse of us strangers. We were warmly welcomed by various dance performers that the AGU and Tiger Island students had been practicing for weeks. Soon after, the bell rang, and children quickly dispersed into their designated classrooms.

Interview with Sholpan Tilesh

PolyU student from Kazakhstan

> **All the language barriers will fade out.**

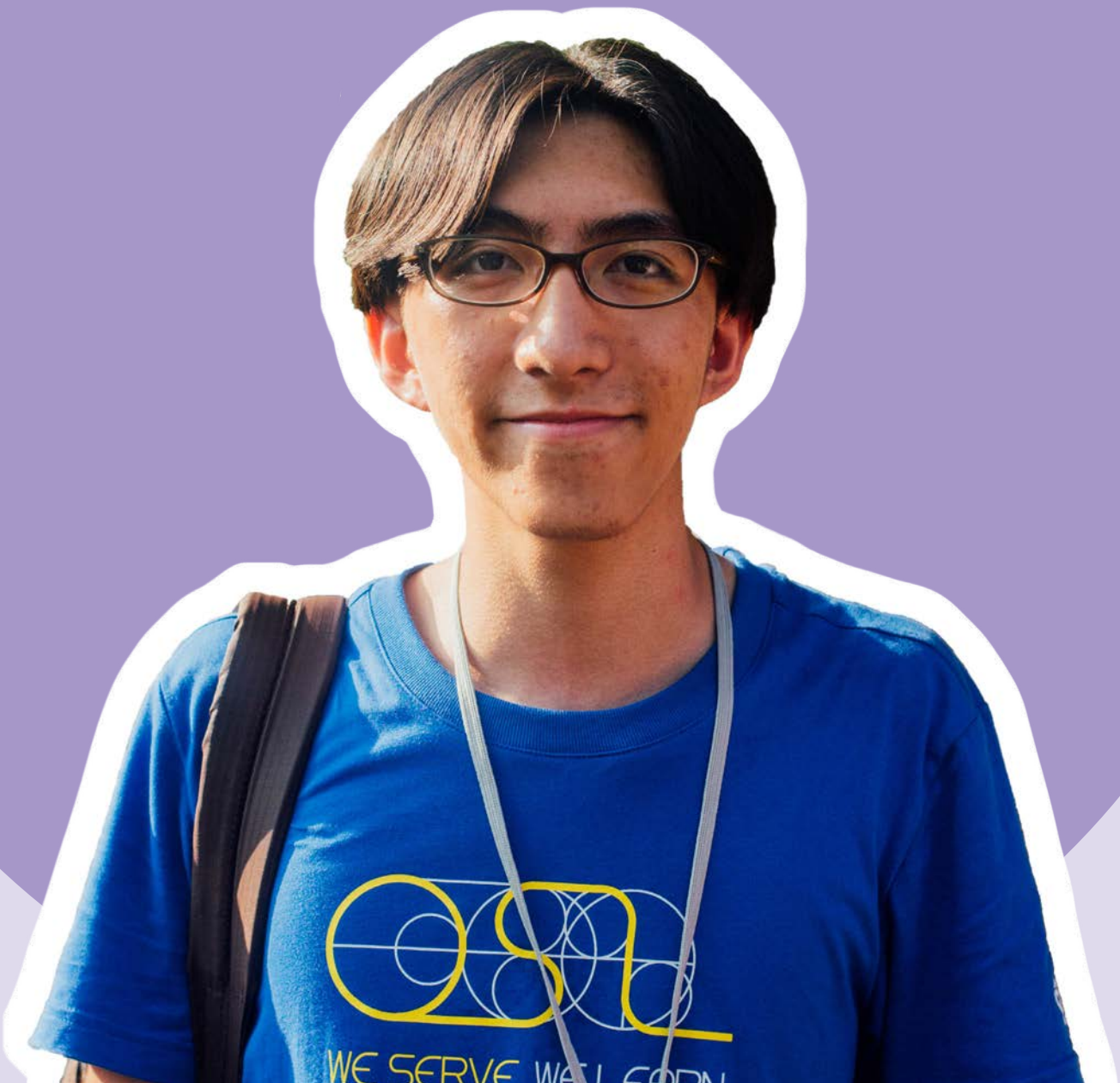
I wish we had spent more time than just the two days we had at Tiger Island, for the vibrant energy of these students was indeed contagious. While they were very young and spoke little English, it was clear how bright and ambitious many of these students were. The AGU students were integral to translating the lessons that the PolyU students had planned. Regardless of this language barrier, all were able to powerfully connect with one another and have fun through all kinds of activities. Sholpan Tilesh, a PolyU student from Kazakhstan, spoke to this experience. She said that her biggest worry going into the program was how she could engage with others from a foreign place. As an international student living in Hong Kong, language and cultural barriers are no new challenge for her. However, this service-learning trip has shifted her mindset.

"I had a really interesting day with the kids. Understanding that wherever we live, where we are from, we can all be the same. We have the same needs. I realized that... the language barrier is nothing. If you can show your love, you can show your needs, it's fine. All the language barriers will fade out."

While each classroom appeared different, I saw and experienced the same emotion: pure joy. Seeing so many students get so excited about learning, was one powerful sight to see. They would jump out of seats, yelling over their squeaking chairs the answers before their peers. They would hold hands with one another as they sang "Hakuna Matata" together. They would cheer their classmates on as they wrote the correct words on green chalkboards. Small hands would shoot up to the sky as if to reach the clouds.

Interview with Cyprian Wong

PolyU student



We want to show them that there is always someone beside you that is loving you.

Cyprian Wong is a third-year PolyU student who said that his visit to Tiger Island was unforgettable. Outside his studies in Information Security, he spends his time volunteering as a primary school teacher in Hong Kong. He was able to compare his experiences at home to his service with APSS.

"The kids in Hong Kong versus in Vietnam are very different. In Vietnam, the children here are more open-minded and friendly to one another. I love kids. But if I am teaching kids in Hong Kong, they will have this idea that I am just their teacher, so they will keep a distance. But here, we are teaching them to build trust and to build relationships. We try small actions like giving them hugs and holding hands. We are global citizens. We want to show them that there is always someone beside you that is loving you."

We left Tiger Island feeling positive about our starting experiences in Vietnam. Students felt ready to start off the next week of lesson plans, which would take place on An Giang University's campus. These classes were different in that they did not take place in one local primary or secondary school. Instead, 112 participating students from various ages, towns, nad backgrounds, would all come together at AGU. Classes tackled subjects like Overcoming Adversity and Interesting Science, and would span the next five days.

After the first day of classes, I could feel the PolyU students were mentally drained and physically exhausted. One PolyU student said he had barely eaten all day because he was constantly up on his feet. He promptly ordered three bowls of pho for himself at the restaurant we were eating dinner at. While he slurped these noodles, he explained how the lessons were quite difficult. One reason was that they were not prepared for their cohort of students to have such varying levels of English proficiency and education. Some came from the best private school in the province, while others had travelled long ways from their rural villages. This made progressing the lesson plans difficult because they had to pay close attention to ensure that no child was left behind. Another challenge, however, was that the students were simply too shy. Unlike the warm welcome we received back at Tiger Island, the students at AGU had a hard time opening themselves up the PolyU students. Few children raised their hands, keeping in their seats and speaking in hushed voices to their classmates.

However, these initial barriers only motivated the PolyU and AGU students to connect more with the kids. Throughout the next few days, the teams worked hard on cultivating safe and empowering learning environments for the kids.

The most unique aspect of the APSS program is that students are given full freedom to create their own lesson plans. How each team interpreted and expressed the goals of APSS came alive in each classroom. One classroom I walked into didn't even look like a classroom: all the wooden desks had been pushed up against the white brick walls, clearing a wide open space for children to run around in a game of tag. Tornados of students spun around the room, chasing after older AGU and PolyU students. Within this whirlwind, I couldn't tell who were the children and who were not. Next door, the desks were also pushed away and the chairs had been arranged into a circle. Children surrounded PolyU students, unable to control their laughter as they acted out various scenes within a game of charades. Across the hall, an entire classroom seemed webbed with white yarn, separating the children into teams as they tried to bounce a small balloon from the back of the room to the chalkboard. Across the courtyard, one classroom was left empty. I realized that the class had moved outside into the courtyard, as children test-raced the model cars they had built out of plastic water bottles, popsicle sticks, and duct tape. Students screamed over one car moving just one inch farther than another, so loud as to be heard from the parking lot.

By the fifth and last day of classes, the children and PolyU students seemed like friends who had known each other forever. The children had truly blossomed out of their shells. No longer the shy students who sat in the corners of the classroom, they now fought for the front row seats, frantically waved their hands for the answer, and sat alongside their fellow teachers.

Interview with Nguyen Gia Hao

AGU student

“The joy of meeting new people, it’s as simple as that.”

I had befriended Nguyen Gia Hao by the end of the program, and we spoke about the impact that these programs have on the participating children. His jovial personality made him very popular among the children since the beginning. When children were shy around us foreigners, he would help them break a smile. Nonetheless, he accentuated his deep appreciation for the PolyU students to come and serve as role models for the kids in Vietnam.

"This kind of collaboration is especially inspiring for the kids. You can imagine in a country where it's not very international. Where kids inside have never seen any signs of the outside world. Yet, people from the outside are coming in. New faces, new clothing, new cultures, all peak their interest in international affairs. They will want to know more. When they get to know foreigners and feel comfortable with them, they will then want to seek out more foreign experiences and international affairs. This impacts the kids. The joy of meeting new people, it's as simple as that."

Hao was right: the experience of being taught by international students in these unique learning environments was one that these children could not forget. We interviewed two girls who participated in the classes: Thanh was an eighth grader and Nga was a sixth grader. These were only two of the many students who formed close friendships with the APSS students. Both girls emphasized how moved they felt on the last day of classes.

Interview with Thanh

Local Vietnamese student

> **“I feel like I can improve myself more.”**

“On the first day, I was really lazy to go to class. But today’s the last day, and I couldn’t be happier.” Thanh said. “They teach me a lot of things about life, and I feel like I can improve myself more.”

Interview with Nung

Local Vietnamese student

> **They give me a meaning in our life.**

"I have learned so many things," Nung said. "They give me a meaning in our life. They teach me how to be brave...if you want something, you should try your best to reach that."

When speaking to these students, I remembered my earlier conversation with Hao about his hopes that the children would be inspired to one day explore the world. I hope that from their time with APSS, that these students would develop the desire to become global citizens themselves.

The most emotional experiences came from the end of the program itself. After taking the final group photos of the AGU students, PolyU students, and children, smaller circles of people dispersed throughout the courtyard. I zigzagged my way through the crowd, laughing as I snapped goofy photos of newly formed friends among the children and teachers. However, I took my eyes off my camera's viewfinder, to see with my own eyes, a young girl burying her tearful face into the arms of a PolyU student. Her small back shook from her gentle sniffles, and the green collars of her uniform had been dampened from stuffy nose. Other AGU and PolyU students came to hold her, gently rubbing their hands on her small back. I turned around, and realized that more of the children had begun to cry like this girl. They all held their teachers, refusing to let go of one another.

It wasn't until the bus drivers started impatiently honking, and when older staff tried to pry children off the arms of the APSS students, that the final goodbyes were made. We embraced every student before they filed onto the buses. Even through the darkly tinted windows, we could see the tears streaming down their cheeks. We waved our hands, forcing smiles on our faces in hopes to swallow imminent tears. This moment revealed the important footprint that the PolyU and AGU students together left on the local schools of the An Giang Province. It was very difficult to say goodbye, considering the reality that none of us would probably ever cross paths again. As the buses trickled out of the parking lot, many of the PolyU students began to finally let themselves go and tear up. They had grown more attached to the children than they had expected. It was amazing to see such tight friendships form in only a matter of days, especially when the merging of two different cultures seemed unlikely in the first place.

I remember sitting through these classes, asking myself what the children could possibly learn from these classes. However, I realized that these classes represented much more than how to make a robotic hand out of cardboard, memorizing the water cycle, or winning a game of charades. Indeed, they symbolized larger opportunities for children to engage with global citizens, leaders, and role models. While I was personally suspicious of how much the children could learn in a matter of a week, I was touched by how fast such relationships could so quickly deepen.

Interview with Richard Tan

Second-year PolyU student studying Computer Science

“I don’t think I will ever forget the people that I worked with on this very trip.”

After the last kids had left, we all sat down to fully absorb the emotional experience that had just occurred. Tan Yung Chien, who also goes by Richard, is a second-year PolyU student studying Computer Science. He said that he now truly understood and internalized the meaning of service-learning.

"Often people get confused with service-learning and simple volunteer service, and before coming here, I was one of those people. Only after I have served in Vietnam teaching the lovely kids here and working with our partner university, An Giang University, did the true definition of service-learning really hit me hard. For me, this service-learning trip has been volunteer service. Of course, it's an opportunity for us to deliver academics, service, and knowledge to the kids here. But at the same time, it has been a great opportunity for many of us, including myself, to expand our capabilities to make changes to this world as global citizens."

The power of relationships was something that Richard truly internalized. He said that the most meaningful aspect about service-learning was the relationships he formed with his peers and the children.

"The most memorable part for me has been the kids and the friends that I have worked with here. Before I came on this trip, I didn't know any of them. We have different majors. We have different hobbies. We come from different countries and have different ethnicities. We all come from different backgrounds. We're just different. I didn't know any of them at all. But by the end of the trip, I realized that I have bonded with the children, my classmates, my group mates. This is very memorable for me, and I have been telling this to many people...but, human-to-human relationships look so simple yet they are so sophisticated and complex. For me, realizing that I have created such a bond and relationships with people that I barely knew before this trip. And I don't think I will ever forget the people that I worked with on this very trip."

Richard concluded that he is inspired, now more than ever, to continue as a global citizen in his future endeavors. I left Vietnam with the APSS team feeling extremely humbled by the new friendships I myself formed. It reminded me about the power to create new bonds, no matter the cultural or language barriers that exist.

09

School of Nursing

in Vietnam

09

School of Nursing

SN2S03 Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities

The School of Nursing travelled to Vietnam with Ellen Ku, who teaches the service-learning subject "Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities." What was most unique about this cohort of Nursing students, however, was its diversity. The PolyU students were joined not only by AGU students, but also by Cambodian students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). The union of three cultures would become an exciting development. Twenty PolyU students, ten RUPP students, and thirteen AGU students came together to provide service in the Can Dang Commune. They are expected to meet five core values of healthy living: nutrition, physical activity, smoking, alcohol consumption, and hygiene.

To watch the service highlights of nursing team in Vietnam, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

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After 30-minutes driving straight on one road out of Long Xuyen City, I had arrived to the SN's team working site. Can Dang is one of An Giang's more rural and impoverished areas. We entered the village through a dirt path off the main road. I squeezed myself between various houses made of tin walls. Some houses were as small as the bedrooms we had in Hong Kong. Some houses stood on narrow stilts above a muddy stream, in which I saw an old man wash himself, his skin glistening under the scorching sun.

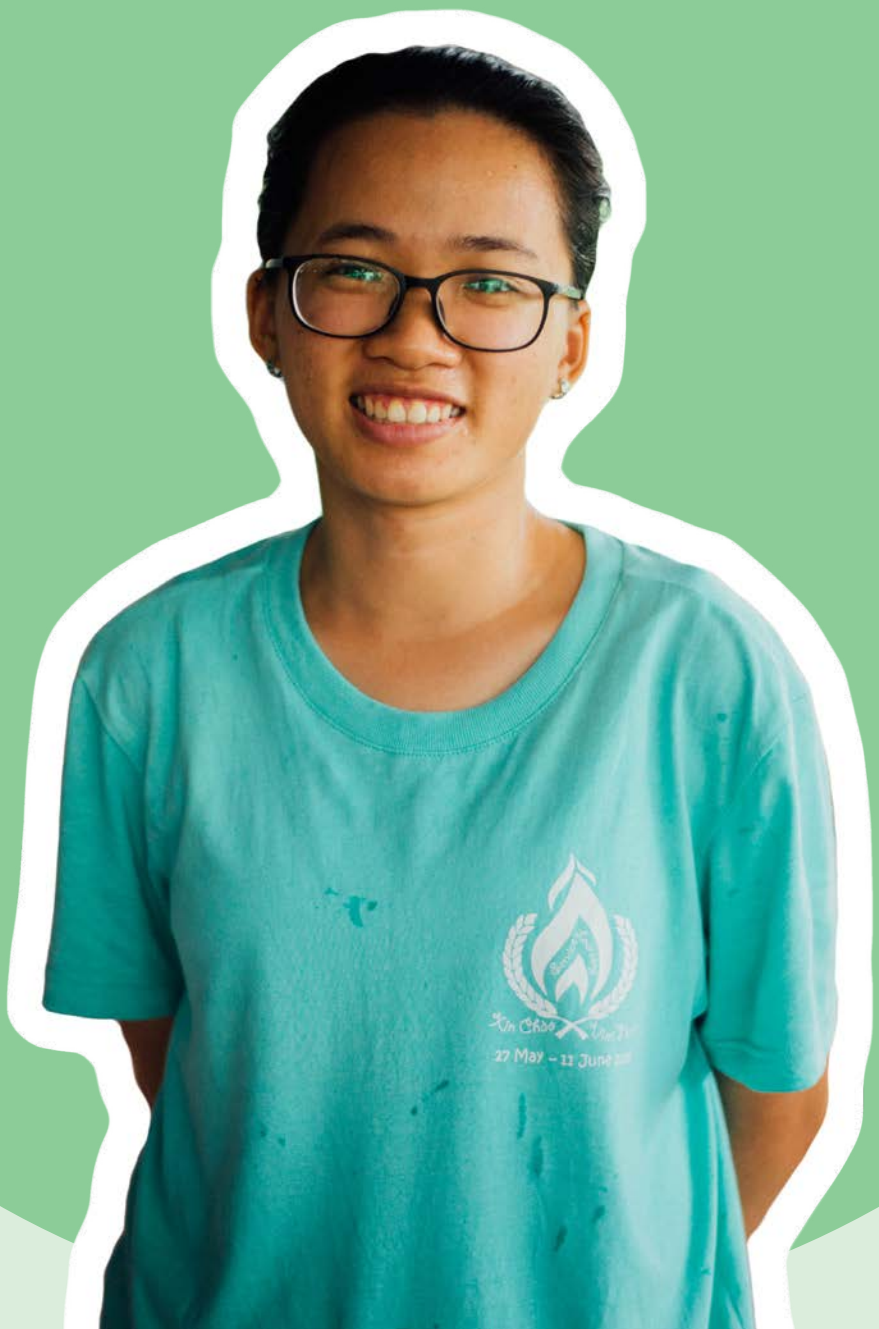
The very first day I met and followed the SN teams, the students were eager to tell me about their experiences. They first complained about their hotel. They listed an encyclopedia-worth of insects that would fall out of their pillow cases, felt sick from eating all of their meals at one restaurant, and counted the number of days they had run out of hot water. However, they burst into laughter at the sight of my horrified expression. I soon realized that, despite such foreign circumstances, they had all bonded over—and come to appreciate—what they had and what they would accomplish by the end of the two weeks.

Students were split into teams of four to five students, composed of at least two Hong Kong students, one Cambodian student, and one Vietnamese student. As expected, it was clear that the AGU students were integral to translating the health survey and promotion plans to the villagers. Without their patience, dedication, and precision, it would have been impossible for PolyU's School of Nursing deliver their services at all. Teams walked door-to-door to village houses, with each team expected to serve ten clients each. Villagers warmly welcomed us into their homes. We started our interviews, the buzzing fans serving as background noise. We found that the clients had varying health conditions. This pushed the students to really focus on personalizing the promotion plans to each client, as it was difficult to make overarching conclusions about the village's public health environment.

Vietnam - School of Nursing

Interview with Ngo Loi Loi

AGU Student Leader



“I am more open-minded about the situations and the livelihood of those in these communities.”

The unique opportunity to connect with new people is exactly what motivates student leader Ngo Loi Loi, a fourth-year student at AGU. This is the fourth year that Loi Loi has been volunteering with SN’s service-learning program.

“One thing led to another, and here I am, my fourth year into the program. Staying true to my original goals, it is to get to know the people more. I am a Vietnamese person, but I didn’t get a chance to get around and get to know about the lifestyles and health situation of villagers in neighboring communities.”

Like many of the AGU students, Loi Loi is quite used to the living conditions of the big city. However, this experience has helped her widen her perspective on other lifestyles not far from her own home. She noted that the opportunity to work with Hong Kong students has also informed her experience.

“One thing, for sure, is that I am more open-minded about the situations and the livelihood of those in these communities. My skills have also widened. Working with international students is a privilege, also a very good experience. My leadership skills have improved, because I have grown to care about others. Making myself vulnerable to these situations opens my mind.”

The SN teams made two rounds of visits to the village. The first round of visits involved the students conducting detailed health survey interviews and taking vital signs. The second round involved the students returning to these same houses with their respective health promotion plans. The students spent almost every evening analyzing their completed surveys: they identified ways in which clients could improve their diets, incorporate exercise into their daily routines, and persuade smokers to quit.

In between these visits, the students also participated in a cooking competition. This unique experience not only informed the development of their own promotion plans, but also encouraged collaboration and blurring of different cultures: the students were challenged to create nutritious dishes that would pay homage to their respective cultures, using the ingredients only available at the wet market and with a tight budget in hand. This activity was Ellen's favorite part of the curriculum, for it bears large significance to student learning.

Interview with Ellen Ku

Teacher in School of Nursing

“It helps them learn to work as a team while bringing together different cultures.”

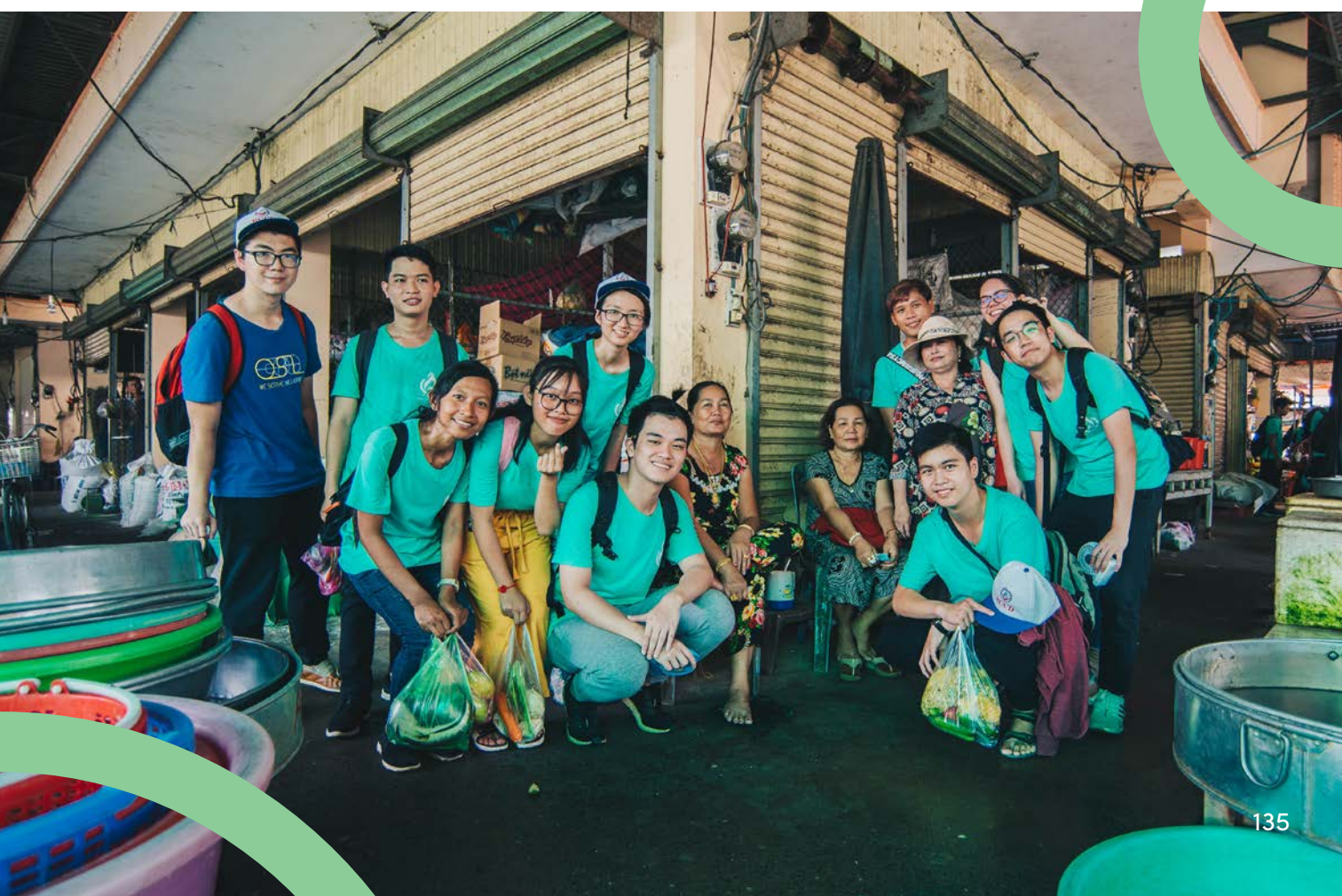
“In order to help the students understand local eating habits, they will go to the wet market and see the local environment and eating standards. This is to see what’s available in the market to see what’s possible for the villagers. They will also learn some more empathy, engaging with the vendors at the local market. When they go visit the local families, they can share these experiences with them, these villagers will be more engaged.”

Because many of the students have never cooked before, the cooking competition simulated the students under the same conditions that shape the villagers’ food choices. They could thus turn to first-hand experiences to determine what nutritional recommendations were most realistic for their clients. Ellen was most excited for the cultural diversity that would be brought to the table, as students from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Hong Kong would all be in the kitchen together.

“In this activity, we will not only engage students to understand the foods available, but also help them learn to work as a team while bringing together different cultures.”

We arrived at the wet market, holding grocery bags and tight wads of Vietnam dong. We wandered between vendor to vendor, comparing prices of chicken, fish, and various produce. Our knees got sprinkled from the water splashed by fish flipping and flopping in their water tanks. Our eyes avoided looking at the women chopping the heads off of live chickens. Our bright blue OSL t-shirts glowed throughout the market, attracting the eyes of local shoppers who greeted and smiled at us like we were long-time friends. Each vendor we shopped at held a rainbow of different vegetables. One woman sat on top of a mountain of onions, cabbage, and cucumbers. The woman across from her slashed at chunks of marbled red meat, her children lying in a cot next to her, watching her work. PolyU students would cross out ingredients off their lists as the AGU students seamlessly haggled for various groceries with the sellers.

When we were done with our shopping, we walked across a canal toward an empty Buddhist temple that housed a community kitchen and dining space. The kitchen was stocked with wood-burning stoves and giant woks. The students excitedly dispersed all of the ingredients in every corner of the kitchen, washed their hands, and got to work. I did my best to not stand in the way of the students running from one end of the kitchen to the other. Hong Kong students flipped cauliflower in throwing flames. Vietnamese students briskly chopped onions and garlic and sprinkled them across neighborhooding dishes. Cambodian students were in the corner, unfeathering whole chickens and turning their insides out.



My nose became overwhelmed by the competing scents that penetrated the steaming air. I smelled the fish sauce being poured across stir fry, freshly chopped bundles of cilantro, burnt wood like from a campfire. Some students crowded over one another, decorating the edges of plates with slices of carrots and cucumbers that were perfectly carved into flowers. At the other end of the kitchen, Ellen was sitting on the hard ground, helping students wash away the last grains of dirt from hairs of scallions. Students circled around plastic bowls, passing individual shrimps to each other as they got cleaned and skinned.

A few hours later, the dining tables were embellished with the most colorful and beautiful dishes. I was blown away by the collision of different cultures that imagined themselves into various ceramic dishes. While each dish looked completely different from one another, they all gave me the same feeling: the feeling of home.

While most tastes were foreign to my western tongue, I knew the taste of familiarity, of love, of friendship. Being thousands of miles away from home myself, it was incredibly moving for me to feel at home after the taste of every dish. There were fireworks in my mouth as I experienced the colliding tastes of sweet and sour chicken, the spicy yet refreshing mango salad, the pungency of pineapple and deep fried cat-fish, the sweet crisp of Vietnamese pancakes— these were only a few of the many dishes overwhelming the room. I could taste the new friendships being formed between the Hong Kong, Vietnamese, and Cambodian students.

After hours in the smoking kitchen, all the students and staff sat next to one another, passing various bowls and plates across the table, serving everyones' plates to make sure we all got a taste of everything. While I tried many incredible things in Vietnam, like fresh spring rolls and heartwarming pho, this was by far my most memorable and favorite meal from the trip.

While this experience indeed helped inform the students' health promotion plans, it was still not easy for the students to address all of the health needs of their clients. This came to light when a team of students returned to one client, a man so thin that his cheek bones and shoulder blades stuck out. When the students told him he was suffering from malnutrition and needed to eat more, he refused. He spoke quietly in Vietnamese to the AGU student. She fell silent until the PolyU students urged her to tell them what had happened.

She murmured, "He said he doesn't eat his meals because he would rather starve than let his children go hungry."

We fell quiet after that. This was only one example of what the SN teams struggled with during their health consultations. Indeed, some of the health conditions that burdened people were beyond the qualifications of us students. These conditions are often too severe to fall within the expertise of nursing students in training, or they are due to institutional problems of wealth inequality. These are complex issues that cannot be fully comprehended in a matter of two household visits. This led to some students feeling that the service they wanted to provide was beyond their reach.

I walked away from these visits with many thoughts, ones that I still have yet to completely navigate. Firstly, I felt that the definition of "developing communities," the very homes that we were serving, must be contested. These are words, coming from western, capitalist societies, that we impose on other spaces that have been largely excluded from our imaginations of economic and cultural prosperity.This perpetuates a dynamic that is inherently unequal to constructed "developed" nations, such as Hong Kong. In reality, many of the students learned this to not be the case. We were indeed exposed to very different lifestyles and living conditions, ones that we may not be comfortable with. However, we came to truly appreciate and respect how happy and self-sufficient the villagers were. If anything, some students expressed feeling that they learned more from the villagers during this experience rather than the other way around.

I also felt that for any service project that goes beyond one's borders, there needs to be stronger critical discourse about the ways these services are implemented. While themes of empathy are the core of service-learning, to provide meaningful change goes beyond just exposing oneself to others more "disadvantaged." To overcome these barriers, we must be asking more questions about how inequalities are embedded into larger political and economic systems. Why are poor families poor? Why is meat so expensive? It was important for the students to work within the financial and cultural limitations faced by these households, but discourse should continue into why these limitations exist in the first place.

These thoughts were ones that I shared with my peers. Positive light still remained for those who felt frustrated and wanted to do more. Many of the students expressed interest in continuing to think more critically about public health at a global scale, how these health issues exist beyond the scope of this service-learning project.

These thoughts do not undermine the hard work and thoughtful dedication that the PolyU students put into their service. Following the last few household visits, I was touched by how eagerly and intently the villagers listened to the promotion plans that the students worked so hard on perfecting. For clients who needed to follow a more nutritious diet, students used informative visuals to show what proportions of proteins and carbs needed to be on their plates, and spoke about their experiences doing the cooking challenge. For clients that were suffering from muscle stiffness, students helped clients perfect certain stretches and exercises. At the end of each visit, it was clear that the villagers very much appreciated the time the students had put into their recommendations.


BIA SAIGON
3

Interview with PolyU students

“This experience will motivate me in other ways.”

I remember speaking to one student who had returned from their final consultation. I asked him how well the villagers received the health promotion plans that he worked so diligently on perfecting the night prior.

He laughed, and said, “the villagers were honestly most excited about receiving our photograph.”

Each client was gifted a photo of him/herself with the students. These were taken in front of their homes after the first household visits. Every photograph consisted of PolyU, Vietnamese, and Cambodian students standing next to a villager and their family. These photographs were much more than just ink stained to a glossy piece of paper. These images represented a memory, a cultural exchange that none of us would ever forget.

Small actions such as this do have the power to go along way. Andrea, a Venezuelan student at PolyU, explained that even though their contribution may be quite small, the exchanges they have with the villages help our understanding of the world for the better.

“I hope that, for me personally, that this experience will motivate me in other ways. It has been a growing experience in which we have learned a lot from the people and the activities from this country. We can see how severe the conditions are for a lot of people, like they don’t have clean water or live in dirty spaces. Or, the food that they consume may not be clean or adequate. We are learning and hoping that what we teach them might improve them a little bit.”

INDONESIA

By Lauren Shin

"Do you see those mountains over there? The ones that look like they are almost fading away?"

Luthfi, an Indonesian student from PolyU, motioned for me to sit with him on the stone ledge. We were in Borobudur, and the sun was about to set. The world's largest Buddhist temple took the form of a nine-layer step pyramid. The monument was once a site for pilgrimage, guiding past Buddhist followers through intricate stairways and corridors that pieced together the stories carved on by the more thousands of relief panels and balustrades. Our tour guide had tirelessly motivated us to straggle the hundred and fifty steps to the top, saying we'd soon reach "nirvana." Just before the blue skies became lavender, and just before the sun started hiding behind the layers and layers of stupas, I finally felt the weight of the hundred and fifty steps, letting my legs collapse under me.

I plopped down next to Luthfi, joining a row of Hong Kong and Indonesian students, our feet dangling over the ledge as we all took in the sight before us. I had just met a cohort of students the day prior, comprised of students from Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Nursing and Yogyrakarta's Duta Wacana Christian University (UKDW). They would be working together for the next two weeks, completing their service-learning in Yogyrakarta, Indonesia.

Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities is a service-learning subject in which students must assess the health of individuals living in rural, often disadvantaged, communities. Through a comprehensive combination of interviews, observations, and assessment, students would be then responsible for designing personalized health promotion plans based on each individual's health needs.

I squinted at the mountainous terrain. While it seemed so far as to behind the setting sun, I could also easily count the layers of shades between blue and green.

Lutfi continued, “That’s where we’ll be tomorrow. Deep in those mountains. Hidden and so far away from everything else.”

He was referring to the place we would not only be serving in, but also living in. This place was a village, or desa, called Kebonharjo. It resides in the sub-district of Kulon Progo, tucked away deep inside the Javanese mountains just west of Yogyakarta. His words lingered in my mind. I couldn’t visualize myself within a landscape that had, so far, served only as a distant background.

But soon enough, I realized how right Lutfi was. One hour-long rocky ride later, Yogyrakarta’s bustling streets that were once crammed with motorcycles weaving through taxis and vans soon morphed into barren dirt paths. I said the village’s name slowly over and over again to myself, accentuating each syllable each time our bus shook climbing over rocks and rubble. We found ourselves quickly disappearing into the mountains we had joked about being so far away the day before.

10

School of Nursing

in Indonesia

10

School of Nursing

SN2S03 Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities

As we got closer and closer to our homestay, I looked over at the other students sitting near me. They were standing above their seats, eagerly looking for glimpses into the world we would be living in for the next two weeks. We zoomed past women hiking up the hills our bus struggled to overcome, heaving branches over their shoulders and balancing baskets of cassava on their heads. We zoomed past men wiping sweat from their cheeks as they layered white bricks, the new skeletons for new houses. We zoomed past numerous stray dogs as they barked at us newcomers and curiously wagged their tails. On this bus ride, I remembered my discussion with Maria a couple days prior.

Interview with Dr. The Maria Meiwati Widagdo

Director of Institute of Research and Community Service at Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW)

“I hope that they have an attitude that is different.”

Dr. The Maria Meiwati Widagdo works for UKDW’s Institute of Research and Community Service. She was the one who made this year’s service-learning in Indonesia possible, becoming the bridge connecting PolyU and UKDW. She shared with me her excitement for this project, one that was reborn after several years of paused collaboration. The last collaboration between UKDW and PolyU occurred in 2014, but was put to a pause a year later. Additionally, it will be the very first time for PolyU’s School of Nursing to come to Indonesia. This year symbolized a revitalization.

“Last year, Stephen came and discussed the possibility of starting a service-learning project here again. At this time, he planned to send the engineering students here. We visited the villages and a couple of villagers with the hope of installing microscopes and solar panels for the students. I have to say, the students were already excited!”

However, Stephen had become overwhelmed with the engineering projects he was managing in Rwanda. He sadly didn’t have time to initiate another project, prompting him to refer Maria to Phyllis from the School of Nursing. This worked out for the better, for Maria came from a background of medicine herself. Harmonizing their shared interests in health sciences, they began imagining the design of a new service-learning program. Soon after, Phyllis travelled to Indonesia and met Maria for the first time, and they visited the villages they would be working in.

Like PolyU, UKDW makes service-learning compulsory for their students. Maria explained the significant role that service-learning plays in the learning arch of her students.

"We want to improve their willingness to serve. To help. There are many ways this can be done, but service-learning can be one of the means to enhance student skills. During service-learning, they will learn from the community. That means they must be humble with engaging with simple people. They will learn how to mingle, they will learn how to collaborate both with locals and with their friends. I keep telling the supervisors that we can still learn from the villagers. Although their education level may be lower or their social economic status may be lower, there is always something to learn. There is local wisdom that is significant"

To Maria, the collaboration with an international university-such as PolyU-is also integral for their students' development.

"Globalization is at a mass scale," she continued. "For me, it is very important for our students to be exposed to and engaged with international students. When students study at this university, we must equip them with hard skills. However, this is not always enough. They need to develop soft skills too."

Yet, she shared with me her uncertainty, wondering how successfully the students would immerse themselves into village lifestyle. Kebonharjo would indeed pose a foreign environment compared to what students are used to inside the urban jungles of Hong Kong or Yogyakarta.

"You will see for yourself in the village," Maria chuckled. "There's no public transport, so you'll be doing a lot of walking. We're also talking about very modest places. For the villagers, it is already a good place for them, but it still might not be good enough for the Hong Kong students...But I hope that they can still appreciate the different lives."

The differences were immediately visible as soon as I stepped off the bus. The rich aroma of fresh tobacco spices wafted out of neighboring houses. Black wasps the size of my thumb buzzed past my ear. I slowly wandered into our homestay, clasping the mosquito net that I lugged around for the whole trip in my hand. Our host mother welcomed us with glasses of sweet tea and stacks of deep fried tempeh. I peeked into the bathroom, which consisted only of a blue squat toilet, a basin of cold water and a designated bucket, and a frightening wasp nest! At this time I remembered Maria's last words to me.

"I hope-I really do hope- that the many students who chose to come here, who chose to overseas, these ones are the adventurous ones...They want to see the world! They want to see a world that is different from their own. I hope that they can enjoy something that is different. I hope that they have an attitude that is different."

I found Maria's concerns to be completely reasonable, but I found that they were also soon appeased by Phyllis and her unfaltering determination to ensure the students are absorbing their experience and exceeding their goals in service-learning.

Interview with Phyllis Pang

Teacher of nursing team in Indonesia

“I see the light for community empowerment for the future.”

Phyllis Pang is the teacher leading this year’s nursing team to Indonesia. Six years ago, Phyllis Pang travelled to Cambodia to find out what service-learning was all about. It was a very important trip for Phyllis, as it was the first time she saw people living in desperate environments. She said that she knew that they deserved better. This is what sparked Phyllis to design a service-learning subject: Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities is a popular course that has been offered since 2013.

“I visited different areas to find out what I can do—representing the nursing department—to help these people. I wanted to develop something that helps people become more self-sufficient, helping them pursue healthy lifestyles in a way that allows them to work within their social, economic, and cultural contexts.”

While there are many ways to define a “healthy lifestyle”, Phyllis internalizes the definition provided by the World Health Organization. According to WHO, a healthy lifestyle involves a way of living that lowers the risk of serious illness, helps one enjoy other aspects of life, and strengthens one’s family. She extracts four core principles from this definition: nutrition, physical activity, tobacco, and alcohol. While there are indeed several other aspects to a healthy lifestyle, Phyllis believes that these four are not only the most relevant to developing communities, but also provide the most effective avenues for students to directly help their clients. While she has been perfecting her curriculum in Cambodia for the past several years, this will be the year she pilots her curriculum in Indonesia.

We had all just finished dinner, licking clean the dishes of rice, fried tofu, boiled carrots. We were all exhausted after a long day of hiking and service. But Phyllis's persistent enthusiasm rejuvenated us- she still had so much energy at 10pm at night. What was meant to be merely a thirty-minute Q&A evolved into a two-hour conversation about her unfaltering dedication to this program. I asked her how she keeps herself motivated, given the challenging circumstances living and serving in developing communities of both Cambodia and Indonesia.

She spoke to her own beliefs about service-learning, how it has always been her duty to ensure that her students grow by learning.

"In service-learning, I see the balance between the service and learning so that it matches one another. I can provide a certain service to the community, while developing the students in a way that they learn. For me, it is service to learn, and learn to serve. There is no one way. It has to be both."

Phyllis had prepared her students over the course of two semesters, with one of those semesters having eleven weeks of class content. Because her subject is open to students from all different departments and studies, she brackets space to train them in basic skills on conducting health surveys, interviewing, and taking vital signs. She also encourages her students to improve their moral autonomy, as students need the creative skill and competence to promote their plans to residents in a clear and effective way.

Phyllis emphasized that her biggest hope out of these projects is for her students to have some sort of "transformation."She noted that for a majority of PolyU students, especially those who grew up in Hong Kong, it is not easy to get them to step out of their comfort zones.

Most of these students have never travelled outside of the country, and will often resort to their safe spaces. For example, she catches some of the students only speaking Cantonese with one another. This has been a serious problem that Phyllis has addressed with her students, for it exacerbates the language barriers that already make it difficult to engage with local students and the clients. But when students take a few steps out of these safety barriers, it can significantly shift their perspective and maturity for the better.

"You know students are growing when they go beyond the academic requirements. Yes, I ask them to complete ten surveys, so many students just do ten surveys. They are just handing in their homework. But if a student really wants to go out of their comfort zone, they need to advance themselves a little bit. When it comes to service, they will do it from the heart."

The biggest thing that students learn from this service is how to engage and empathize with people. Phyllis explained that many of the students that gravitate to this service are not just nursing students, but others who come from academic departments that barely ever deal with people. It offers a unique opportunity for students to develop themselves and become more people-oriented. There is thus a hope that youth can learn from their engagements with their peers as much as them could make an impact on them. .

After hours of sharing stories, laughs, and aspirations, Phyllis concluded, elaborating on her hope to develop a long-term relationship with UKDW's health science faculty.

"I see the light for community empowerment for the future."


BOROBUDUR

Every morning began with the same routine. I would always wake up to prayers to Azan, cackling roosters, rustling palm leaves, giggling goats, and barking dogs. I unzipped the cocoon of my mosquito net and shuffled over to the wooden sink to splash cold water into my face. Breakfast was a cold plate of instant Indomie noodles and boiled eggs.

I'd pick a different team to follow each day. Each team consisted of one Hong Kong student who would complete each client's health survey and two UKDW students who translated every single conversation we had with the villagers.

Beads of sweat would trickle down our cheeks as we scaled various hills, going door to door to see which families were home. Sitting within each house, they would welcome us with more glasses of sweet tea, give away all their snacks in their pantry, and insist on making ourselves comfortable as we all sat down, running through all of the detailed survey questions.

"How many servings of vegetables do you eat within a week?

"Do you smoke?"

"How much do you exercise in a given week?"

"Do you wash your hands before and after you eat?"

"On a scale from one to four, how happy are you?"

As they asked these questions and over and over again to each client, there was a completely different set of questions running through my own mind. How qualified were we-college students-to fully understand the health needs of a foreign community we had just arrived in? What if they cannot afford to follow the recommendations we provided? Would they even be willing to embrace our advice? Most especially, I was worried about how the nature of recommendations, being shaped by our urban and westernized biases, would locate themselves beyond the cultural, economic, and social conditions of Kebonharjo's community.

However, I began to further understand this new place, its past and its future, after meeting the village head. He welcomed me into his office, which was adjacent to the most luscious grass stairways of rice fields. I was deeply inspired by his passion and dedication to his community. He was elected village head by his people in 2015, and will serve until 2021.

Interview with Rohmad Ahmadi

Village head

“I wanted to work together with the universities to promote the village,”

Rohmad Ahmadi, the village head, was born in Kebonharjo but spent most of his lifetime living in Yogyakarta. He received a formal education until earning his Bachelor’s degree in Social Politics. Before his election, he had worked for an NGO that focused on women’s rights, disaster issues, and city planning.

“I came back here, to Kebonharjo, because I saw some challenges I would like to solve. This village was built by my ancestors. The predecessors gave certain milestones to guide us to follow their steps and progress the village.”

However, he found that the ability to reach those milestones became stifled by growing health problems. One of the challenges he encountered right after his election was the collective lack of nutrition among his constituents. Nutrition is one of the core components students must address in their health promotion plans, that alongside with smoking, alcohol, and exercise. The most serious consequence to this trend has been his village’s growth stunt.

“This is a major issue I am dealing with now. By 2030, eleven years from now, the generation will become less and less healthy even though if they are getting wealthier. The stunt will become of a more serious problem.”

In response, Rohmad enforced regulations to give babies within the village additional nutritional sources every month. I was blown away as he continued to list the other actions he has taken to build a healthier environment for his people: he has promoted better air quality, installed marble tiles over the previously dirt floors of houses, provided proper toilets, built better infrastructure for villagers to travel to and from their farming fields, and acquired cleaner water systems.

In light of these changes, Rohmad said that Kebonharjo was undergoing a unique transition. People have lived in Kebonharjo for as long as over a hundred years. Once shaped by its own isolation and its old traditions set by his ancestors, Kebonharjo is now slowly evolving under new forces of globalization. Despite the possible loss of these old traditions, he accentuated that things are changing for the better.

Rohad internalizes many of the values that define the discourse of service-learning, one of those being the idea of open-mindedness. He possessed a constant willingness to learn, and understood that there is always new knowledge to be shared with one another. This is exactly why he wanted PolyU and UKDW's service to take place in his community.

"I wanted to work together with the universities to promote the village, I was happy when I heard that the School of Nursing was coming."

When I asked him why he was happy, he continued, "The local people are very closed off. I want to make them more open-minded. That's why I am willing to bring in changes and knowledge from the outside."

However, this is not to say that these projects should undermine the village's identity. Ideally, Rohmad wants to bring in new changes that will benefit his village, but ensure that their lively spirits are not left behind in the process.

At the end of my conversation with the village head, he added another reason for his desire for the school of nursing to come to his home.

He remarked, laughing, "I actually have seen more foreign people appreciating the local culture instead of our own local people appreciating foreign culture. So that's why I prefer to have more foreigners to come here, to see what the local people can offer."

There indeed existed a unique opportunity for our service-learning project to complement the larger development projects that Rohmad has spearheaded. The opportunity to be one little contributing piece of this puzzle would be a privilege for us students.

The students observed many of the health problems that the Rohmad had identified himself. They found that many villagers suffered from symptoms of protein deficiency, a consequence to the expensive price tags and overall lack of supply of meat. Another common problem that villagers struggled with was muscle stiffness. While most clients said that they did not exercise every day, they seemed to get more than enough from their commute to the farming fields, lugging huge loads of wood and scaling coconut trees. Without the proper knowledge of how to recover one's body after such strenuous activity, this leaves people at serious risk for future injury. Lastly, a substantial number of households had at least one smoker in the family, this being the father. Smoking is perceived as a normal pastime and social activity among Indonesian men. The accessibility of herbs also makes acquiring cigarettes very cheap.

The biggest challenge in overcoming these health issues was ensuring that health promotion plans were financially realistic for each household. To better inform their final recommendations, students woke up at six in the morning one day to visit the local wet market.

We entered the market through a narrow alley, opening the door into a whole world of colors and smells. Various vendors were located side by side on top of black wooden planks. Women in patterned hijabs sat on these planks, surrounded by rainbows of produce. Balls of lettuce, stacks of cucumbers, mountains of carrots, piles of tomatoes all lay on the ground, their hues glistening under the rising morning light that penetrated the cracks of the wooden roofs.

My eyes fell to the corner of the market, where I noticed several children and their mothers all crowding around one little stand. I struggled to see what the commotion was about. Between the gaps of waving arms and hands, I saw one woman behind the counter, throwing a huge knife through piles of raw chicken meat. Next to this stand were stacks of plastic bags filled with yellow vegetable oil and MSG.

As I wandered through the market, I passed PolyU students scrambling down different numbers on their notepads and UKDW students haggling with vendors on various vegetables.

While all kinds of beautiful fruits and vegetables seemed readily available, we were shocked by the hefty price tags on meat, as well as the rather un-hefty price tags on MSG. This experience allowed the students to simulate themselves into their clients' average day at the market. They were able to understand what foods can realistically end up on their clients' plates at the end of the day.

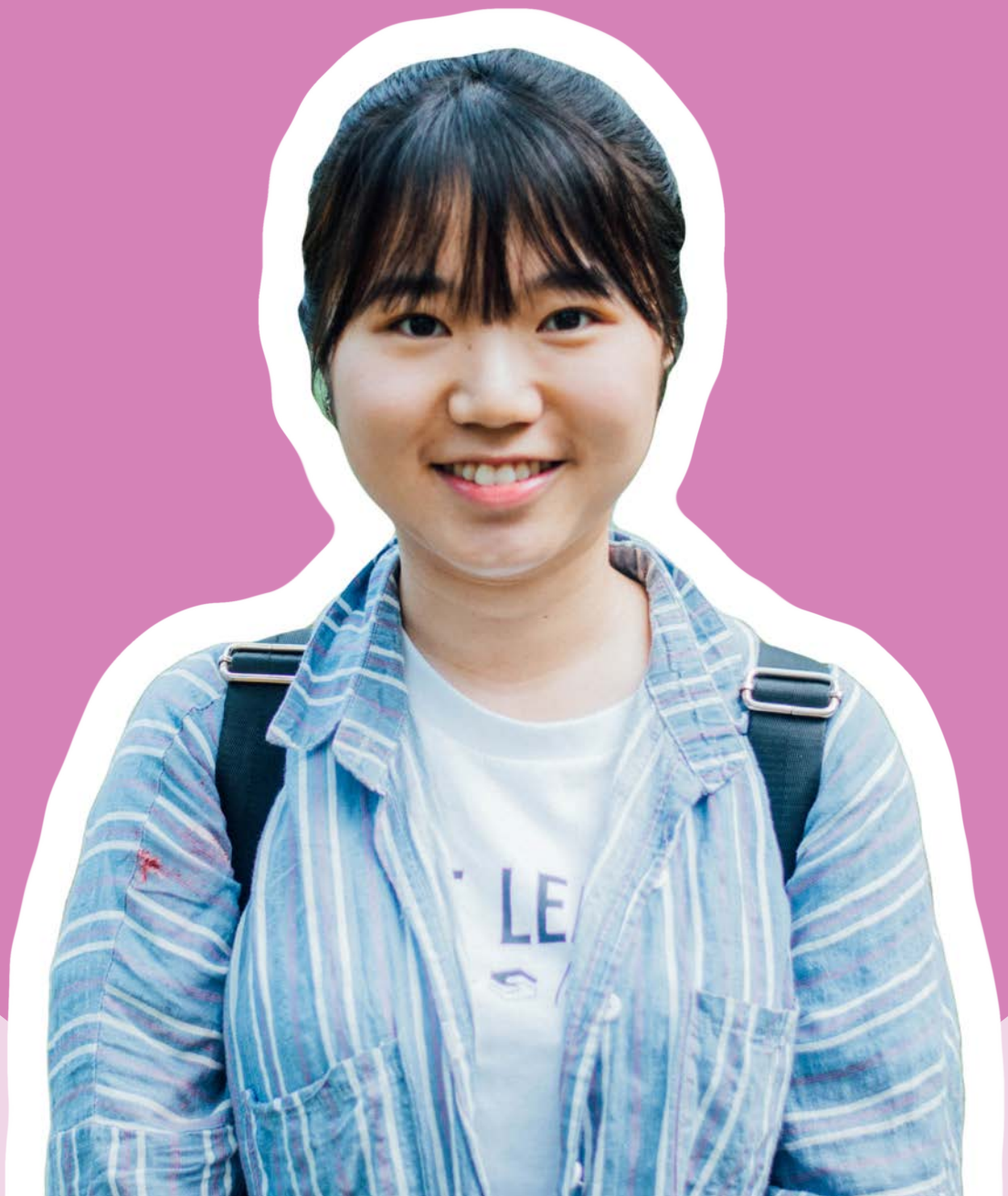
Taking home these experiences, students spent the next day analyzing the surveys they had so meticulously completed. Students looked for their solutions, reading between the lines of each written question. They stayed up long into the night, tweaking and re-tweaking their promotion plans. I sat with the students, watching them scratch arrows and cram words into the last corners of their papers. Outside the student homestays, stars began to freckle the blackening sky. For many PolyU students, it was the very first time they saw a constellated sky with their own eyes. Neon lights and towering skyscrapers barricade the night sky back in Hong Kong.

When students returned to their clients on the last two days of service, the villagers warmly welcomed them back into their homes. They greeted us like we were the grandchildren they spoke about, the ones who moved away to find work in the city, only to never return.The clients listened eagerly to the students as they walked carefully through their health promotion plans. Recommendations came alive once the students and villagers stood up from their chairs or stood up from the floor to practice various exercises and stretches. Students helped mothers and fathers perfect arm stretches and leg lunges, helping them angle their arms over their heads and bending their knees perpendicular to their shins. Children watched quietly from the corner. By the end of our visit, they had joined their parents, giggling as they imitated our moves. At the end of one session, a mother asked a Hong Kong student if he could record a video of himself performing each of the exercises, in hopes that she could share the video with her friends, family, and neighbors.

What was most profound, however, was what PolyU students took away from their service. What they learned from their connections with the Indonesian students of UKDW, from the families residing in Kebonharjo, was more powerful than any health questionnaire.

Interview with Katie Yeong

PolyU student



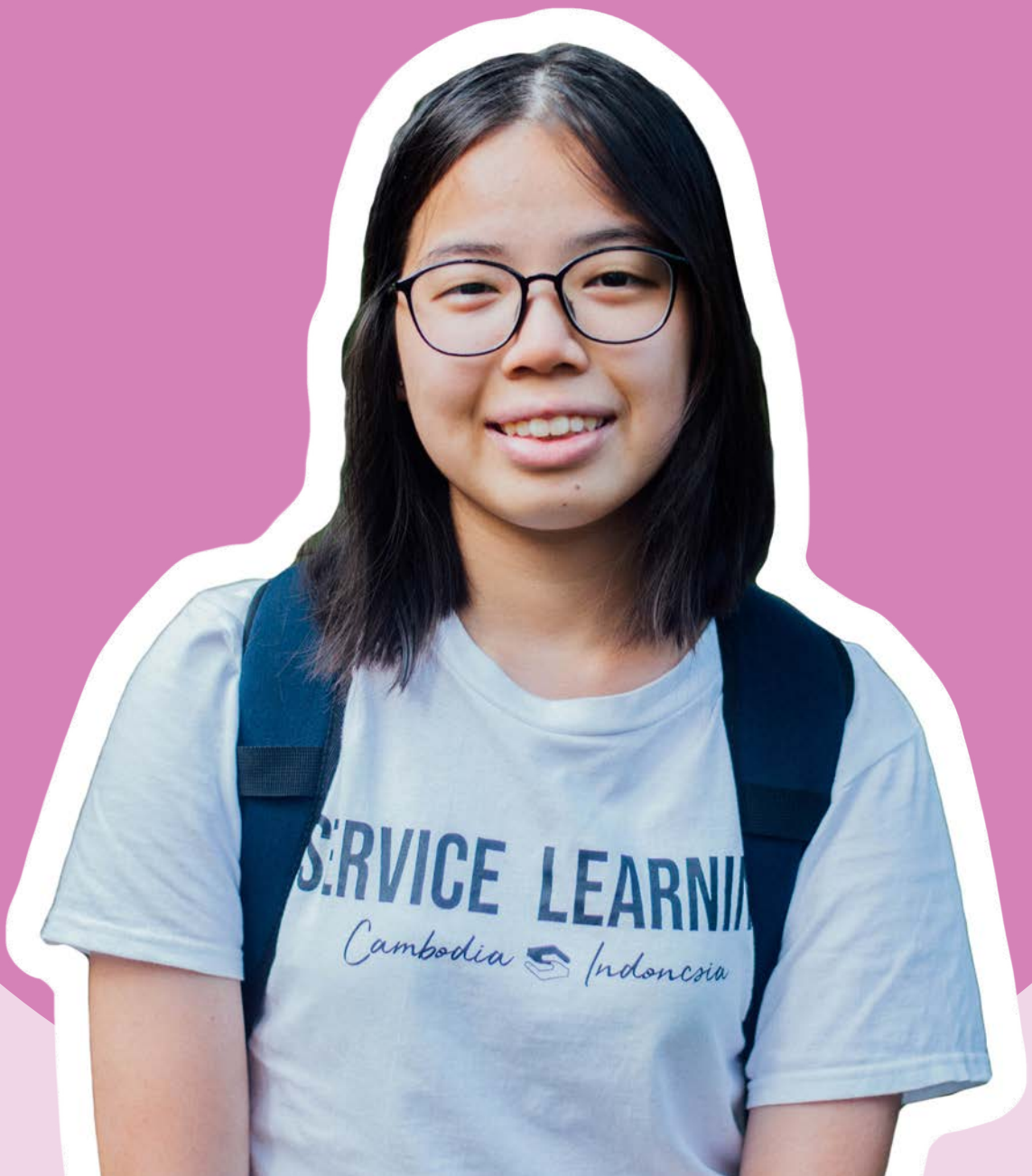
“Even if we may have ‘more,’ are we really happy?”

Yeong Ho Lam, who also goes by Katie, is a fourth-year PolyU student. She explained that though she comes from a different academic study, the nursing project was directly relevant to her personal aspirations. As a social design major, service-learning has brought her into a new society while allowing her to give back to that society. This experience has really changed Katie’s mindset about what it means to be happy.

“In Hong Kong, we are surrounded by materials entertainment, phones, and computers. But here, they don’t really have anything. When I step into a house, they barely have any furniture, only a chair and a desk. I ask them, ‘do you feel happy?’ Then they say, ‘why not? I am so happy everyday.’ I wonder, because it seems like they just do the same thing everyday, without many of the things we rely on in Hong Kong. But I think they are even happier. I start to imagine, can I live here? Can I survive here? This is an important question for me when I think about my life in Hong Kong. Even if we may have ‘more,’ are we really happy?

Interview with Wendy Tsang

PolyU student



At least we can teach them how to make better food choices given the opportunity.

Tsang Ka Wei, who goes by Wendy, shared similar thoughts, comparing the life that her and her peers have taken for granted back in Hong Kong. A first-year nursing student, Wendy has been able to apply studies and core nursing skills abroad. Most of her clients are suffering from risks of hypertension due to the overuse of MSG in their diets. She plans on advising her clients to use more natural seasonings over artificial ones. Her service in Indonesia, however, has pushed Wendy to think more critically about the public health issues that also exist in her own community.

"In Hong Kong, just because we are very wealthy and have many food choices, we may not always choose the healthiest options. We end up eating a lot of junk food just because we want to. But here, even if they want to eat more or eat healthy, they may not have the money to afford it. So I just wonder, when we have the choice, why we don't always adopt a healthier lifestyle? We may not be able to change their economic status, or help them buy more food, or affect them in the long term, but at least we can teach them how to make better food choices given the opportunity."

There was also much to be learned from the memories we shared with every individual who had welcomed us, embraced, and brought us into their homes.

We learned that it is okay to make mistakes. I sat with a group of nursing students and their client, a 40-year old father. We had sat forming a circle on the cold marble tiles of his home, the same ones the village head had described. His home smelled of fresh paint. I was shooting different angles of their interview, but I stopped when the students seemed panicked and confused. They whispered to one another, struggling to identify why the client's blood pressure was not appearing on the monitor. It was only when they realized that the arm cuff was wrapped completely inside-out around the man's arm, that we looked at one another, and burst into tears of laughter. The man too realized what had occurred, his glowing teeth appeared through a smile that reached the corners of his cheeks, his booming laugh echoed miles away.

We learned to open your heart to others. It was the first time for Li Ting Vanessa, a first-year nursing student from PolyU, to feel so embraced by strangers. Before the trip, she had packed and repacked her suitcase over and over again, bringing a part of Hong Kong with her to this unknown place. Mosquito nets, extra towels and toilet paper, Cantonese snacks, emergency bottles of soap. Her fears and uncertainties were flushed away, however, as soon as she met her knew partner, Ira Luik, a bubbly UKDW student.

Vanessa recalled, "When I arrived there, [Ira] greeted me like I was a best friend that she hadn't seen for a long time."

The first day Ira and Vanessa walked around the hamlet walking door to door, Ira wanted to hold Vanessa's hand.

"At first I couldn't get used to it. I'm not that passionate or warm."

But only within a few days, Vanessa found herself opening herself up, not only to Ira, but to others around her who had helped her feel at home.She said that by the end of the service, the feeling of holding Ira's hand actually felt quite good.

Beyond this one blossoming friendship, hands were also being joined all throughout these mountains. Experiences of learning were made possible by the ability to connect with one another, through human touch, the intertwining of one another's fingers. We grasped each villager's hands through the traditional Javanese greeting form. We held the arms of villagers to take their blood pressure. We listened for their pulse, gently placing two fingers on their wrists to count the beat pumping through their veins. The joining of these hands symbolized the connection of two cultures.

"This service-learning, it's not just about providing health knowledge. It's about connecting with the people you want to help. I noticed that people are always patient and open to people like us, who come from a different place and culture. They don't know you, but they smile to you and they welcome you. It's the most natural thing that makes you feel warm. It made me feel like I need to change my mindset. When I meet a stranger, I feel scared or shy to speak to them first. But now, I feel like if I try to be more of an active listener, I will have more of a chance to know more stories about these people, to learn more about their country. Even if they are not at first willing to talk to you, it's the main thing that I learned from here. That people can be kind and willing to share with you. It's not because they want to get something from you. It's because they enjoy the time and chance to be with you."

We learned to be sincerely thankful for what we have, and for what we are given. Living in the village was difficult, challenging students to embrace a lifestyle very different from the urban boundaries we seek comfort in. The people of Kebonharjo, and the beautiful mountains and trees and flowers we surrounded ourselves in, helped us become more grateful for the life that we have, and the lives that we have met. We learned that happiness can be found anywhere in the world, as long as you seek connections with others, with the people you love and those who surround you.

RWANDA

By Meredith Morran and Nico Page

A Long Landing

Two boarding passes, three flights. Given the former, the latter came as a surprise. First, we'd flown from Hong Kong to Doha, Qatar; then from Doha to Entebbe, Uganda; and, lastly, from Entebbe to Kigali, Rwanda— with this final flight clocking only 35 minutes of actual airtime. Finally, we arrived in Rwanda, a small country in Eastern Africa with a population of approximately 12.21 million.

We spent two weeks staying in the capital city of Kigali, known to tourists for its markets, milk bars, and a dish aptly-named "big fish." Now Kigali is known to us for all of those things as well as its role as one of the central hubs for the 2019 service-learning projects.

Our team was composed of the same four journalists from Cambodia: Yeok, Lucas, Nico, and Meredith. We spent our days following the PolyU instructors, staff, and students on their service work in the Kibobo village. Unlike Cambodia, all of the projects were conducted in this shared location and there was even cross-over and collaboration between teams, despite the disparate nature of their individual projects. Our writing is similarly intertwined and connected.

Outside of our time onsite, our mornings were spent riding buses, our evenings spent eating potatoes and reflecting on what we had learned. Furthermore, there were a few days built into the trip for necessary cultural and historical education for students and journalists alike. Upon arrival back in Hong Kong, we found that many feelings and reflections related to such "in-between" experiences lingered. These enduring thoughts have offered one point-of-entry for our writing about Rwanda, about service, about the trip as a whole. It is with them that we will begin.

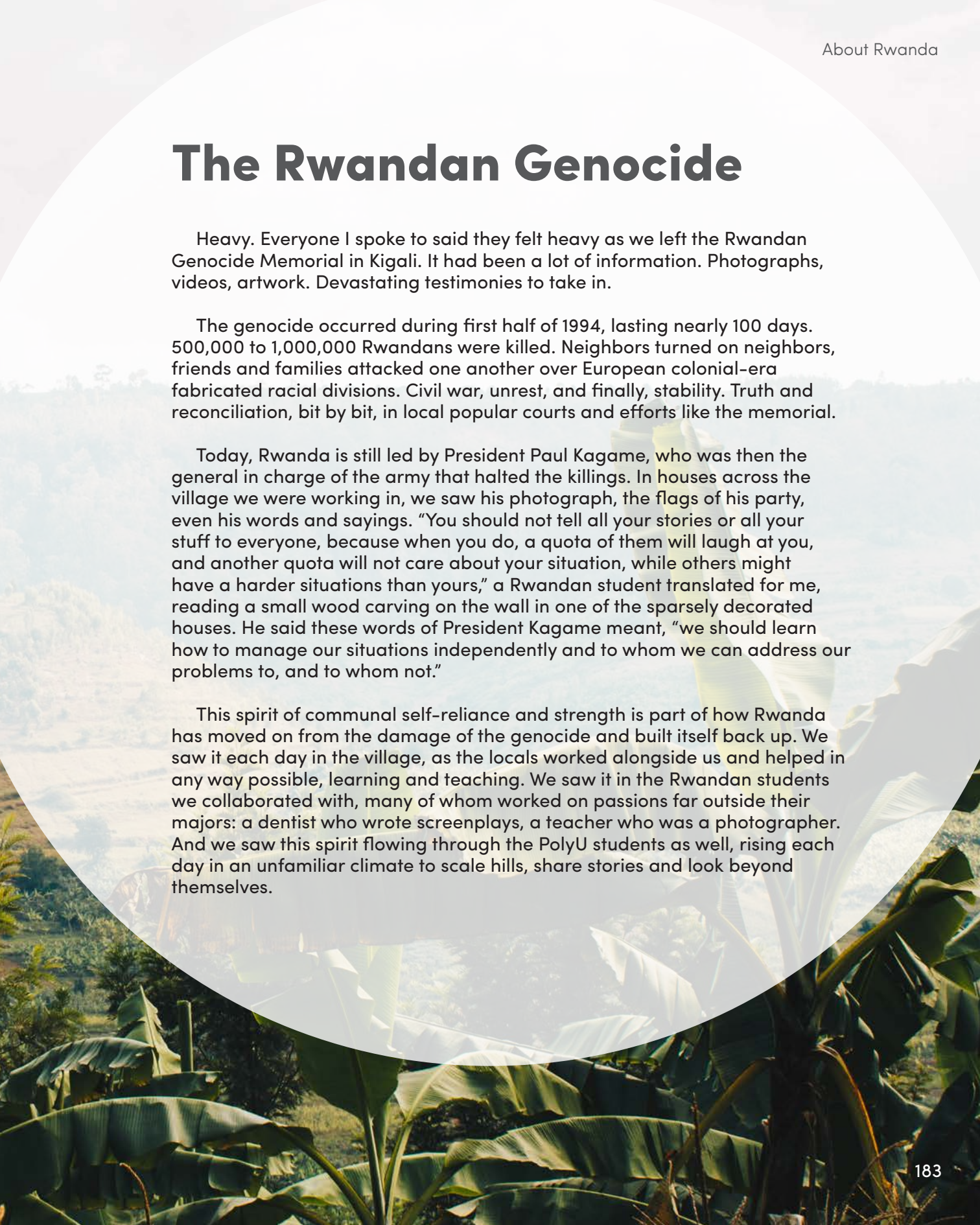
The Rwandan Genocide

Heavy. Everyone I spoke to said they felt heavy as we left the Rwandan Genocide Memorial in Kigali. It had been a lot of information. Photographs, videos, artwork. Devastating testimonies to take in.

The genocide occurred during first half of 1994, lasting nearly 100 days. 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandans were killed. Neighbors turned on neighbors, friends and families attacked one another over European colonial-era fabricated racial divisions. Civil war, unrest, and finally, stability. Truth and reconciliation, bit by bit, in local popular courts and efforts like the memorial.

Today, Rwanda is still led by President Paul Kagame, who was then the general in charge of the army that halted the killings. In houses across the village we were working in, we saw his photograph, the flags of his party, even his words and sayings. "You should not tell all your stories or all your stuff to everyone, because when you do, a quota of them will laugh at you, and another quota will not care about your situation, while others might have a harder situations than yours," a Rwandan student translated for me, reading a small wood carving on the wall in one of the sparsely decorated houses. He said these words of President Kagame meant, "we should learn how to manage our situations independently and to whom we can address our problems to, and to whom not."

This spirit of communal self-reliance and strength is part of how Rwanda has moved on from the damage of the genocide and built itself back up. We saw it each day in the village, as the locals worked alongside us and helped in any way possible, learning and teaching. We saw it in the Rwandan students we collaborated with, many of whom worked on passions far outside their majors: a dentist who wrote screenplays, a teacher who was a photographer. And we saw this spirit flowing through the PolyU students as well, rising each day in an unfamiliar climate to scale hills, share stories and look beyond themselves.



Every day for two weeks our buses raised dust in the villages, traversing the hills. From Kigali, the clumsy vehicles picked their way out of the guesthouse's pockmarked dirt alleyway. Onto pavement. Passed the corner store where we bought our SIM cards, turned just before the airport. There was the long stretch of road that slowly opened, fields appearing out the windows. At the gas station, a left on the final little stretch of asphalt. Engines inhaled in preparation for the repetition of slopes that followed. Past the sealed, calligraphied gates of the Chinese construction complex, the road returned to dirt, and then the hills and the dust began.

Then the people walking with piles of produce, or bicycles loaded up to the sky, or water jugs. Always the reused yellow fuel canisters, the jerrycans heavy with water. Children in school uniforms, women wrapped in colors, young men in old jerseys— everyone carried water. Balanced on the crown of the head, dangling from little arms, tucked under armpit, hooked to the side of a bicycle, no matter how, the water had to get home.

Carrying water was normal to the Rwandans, riding in our private bus, normal to us. We each had the same reaction at the other: while we stared at the heavy loads people carried up the dirt roads, they stared at us filling the tight bus seats, taking pictures out the window, trying to sleep through the bumpiness; our caravan of bus after bus after bus trundling up and down the hills. On either side of the glass, hands raised to wave a fleeting hello. Kids ran out smiling and yelling like in the movies, arms shaking the sky. I didn't think that actually happened. People sitting by the side of the road, at sewing machines and restaurants and produce stands and car repair shops, all stopped and watched and waved our way.

The description of Rwanda is always of the hills. As though they might contain something essential about the place: land of a thousand hills. Maybe living in valleys and along stiff slopes does do something to a people, so that one would understand more of them with an intimate knowledge of such elevation. And I suppose there are mountains in my life that are deep inside, a part of me. So, Rwanda rolls: one thousand hills. We watched in awe as children that had probably learned to walk just two years ago sauntered up and down sheernesses without a doubt, loading buckets of water or planks of wood three times their size.

Potholes deepened into valleys for our buses to sink into. Up and down, up and down. From hills with the kind of view called sweeping (blue distances melting into sky), we crested and descended into valleys with the kind of land called lush (rivers running through banana plants and full fields). The indication we were getting close, I came to learn, was the turn-off at the sign pointing to "Poste de Sante Gicaca." From there: a valley that fell deeper off to either side, a small hill, a left turn. The local clinic appeared first, then some houses and soon, the final sign. In blue, green and black block letters, it denoted we were in the Republic of Rwanda, the city of Kigali, district of Gasabo, approaching Kibobo village.

AR

To watch service highlights in Rwanda, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

Interview with Dr. Grace Ngai

Associate head of the Service-Learning and Leadership Office & Associate Professor in the Department of Computing

“Service implies seeing the humanity in people.”

From the top of the valley which overlooked the Kibobo village, we spoke with Dr. Grace Ngai, the associate head of the Service-Learning and Leadership Office. Ngai explained how she actually had two roles during this year's trip to Rwanda; this year, "I wear two hats," she said. Not only does she work as the associate head of the OSL program, but she's also an associate professor in the Department of Computing at PolyU. Ngai described how, as a computing professor, she's been in charge of leading the computing team; "I've got thirteen students here and we're doing a project on solar energy," she said.

She's also in charge of overseeing projects across all subjects. "I need to make sure that everything goes well." This summer, PolyU brought three cohorts of students, representing the following disciplines: Computing, School of Nursing, and the Department of Building Services Engineering.

I began by asking her to tell me more about the history of service-learning in Rwanda. "Our first project was in 2013," she said. "Our then-vice president told us that she really wanted to do a project in Africa." Ngai continued, explaining how, at the time, the majority of the projects students had been conducting were based exclusively in Hong Kong, mainland China and Cambodia. The former vice president then asked Ngai, "'why don't you go further?" After recommending a project in Africa, she gave OSL the funding to pursue it. "I happened to know of an organization, African Enterprise, through my own connections, friends, and referrals" Ngai explained. "I contacted them and then after some back and forth, you know, they said, 'why don't you try Rwanda?' We've been coming here since 2013," she said, adding, "it's now 2019, so this is our seventh year."

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To watch Dr. Grace's interview, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

Then, I asked Ngai what service meant to her. She began, "service, to me, implies giving up something, whether it be your time, your money or your labor." She elaborated by explaining how "that is the ethos of the word to serve, anyway," adding, "it also implies seeing other people as being as important as you." Ngai also hopes that these trips provide the opportunity for students to broaden their world view, "service implies seeing the humanity in people, understanding, that no matter whatever our skin color may be, whatever our religion, language, ethnic background we may be, that it is a shared humanity."

I asked her if there were any particularly memorable experiences that had influenced her outlook on service-learning throughout the years. Ngai described walking into a home in Rwanda back in 2015. "It's not exactly a good memory," she said, "but I think this is the memory that taught me a lot about what human rights are really about." 2015 was the first year her team started installing solar panels in local villages during their Rwandan service-learning trips. "The project really changed a lot of things," she said, "because before that we were working in schools." She added, "that was the first time we were actually going into peoples houses and spending extended periods of time there." She told me that the time spent working in peoples' homes "brought [her] a lot closer to how people lived in general."

She noted a particularly memorable event, during which she went into a young woman's home and noticed the architecture, which was less advanced than she had originally expected. "That year, I remember, we went to one house to do wiring, and the walls were made of small branches that they tied together in a grid pattern and then they packed mud around those branches." The living conditions were unlike anything Ngai had seen in Hong Kong. One woman was living there, sharing a single bed with her six children. Ngai remarked how the living conditions appeared to be exceptionally challenging, and then noted how her own impetus to help increased throughout that trip. The brief stay in that woman's home remains a crucial influence.

Though the computing team is unable to singlehandedly eradicate these infrastructural difficulties nation-wide, Ngai believes in the importance of small, local change. After seeing that house, she said "that was when I really understood what it meant for a basic living environment to be a human right," adding, "which is what keeps me going year after year. And that is why we keep on doing this project and I hope to keep on doing this project for as long as we have the resources and are able." At the conclusion of the interview, we thanked Ngai for her time and set off to follow the three teams working in the Kibobo village.

Interview with Prof. Esmond MOK

Dean of Students of PolyU

Prof Esmond Mok is the Dean of Students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Coming along to visit the Rwanda projects, he exuded a kindly and supportive presence which was palpably felt by students and teachers alike. On the request of Stephen and Grace, we sat down Prof Mok to ask him how he felt about service-learning and Rwanda.

"My name is Esmond Mok, my position is Dean of Students of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University." Mok began. "This is my first service-learning trip, I finally made it for the Rwanda Trip." he told us. We asked Mok about his impressions of Rwanda. "Even though there are some difficult topography, there are very beautiful flowers." he added, "we have a difficulty, but inside the difficulty, we also have some beautiful things. After we hurdle through this, we can become better and better." He explained how this was a memorable trip for him. "I come here and I learn a lot, not just from the people here, and from my students as well." He was impressed by the passionate and hard-working students and was glad to see the students use their knowledge to help the people who are actually in need. He concluded, "the process is very important, students can interact with the people when they participate in the service-learning. I'm sure this service-learning will continue to help students to become more positive thinking and more concern about the community service, not just locally but internationally."

To watch Prof. Mok's interview, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

AR

KIBOBO VILLAGE

Our mornings began with a breakfast consisting of gingery African milk tea, eggs, toast, and bananas served to us at the African Evangelistic Enterprise guesthouse, where we were staying. After we ate, we'd all pile into six buses and begin the hour and a half drive out to Kibobo village. The landscape immediately caught my eye. Rwanda's horizon line rose and fell with a frequency I should have anticipated, but hadn't expected, despite what I had been told. However, the bus ride offered an immediate way for me to register this reality physically: the bus rides were bumpy, very bumpy. After sitting towards the back of the bus the first couple days, I soon learned that a seat closer to the front was preferred— the ride was smoother; I could worry less about my camera equipment flying across the aisle.

The bus rides also provided invaluable bonding time for the PolyU students and their local collaborators: students from the University of Rwanda (UR). They started by exchanging stories and, after a couple days, songs. Evening rides back to Kigali frequently became sing-alongs. And these daily bus rides also afforded us journalists the opportunity to get to know the PolyU and UR students alike. One morning, we talked to Gedeon, a student from UR studying French education. Gedeon told us how he recently returned from a trip where he had worked as a DJ at a wedding. We exchanged songs, including some of Gedeon's own, on our smartphones and discussed meeting up for dinner and dancing later in the week.

Most days would begin with the same hike down from the buses. Each team would arrive, collect their things, and begin walking along a small dirt road amidst the trees. On either side were hillside plantations: sorghum and cassava, corn and bananas. After an initial, steep incline, the descent become mellower and the near-jungle around us opened out into a giant valley. Sometimes the sky was blue—thin clouds just veiling overhead and the edges of the hills well-defined—, but most mornings the landscape softened into a grey haze. A small river drifted down the center of the valley. Houses hidden by stands of banana trees dotted the slopes.

After thirty or forty minutes marching down and across, our long trail of people regrouped at what became our base of operations. It was a cleared, flat piece of hillside just off the road, overlooking and directly across the river from a small clump of houses that was seemingly the center of the village. This rest area was where the teams would come back at midday for our lunch brought from the guesthouse in a pickup truck. Above the clearing was a vegetable garden and large banana grove, under the sparse shade of which, students caught their breath.

Each morning here, sub-teams were assigned houses to work in and pointed in the right direction, given materials for the day and paired up with local villager-guides. The groups spread out in all directions, covering most of the valley and up both hillsides in our two weeks of work. Us journalists, meanwhile, would try to figure out which projects we needed more coverage of and who might be a good interview subject to follow for a few hours. Then, grabbing cameras, notebooks, lenses and tripods, we'd hurry to catch up with our chosen companions for the day— off to observe and record the students hammering, building and farming.

11

Department of Computing

in Rwanda

11 Department of Computing

COMP3S02 Socially Responsible Global Leadership in a Digital World

The computing team distributed equipment across their group, everyone lending a hand to carry it down to the homes. I followed behind their group, amazed by the scenery and struggling to adequately capture the beauty on camera. At the first home we visited, the students would be installing solar panels and wiring the inside.

I watched as they carefully unpacked the panels, then proceeded to set them up. Crouching in bright sunlight, they drilled holes in the panels' PVC perimeter, connected wires across the back, and, finally, placed the panels on the roof of the home. Inside, other students ran worked on wiring the house to provide electric lighting for the family. During the week, the computing students would continue installing solar panels at various homes throughout the village. These homes were to become "charging stations," where locals could come to recharge the batteries given to them to power the personal electricity within their own homes. In total, the 2019 team set up five charging stations around the Kibobo village and installed indoor wiring systems in 151 homes.

At the first house, Grace walked into the dark room, carefully inspecting the recently-installed wire running from a lightbulb hanging tightly to a thick wooden ceiling beam, down the wall, along the edge of a large poster of the Holy Family to a switch, then back up to the ceiling and over to the next room. She called one of her computing students over, pointing at their work. "Here," she said, "this is not very attractive, right? And people have to live here and look at it, so, you know, try to make it at least prettier. In general, the rule of thumb whenever I see a wire is, I want it straight. So I don't want to see that, like a snake." She indicated where the lightbulb hung, its wire coiled around the beam. "Second thing, whenever I see a corner I want it to be at ninety degrees as much as possible." The student paid close attention, agreeing and assenting. They would pull out the nails and try again.

The student walked into the next room and pulled her classmate away from where he was already attaching the next switch to the wall. "I need your height," she said. Beside me, Grace laughed at the turn of phrase. The student explained to her classmate, "the roof is too high, and if the light is so up high then it will not be so bright. So we need to make it straight." Uncoiling the wire would solve both the aesthetic and the illumination problem, allowing the bulb to hang lower and eliminating the "snake," as Grace had called it.

However, the student's height alone was not enough. They pulled over a low table, then put a chair on top. He picked his way up the small tower, got his balance, and passed the light bulb between the wooden beam and the tin roof with a loud crashing sound, as the sheet metal bent and flexed. Twice more and they were free of the snake.

Wiring was repetitive, hard work. Each house had its own set of difficulties and peculiarities, requiring the students to adapt and think quickly with the materials they had on hand. However, the work was anything but thankless. The moment when the family hit their light switch for the first time, when the bulbs came to life and the radio sounded and phones charged right at home, was always rewarding. But it wasn't just the adults or school-aged children that appreciated the electricity.

Outside, I noticed that a couple local children had commandeered their family's new radio. Having tuned it to play their desired music, they motioned for me to follow them behind their house. I followed. First, the youngest of their group started nodding along to the song. Then others joined in until it had turned into a full on dance party. There were smiles all around.

Interview with David

PolyU first year computing student

“This has been an eye-opening experience.”

After a couple of songs, I made my way back to the front of the house where I found Lucas. We wanted to speak with a couple of computing students about their first few days of service. First, we interviewed David, a first year computing student from Hong Kong. "We are here now in Rwanda doing a project trying to help out the local communities by installing an electrical infrastructure in the villages around," he explained. David was part of the indoor wiring team, "our job is to wire up the houses themselves by installing so lightbulbs and some USB chargers," he said, adding, "but it's only powered by a battery and that's why we have to install the charging stations."

I asked David if he had ever travelled to Africa previously. "This is my first time in Rwanda and the continent of Africa," he said. I asked him to tell me about what he had learned so far. He began, "this has been an eye-opening experience.Working with the local students has definitely been a blast." He explained how, from the collaboration with the locals he'd already "learned a lot about the community, the culture and the history of Rwanda."

Then, I asked him if he could tell me more about his PolyU cohort. "I am the only computing student in this course, ironically; it's a computing course. But I don't think that's a problem," he said, explaining how, at the start of the course, the instructors, "treat everyone as if they don't know anything; you start from scratch. They teach everyone from basic physics of how electricity works, voltages and currents, to actual practical workshops two weeks before we came to Rwanda." Noting the makeup of the course and range of disciplines represented, he said "I actually think that the diversity of different students is a good thing" adding, "we have some students from the School of Nursing, from business and financial, some students from engineering which is definitely helpful and some students from humanities." He concluded "the mix, the diversity really helps the overall experience. The humanities students are sharing their knowledge of culture and how cultures work and language and language barrier, it keeps the spirit high and the energy going."

As we neared the end of our interview, we noticed the sun was already beginning to set. We asked David to pose for a quick photograph and then set off to climb back up to the buses with the rest of the computing team.

On the hike home our first day, I reflected on those children dancing behind the house and thought more deeply about my role as a journalist and documentarian in two specific ways related to the camera. First, I realized that the presence of the camera could be intimidating. Two, I also realized that the camera could, if used appropriately, offer me a way of connecting with others despite inherent language barriers. When I had entered the yard surrounding the first home, I saw the children from that home and from others nearby had gathered to greet us newcomers and watch the installation of the solar panels.

They smiled at me, but eyed the camera with noticeable shyness. At first, they kept their distance. I tried to remain at the periphery, asking UR students to translate for me when I would request to take a photograph featuring one of the locals. Unlike the children I had encountered in Cambodia, who were quick to jump in front of the camera and strike a pose, the children in the Kibobo village were much more reserved. I wanted to build camaraderie with them, and, more importantly, I did not want my presence to feel intrusive. So, I began to wave when I noticed a child nearby. This was often met with a wave in return and usually a smile. I asked a UR student to teach me how to ask for a photograph. He told me, "nafata ifoto yawe," explaining that "ifoto is 'picture,' nafata means 'may I take' and yawe is 'yours.'" Nafata ifoto yawe. Got it. I made a mental note.

When the opportunity to take a photograph next arose, I tried asking, “nafata ifoto yawe?” I was met with some laughter, but the children agreed. Then I showed them their pictures. They smiled, gave me the thumbs up, asked for another. And so our dance continued: I’d ask and then snap a picture if they agreed, turn the camera around to show them and we’d start over from the beginning.

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School of Nursing

in Rwanda

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School of Nursing

SN2S03 Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities

The nursing students began their first day with a community consultation. Students settled down, shaded on the ground, while their teacher Ellen and a community partner named Innocent—who led the discussion—sat in front, in small plastic chairs.

We talked about differences between Hong Kong and Rwanda. Innocent interpreted between Kinyarwanda—the local language—and English, doing far more time in the former and speaking emphatically, gesticulating and at times nearly jumping from his chair. PolyU and local students sat between community members. "The key is to learn," said Innocent. Cultural exchange. He asked an older woman how many children she had and the response was twelve; the students laughed. "It would be impossible in Hong Kong," it was declared. As the laughter subsided, one of the Rwandan student interpreters added quietly that what the woman had actually said was that she had had twelve children, but seven died.

We talked more about women's rights, education and family planning. As the man led the meeting, a local women's leader sat off to the side, bored and tired in her chair, one of the few people frequently checking her phone. PolyU students were called up to share, ducking back down after a few words. Children in fresh school uniforms (blue sweaters and grey skirts) gathered a good distance away to observe.

The meeting ended and we sat to wait while Ellen and Innocent discussed more details of the coming days with the villagers. Some PolyU students began approaching their collaborators from the University of Rwanda, who joked around and played music, prodding the Hongkongers to dance.

After lunch on the hillside, we boarded the buses once again: to a local market. It was picturesque: all the bright colors; produce-laden baskets on heads; neat rows of tomatoes yelling in red; goats bleating at our out-of-placeness; that one would, perhaps, expect (but these are not meant to be postcards from Rwanda, it is simply how it was). However, this large rural farmer's market, tucked behind a village that seemed to be no more than six buildings lining a dirt road empty of other cars, was apparently the last place the local people expected something like us. A large group of students from across Asia, in uniform blue shirts, flooding their market. Then there were the Rwandan students in matching tees, and the two white people with large video cameras running about trying to shoot over the crowds. Elsewhere, everywhere, we were certainly stared at with curiosity, but in the market we stood out egregiously.

The nursing team had a decent budget and were to buy a broad selection of fruits and vegetables in order to familiarize themselves with local food and prices and give better advice to their patients. Later, back at the guesthouse, they were going to try preparing a meal themselves with the new ingredients, using the model of a brick stove designed by the Building Services Engineering team, to replicate conditions in the village. However, I didn't once spot these beautiful fresh vegetables from the market at the villager's homes. Though they go to the market to sell what they farm, we learned they almost exclusively eat a few starchy essentials—sorghum, cassava, banana, potato, maize, and sometimes rice—presumably because they can't afford vegetables that aren't filling for a day of hard work.

It was hard for the students to resist buying all the beautiful fruits and vegetables. They filled a bag with the strangest assortment of things, no particular dish in mind. With such ingredients, it would seem hard to go wrong, though. As lovely evening sunlight settled over the produce, we gathered to go back. Though the morning had been slow, the afternoon was a rewarding dive into local life. I just wish the students had invited us when they ate their spoils.

Days later, I rejoined the nursing team for their fieldwork. Carrying a bag filled with cans of seeds, as well as a scale and several other medical instruments, the students steadily hiked behind the mother of the family we were going to consult. The path curved around the back of the hill, leaving behind the area we usually worked in. A steep dip into a dry riverbed, across a rough bridge of a few logs lain parallel, a scramble right back up the gravelly path. Our way continued up another slope before the unfaltering woman who led us turned down a little track between slim sorghum plants taller than us. A man was quickly cutting and uprooting a large patch of the crops, throwing them to the side.

We realized he was the woman's husband, clearing space for the nursing team's kitchen garden. The group stopped to survey the patch where vegetables for the family would soon be planted, taking a group picture. Then we sat beneath a tree in front of the house, the husband bringing out a few wooden benches and chairs for us to sit on— a rare luxury. He returned to the garden site to begin hoeing and turning the soil with tools the PolyU students had assembled and distributed a few days prior while we began the primary care session.

Interview with Vincii & Gedeon

PolyU student leader & UR student

On one of our final afternoons, I accompanied the nursing team back to the guest house. They were returning early to plan the final, group lesson they'd be delivering to the locals. During this afternoon preparation period, I pulled Vincii, one of the student leaders, and Gedeon, a UR student, aside to ask them about their experiences.

After introductions, I asked them to describe the nursing project to me more specifically. Vincii gave a brief overview, "the project that SN is working is mostly for the healthy lifestyle for the local communities here in Rwanda," continuing, she explained, "the SN team, this year mainly is responsible for the health assessment and health education for the local communities." She added, "additionally, we also are involved in the kitchen garden project so that students can work with a local self-help group to create a garden that is near the villagers' homes so that they can grow food by themselves so that they can feed themselves."

> **"It makes me more to not take things for granted and to treasure what I have."**

Gedeon provided additional context. He explained how the UR and PolyU students are "trying to help people and get data from the people like how they treat their bodies, take showers, how they cook meals," adding that the UR students assist in translation, helping PolyU students collect data. "They are trying to learn new ways of making those things and they are trying to give knowledge to empower the people," he said. "They are trying to help people to help themselves."

After they provided me with this context, I asked them to speak about the UR-PolyU collaboration. Gedeon began, "The collaboration is really great," adding, "the people from Rwanda call students from UR and they told us about this project that's going on that's going to happen and they asked us if we want to volunteer, then we said yes." He continued, "then we came and the [PolyU students] are treating us good, they are friendly, we kind of have fun, though we are serving."

Vincii offered more specifics, "we have seven teams in total," she said. "two PolyU students are paired up with one Rwandan student so they can work together when visiting households to discuss together what's the problem from the assessment." She explained, " I think this is an interesting collaboration because we are from different countries and different cultural backgrounds." Like Gedeon noted, Vincii said, "the students have made great friendships. It's good to see them coming together."

I asked them if there had been any highlights so far. "These guys are really sweet sometimes," Gedeon said, "but they are also kind of boring. They're always sleeping on buses." Vincii started laughing. Gedeon continued, "and they get tired easily, they are not used to working in farms, but they are pretty good at learning. And they are good at socializing, talking to people, it's cool," he said. "They are great people. I like them."

Vincii jumped in. "I agree. I think this trip is more physically demanding than we expected, because there is so much farming we are doing," she said. "Initially, we thought we'd just be doing very easy work, but it turns out it's a big project. And many of the students had complaints in the beginning." She explained how for many students, they ended up turning a corner, "but as we go on, they know it's doing good for the community and they start enjoying it, you know, they get really involved in it." She added, "we sometimes sleep on the bus, that happens." Gedeon laughed this time. Then Vincii said, "one day, because one of the buses had broken down and then we had to combine the buses into one, we had a singing battle, between Hong Kong students and Rwanda students."

"It was cool," Gedeon said, smiling.

"Yeah, the bus went crazy. That was one of the highlights," Vincii concluded.

This singing-contest-post-bus-breakdown anecdote provided insight into just one of the many ways that deeper connections were fostered through the shared experience of overcoming challenges. I asked if there had been any additional challenges their team had encountered along the way. Outside of the physical difficulties experienced during their daily hikes, Gedeon said, "sometimes we have the barrier of language, but we try to adjust." Vincii elaborated on Gedeon's response, describing "language is one of the things, because, you know, we learn English, we speak English, but maybe at the first stage we don't quite understand each other. You know, it takes time to tune in to each others' accents."

Finally, I asked them if they had learned anything working in the villages. Gedeon laughed. "I'm from the village, so no, nothing new," he said, then turned to Vincii. "As a kid, I grew up in cities," she said, "so, here, I learned that life can be simple." She added, "from what we see, all the locals have is a simple house and a small farm but they can make a living with it." She continued, "when we compare it to, you know, luxury lifestyle back in the city, it is quite hard to imagine how they live a life like this, but, you know, they do. It makes me more to not take things for granted and to treasure what I have, from the experiences."

When we had reached the end of our interview, we thanked Vincii and Gedeon walked back to prepare for their final day of service. They'd be participating in the group training, which was designed to educate all of the locals about healthy living habits based on the data students had gathered in their surveys.

After the nursing students synthesized data from all of their surveys, they planned a 'group day' to speak with all of the locals about in an effort to promote healthy lifestyle choices that would extend beyond the length of their service.

We watched as the PolyU students taught mini-lessons on hygiene, exercise, and nutrition. A large group of the villagers were gathered around, many with children clinging to their legs or tied across their backs. The students stood slightly above them with a microphone connected to a small speaker and a whiteboard on an easel.

The students were teaching the villagers how to stretch every morning before going out in the fields, and telling them of the critical importance of breakfast. Beginning to work before the sun and its heat can make a huge difference in a farmer's day. I wondered if the villagers would make time before the heat for the students' recommendations.

In their interviews, many of the students said they had learned gratitude, to return to Hong Kong aware of what they had. Of what others did not. “I could not live like this,” they told me. But what if you had to? A choice? Some expressed their surprise at the villagers’ buoyancy, their smiles and liveliness, as though life more immaterial, in poverty, is not possible, or perhaps not worth enjoying. It is life nonetheless, I wanted to say. I tend to idealize, yes. But I think there was more to be learned than simply gratitude. It implies that what we have is greater than what they don’t.

Interview with Ellen

Teacher of nursing team

We share knowledge, and I think knowledge has an impact.

After listening to the presentations, Lucas and I spoke with Ellen, the teacher of this year's nursing team. We began by asking Ellen to explain the nursing project more broadly. "The topic for us is 'Healthy Lifestyles Challenges for Developing Communities,'" she said. She followed by outlining the trajectory of the service-learning over the past ten days and the ways that the nursing project consisted of numerous components. The first involved health surveys. "The challenge of coming to Rwanda is that we are in a totally different world and the lifestyle in Hong Kong is totally different from the lifestyle in Rwanda," she explained. "Before we can do anything, we need to learn from the local people."

Then she told us more about one of this year's main points of inquiry: children's malnutrition. "We are interested to know more," she said, "therefore we go into the village, we work with the families, we ask them some questions and we have a health assessment. This year we especially focused on the health assessment with the children to look at the BMI [body mass index, an indicator of fat] and check on it."

The second component of the nursing project involved the kitchen garden. In light of the malnutrition, Ellen explained how their team worked with local partners to design the gardens. "The purpose of building the kitchen garden is to allow the people in each household to have more choices of vegetables, so we help them to have cabbage, carrots, tomatoes, watermelon, onion, etc.," she said.

I asked her to tell me more about what she observed regarding her students' experiences building the kitchen garden. Farming, for many students, was a new experience. "It is a very exciting experience for our team of students to join the villagers to build the kitchen garden, because farming is very interesting skills and tactics for the Hong Kong people," she said.

From this interview with Ellen, it became clear that the learning piece of service-learning was being fulfilled by this nursing project. PolyU students were learning from the locals through both conducting the surveys and helping build the kitchen garden. But I couldn't help but wonder more about the service. I asked Ellen my usual question: what does service mean to her?

"Service-learning is actually learning the reality," she began, "because when we talk about health issues, we have a lot of theories and concepts. But when we want to bring it to everybody it is not only giving them concepts, it is daily living, so we need the theory to be applicable to reality." Then she added, "I learn through the process, the students come, they learn through the process and the villagers come and join us and they also learn from us."

Then, I asked Ellen to share any especially memorable takeaways or moments from this year's trip. She explained that, as the teacher of the course, this year, she "learned about teamwork and how to make different teams work efficiently in a short period of time." She explained, "every time I bring a new group of students and different staff join the team we have lots of planning and discussion, but it's not until we meet in the field that the synergy, the energy, the chemistry come in. It takes time going through the chaotic stage to come to the harmony." In addition to these remarks about teamwork, Ellen said, "I think every time through the service-learning what I bring back will be friendship, new friends, and the smiles after we serve any household. I think the smiling face is an unforgettable thing I will carry with me," adding, "for the healthy lifestyle, we don't give them a box of something, we don't give them some very visible thing, we share knowledge, and I think knowledge has an impact."

Sharing knowledge certainly seemed to be the focus of this service-learning project. The students had, after all, just delivered a few hours worth of mini-lessons to the locals. However, I did continually find myself wondering whether this knowledge was the 'best' they could be sharing with the locals. Due to such radically different lifestyles and eating habits, I wondered if it was realistic for students from Hong Kong to adequately study—and understand—the local health problems after conducting surveys in fewer than two weeks time. The question lingered after days spent following teams onsite and often resulted in dinnertime discussions with fellow journalists, which primarily consisted of friendly debates over the 'right' way to eat and the cultural significance of food. Like Ellen said, the nursing team did not provide the Kibobo villagers with something physical in the same way that the computing team had done with solar panels and indoor wiring, but they did share knowledge. Though it is hard to determine whether the advice they delivered is the most effective advice that could have been given, or if—on an even more practical level—the locals will follow it, it certainly did prompt me to reflect on my own lifestyle habits, which is probably all that we could have hoped for.


adidas

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Department of Building Services Engineering

in Rwanda

13 Department of Building Services Engineering

Living Environment for Low-income Communities in Developing Regions

We scrambled down a particularly steep path to an opening in the plants that served as a fence around the house. A couple that seemed to be in their mid-30s came out to greet us, the man slightly older than the woman, who held a baby. After a Rwandan student on the team explained to the family what we were there for, they showed us their two current cooking setups. One was in a small, three-walled hut beside the house, which they told us they used during the rainy season because it was covered. The other was on the opposite side of the property, near the back where a pig, some chickens and a very vocal cow lived. Both locations had what were called three-stone stoves, which are exactly what they sound like: three large, soot-blackened, irregular rocks placed in a triangular arrangement upon which a metal pot could unsteadily rest.

At house after house, we encountered this same structure, both out in the open and inside of small mud constructions. Besides how precarious it is, this sort of stove doesn't retain or conduct heat well, allowing lots of smoke to escape out the sides and consuming unnecessary resources, while also not providing much protection or safety from the exposed flame. While it is quick and easy to put together, take down and remake, why this design was so ubiquitous is a mystery to me, but the Building Services Engineering team—or BSE, as we called them—set out to provide villagers with a similarly simple but more efficient and clean alternative, which they called a rocket stove.

Crouching in the sun near the back of the house, where the family had asked us to replace their stove, the students began gathering the bricks. At each step of the process, they turned to the family to explain what they were doing, teaching the villagers to do it themselves. This was actually the most important aspect of the design— that it was innovative but simple enough to be taught quickly and replicated easily.

They took sixteen to twenty-four sandy tan bricks, depending on the desired height of the stove, and stacked them in four-brick layers shaped like a "U," or a horseshoe. At alternating layers, bricks were offset for greater stability, so some had to be cut in half using a machete to complete the round. The penultimate layer was left with two large ventilation gaps in the back so smoke could escape without disturbing the person tending to the fire through the main opening. Clay mud, which the villagers used for building a variety of quick, temporary structures, was slathered between the bricks when available to further strengthen the little stove.

After demonstrating the construction process once, the students took it apart, neatly re-stacked the bricks, and let the father of the home make it himself. Besides a few small pointers here and there—to widen the opening a little, or flip over a brick so it fit better—the man mastered the process on his first try. Meanwhile, one of the team members sat in the corner sketching a simple diagram of each layer from above, just for reference in case the family needed it. Once the pot was lain steadily on top of the bricks, everyone posed for a photo behind the new stove.

Interview with Jo-Ann Sanu

first year student from PolyU

“You give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, you teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

After a morning of watching the students erect numerous rocket stoves at various houses, Lucas and I met with Jo-Ann Sanu, a first year student from PolyU, to discuss her experience on the service-learning trip so far.

Jo-Ann began by explaining the background and goals for their current project. She described the stoves that the villagers had previously been using. “What they have is a three-stone system,” she said, adding some of the inefficiencies they had identified with this model. The three-stone system “produces a lot of smoke, it takes a really long cooking time,” she explained, “so, what we want to do is to create a system, create a stove that is much more efficient than the current one.”

Then I asked Jo-Ann how her time in Rwanda was going overall and how it varied from any expectations she’d had coming in. “I think we’d been warned about how difficult the terrain would be and I think it has kind of been true. It’s been a bit hard to get to all of the locations, so there has been a lot of hiking involved and a lot of carrying heavy stuff.” She added, “I think that’s been a bit difficult but it’s also been a good challenge.” I noted how from their first days of service, I’d seen students offering to lend each other a hand when carrying bricks from the truck into the village or when hiking up steep terrain. Jo-Ann elaborated on the ways these physical challenges allowed her to reflect on the lives of the locals, “it makes you think about how it’s hard for us to walk to those places just for a short distance, but the locals live their whole lives there.” Furthermore, fundamental daily needs necessitated this hiking, Jo-Ann added, “they have to travel a lot to even carry bottles of water,” she said, explaining how these interactions with nature and her surroundings made her think more deeply about various lifestyle differences present. And, personally, I could relate. Each day, I’d be panting by the time I’d reached the top of a hill with my camera, then I’d notice locals running with apparent ease up the hillside beside me.

Jo-Ann then commented on the sense of community she'd encountered in the village. "I think the Rwandan system is very communal and very collective," adding, "all of the locals care for each other." She noted two instances where this became very apparent. First she described, "when we went to this one house, there was this huge family gathered. Many children and their mothers and they were all feeding each other together." While building the stoves specifically, Jo-Ann also noted, "even if we went to a household in which there was one old lady, the other household members, they'd be very willing to come and build the stoves for her."

I asked Jo-Ann what service means to her. "I think service means, obviously helping other people, but also learning from them," she said. "You know, it's not just about teaching them about how to build a stove or anything," adding, "There's also so much that you can learn from them," adding, "we might know more about ventilation, but they might know more about how to start the fire. It's a two way system."

Finally, I asked Jo-Ann what she hoped the community gained from their service. "What BSE hoped to do," she said, "was basically to create a more efficient cooking system for them." Specifically, BSE's goal was threefold: "Number one: reduce their cooking time. Number two: reduce the smoke. The three stone system, it produces a lot of smoke and it is pretty unhealthy for the residents, so reduce the smoke," and finally, "number three: be sustainable, be better for the environment, so use less wood."

The final part of the project had a teaching component. Jo-Ann described how, "it's pretty simple to design the stove, so what we'd do first is that we'd build it and then we'd ask them to kind of rebuild it." She said that they "taught them the basic system, about ventilation, how to construct it, how to put the clay over it and they would do it later on." She explained that by teaching the locals to build the stoves, rather than simply building the stoves themselves, "this enabled [the locals] to teach the other households as well. So, even if we couldn't reach certain households, their neighbors or their friends would build it for them or teach them how to do it."

Jo-Ann then told us how the BSE students were actually exceeding their numbers, which would allow them to shift projects and help the Computing team with solar panels and indoor wiring: "we've been able to cover a lot of households and we can even shift our projects right now because we have exceed our numbers," she said. "so it goes in line with that quote that I've read, 'you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, you teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.'"

By the start of their second week of service, the BSE students had already helped build stoves for over 120 hours and they had delivered bricks to 30 more. Like Jo-Ann said, the villagers had been trained to help their neighbors construct additional stoves, so BSE would be shifting projects to assist the computing students for the later half of the week.

We thanked Jo-Ann for her interview and all went to dinner.

Interview with Peter Mooni Nyangezi & Emily Leung Yi Ki

PolyU student leader & UR student

“We exchange a lot about the culture and we know more about each other,”

In the days that followed, I focused my additional interview questions on the relationships built within their PolyU cohort and with their collaborators from the University of Rwanda. Towards the end of the second week, Lucas and I interviewed Peter and Emily from BSE; Peter Mooni Nyangezi is a student from UR and Emily Leung Yi Ki is a student from PolyU.

Peter began the interview by discussing his role as a local student, “I’m here as a student helper in the stove building project,” he said, adding, “I am really excited for what is taking place here,” describing how, from his discussions with the local citizens in the village, people were very pleased with the new stoves.

I asked Emily and Peter what it had been like to work together. They smiled. Emily began, “My favorite memories from this trip are about teamwork. I think we have built a good friendship with each other, because we help each other through the trip,” she said. Consistent with the recurring theme throughout the trip—hiking—Emily stated, “we are going to the village to visit each household and the path has been very difficult to walk, so Peter actually helped me a lot.”

Peter jumped in, “It’s also good to work with Emily, because she was not used to hiking and it would be hard for her to work on this or to talk to the people in this village,” adding, “I helped her so she could connect with the people and work in this village.” He said, “and I was also motivating her to work hard, so that she would be able to hike the mountain because she was not used to hiking.”

Emily agreed and adding that they their value of their collaboration extended beyond this physical assistance that the Rwandan students provided. She said, “we also exchange a lot about the culture and we know more about each other,” adding, “I think it is a good opportunity.”

I asked them to tell me if they had any favorite stories specifically. Emily described an early day when there had been a confusion about the location of the bricks their team had to retrieve in order to build their stoves.“I remember three groups of us had to hike downhill a long way and it was very hard to walk. And we got there and we found out that the household had no bricks,” she said. Their team was faced with a difficult decision— they needed to obtain their bricks, but they had already hiked all the way into the village. Emily explained how they had to decide “should we go up and get the bricks again and walk the path again?” Ultimately, the team came to an agreement, “I think it is through our teamwork that we all agreed that we can go up to get the bricks together,” she explained, adding, “although it was very hard, I found that that is the relationship between each other. We all support each other and I found that this is really a treasure.”

In my final question of the interview with Peter and Emily, I asked them what they each had learned during their two weeks working in the Kibobo village. Emily took the lead "actually, after this trip I've done a lot of reflection on myself," she said. "My life in Hong Kong is very good compared to the lives of villagers here," adding, "but I can still see that they are all happy, they are all satisfied with what they have, so I think it is something that people living in cities should learn from them." Then Peter told me "even for me, I'm from Rwanda, but I didn't know how much the people from this village are suffering," adding, "it's good to know what's taking place all over the country."

From speaking with Peter and Emily, I noted the various ways their experiences and perspectives were distinct by virtue of their different backgrounds and upbringings. I also noted the ways that their feelings overlapped, especially in regard to teamwork and the relationships fostered during the program. Finally, I took mental note of the recurrent theme of happiness, which I had started to chart as a thru line for many of my discussions in Rwanda. Emily had addressed it specifically in her answer to the last question, hoping to learn from the happiness she observed from working with the locals. I thought the many ways that PolyU students would continue to remark on similar insights and started to wonder about the nature of such reflections. How could they not only be noted but pushed further? What did they mean in the larger discussion of poverty and wealth inequality?

Interview with Innocent

African Evangelistic Enterprise's field staff

"You are going to see how people are going to show their emotion and their feelings about the Hong Kong support."

During our final day in the village, Lucas and I were able to speak with Innocent, a member of AEE's field staff, who shared insights about his experience on staff since 2006, and his extensive work in Gikomero sector. After these initial introduction statements, Innocent said, "First, let me tell you about AEE in brief. AEE is African Evangelistic Enterprise." He explained the historical relevance of AEE and their involvement in the reconciliation process, "AEE really contributed many things to this country about reconciliation, just after the genocide," he said, "including healing and teachings and trainings for different people. AEE wants to see people living together in peace." Then, he elaborated on his role working with the organization, "as a field staff now, I'm working with the community, through what we call self help groups." Innocent described the function of these self help groups, "we put people who are more vulnerable together to form groups and then we train them on many topics like saving, loan management, peace building and in the area of nutrition." As a field officer, Innocent also told us how he worked with community facilitators. "I train them and follow all of the activities the community is doing."

After providing this background about AEE, Innocent told me more about their collaboration with PolyU. "Nowadays we have guests from Hong Kong," he began. He mentioned the three projects the PolyU students had been working on throughout the week. "The support really is very nice," he added. Explaining the value he placed on this collaboration with Hong Kong, he emphasized the importance of having good relationships with other countries. "Rwanda really puts accent on the relationship to live together with others, because it is a good quality to live with one another," he said.

Nearing the end of his interview, Innocent told us how those living in the Kibobo village were very appreciative of the service-learning projects this year. In fact, they had prepared a final celebration ceremony. "Very soon, you are going to see how people are going to show their emotion and their feelings about the Hong Kong support," he said. "You are going to see through dancing, different speeches even from me as a field officer. I am really very happy to see that support to the community."

Innocent concluded his interview with some final reflections on Rwanda. "Rwanda is a beautiful country to visit," he said, noting how PolyU students had "[visited] the national parks and saw many animals there." He hopes that students will return, "bring others, bring many people here," he said adding, "the door is open."

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To watch Innocent's interview, hover your phone over the photograph above to view video

The Closing Ceremony

During our final hours in the Kibobo village, we experienced a moving closing ceremony. Like Innocent said, the locals sang, danced, and delivered speeches and gifts to the leaders of AEE and the PolyU projects to show their appreciation.

At the end of the ceremony, they passed around corn for the service-learning students and milk for the local children. As everyone was eating and saying their final goodbyes, we took a couple group photos, noticing a storm approaching in the distance. The first drops of rain began to hit. We thanked the locals and, in true Hong Kong-fashion, opened our umbrellas for the final hike out of the valley.

KYRGYZSTAN

By Meredith Morran

Kyrgyzstan is a country in central Asia known for its cultural diversity, the gorgeous, mountainous landscape, and the stunning lake: Issyk Kul. The ubiquity of post-Soviet architecture reflects the country's status as a former part of the Soviet Union. Russian is the main language spoken and the population represents a diverse range of ethnic groups including Kyrgyzs, Uzbeks, Russian and Dungan peoples from northern China. Islam makes up the dominant religion at approximately 83 percent of Kyrgyz citizens and Christianity represents the other majority at 16 percent. During my time in Kyrgyzstan, I accompanied a team of PolyU students to the town of Tokmok, located in the northern portion of the country nearly 75km from the capital city of Bishkek and only 10km south of the Kazakhstan border, where the majority of the students' service projects took place.

During my first few hours of the trip, I had the time to speak with the PolyU team as well as the directors of the projects to learn more about its unique status. The students from PolyU represented those who had participated in a year-long program called the SOAR Youth Leadership Program. Prior to their trip to Kyrgyzstan, the students had also taken trips to Beijing and nearby regions in mainland China as well as Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, Israel to learn about the histories and cultures in other regions of the world. Just as the goals of service learning promote growth as global citizens, the goals of the SOAR program specifically complemented these ideals as well.

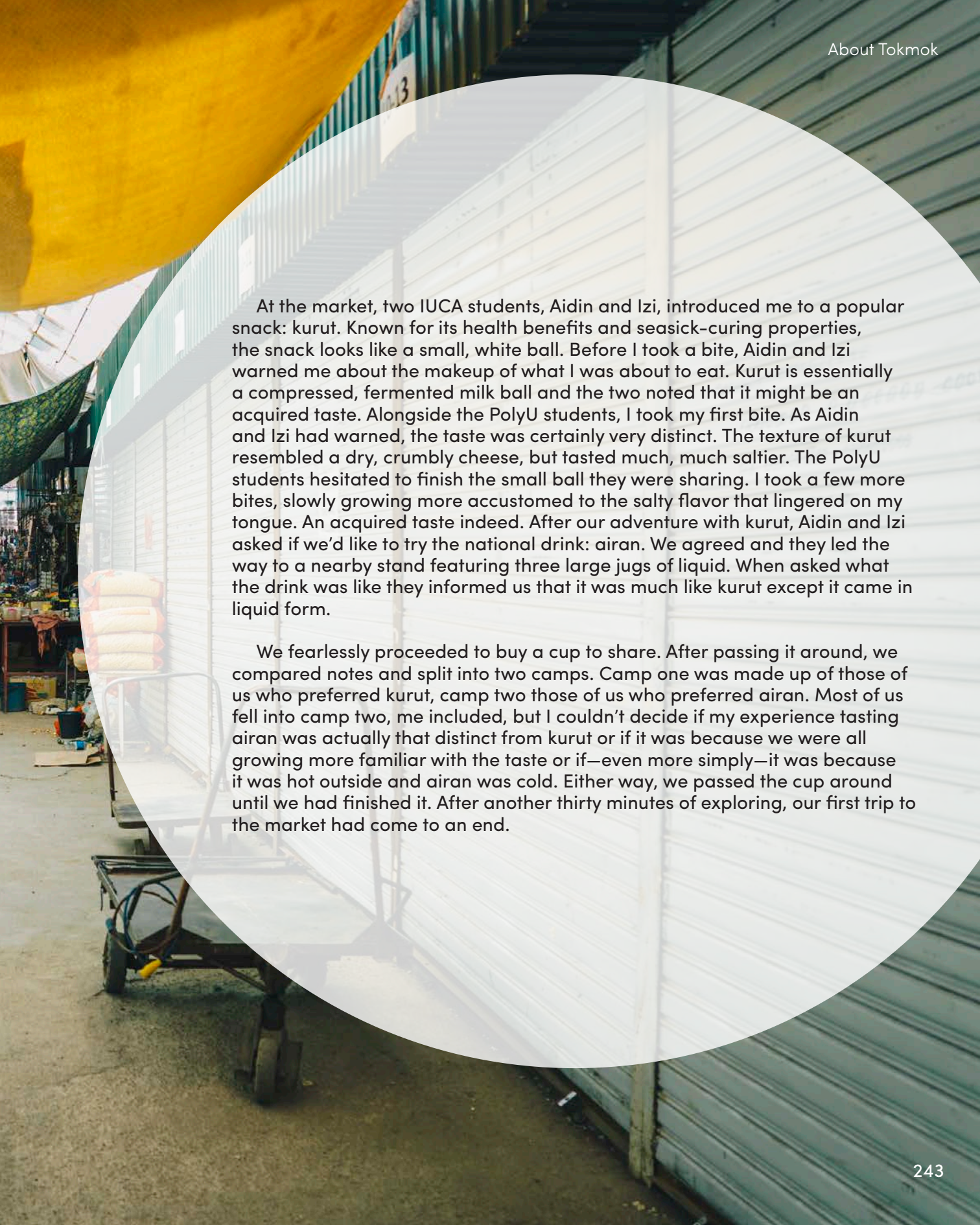
In preparation for their final trip, I learned that the PolyU students had taken a course in Department of Applied Social Sciences. I was told that in Kyrgyzstan they would be providing service to local primary school students at the Ivanovka School and to local children and their mothers at the Taiwan Fund Center, fulfilling not only the remainder of the SOAR program, but their compulsory service learning credit for PolyU. In addition to the PolyU students participating in the trip, the SOAR Program included another team of university students from Peking University. In total, fifteen PolyU students and eight Peking University students were in attendance, led by their team of supervisors and instructors made up of Catherine Chai, Esther Wong, Kace Lai, and Fiona Lai, from PolyU and Michael Jiang from Peking U. By the time I met their SOAR cohort, it was clear that their group was already quite close. During the beginning of our time together, we flew from Hong Kong to Almaty, Kazakhstan, and then from Almaty to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. When we landed in Bishkek late at night we boarded a bus which took us to the nearby town of Tokmok.

TOKMOK

Market Days

In Tokmok, we were hosted by the International University of Central Asia (IUCA)— put up in the dorms and fed by their dining staff. On our first day in Tokmok, we attended an opening ceremony held at IUCA to welcome PolyU students for their upcoming week of service work. Dr. John Rosslyn Clark, the founder of the university, gave a brief overview of the history of the Kyrgyzstan. He explained how it used to be a major point of transit along the silk road and impressed students with the fun fact that it is believed the famous Chinese poet, Li Bai was born only kilometers down the road from IUCA.

After Dr. Clarks's opening remarks, students were given time to meet with the IUCA students who would be assisting them with the service. Among the PolyU cohort, the students split into four subgroups, which each consisted of three to four students. The subgroups were then paired with two local students to aid them in Russian translation. During their preparation period, all of the students met to discuss lesson plans and begin preliminary translation work. After their initial rehearsals, we made the trip to the local market so PolyU students could gather supplies for their upcoming lesson plans. I tagged along and took the time to try the local delicacies.



At the market, two IUCA students, Aidin and Izi, introduced me to a popular snack: kurut. Known for its health benefits and seasick-curing properties, the snack looks like a small, white ball. Before I took a bite, Aidin and Izi warned me about the makeup of what I was about to eat. Kurut is essentially a compressed, fermented milk ball and the two noted that it might be an acquired taste. Alongside the PolyU students, I took my first bite. As Aidin and Izi had warned, the taste was certainly very distinct. The texture of kurut resembled a dry, crumbly cheese, but tasted much, much saltier. The PolyU students hesitated to finish the small ball they were sharing. I took a few more bites, slowly growing more accustomed to the salty flavor that lingered on my tongue. An acquired taste indeed. After our adventure with kurut, Aidin and Izi asked if we'd like to try the national drink: airan. We agreed and they led the way to a nearby stand featuring three large jugs of liquid. When asked what the drink was like they informed us that it was much like kurut except it came in liquid form.

We fearlessly proceeded to buy a cup to share. After passing it around, we compared notes and split into two camps. Camp one was made up of those of us who preferred kurut, camp two those of us who preferred airan. Most of us fell into camp two, me included, but I couldn't decide if my experience tasting airan was actually that distinct from kurut or if it was because we were all growing more familiar with the taste or if—even more simply—it was because it was hot outside and airan was cold. Either way, we passed the cup around until we had finished it. After another thirty minutes of exploring, our first trip to the market had come to an end.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APSS2S09 Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs

Ivanovka and the Four Q's

Our second full day in Kyrgyzstan marked the beginning of the service project in Ivanovka Primary School. On our morning bus ride over to the school, I spoke with Catherine Chai who had been teaching the compulsory service-learning course for the SOAR students since January. Catherine informed me that the students had participated in four lectures and seven workshops during their spring semester. Prior to arriving in Kyrgyzstan, they had devised lesson plans, which targeted learning outcomes for the local children in four main areas: the intellectual quotient (IQ), emotional quotient (EQ), adversity quotient (AQ), and spiritual quotient (SQ). Furthermore, Catherine described how the primary goals of the service were designed to address the PolyU students' personal growth in three additional areas: care, competence, and character. To address each of these areas, PolyU students came with many lesson plans that included teaching in science and physical exercise as well as many, many games.

After recess, I followed Sabina back into her classroom and began taking pictures of the lessons PolyU students were leading. For the science-related activities, the PolyU team had brought in materials to set up various hands-on experiments. In Sabina's class, they were making quicksand to teach students more about physics and the concept of force. They mixed together proper proportions of flour and liquid cornstarch purchased the market they day before to develop a viscous material with unique, educational properties. To demonstrate the concept of force, the PolyU teachers explained how the quicksand would respond if students tried to break the surface by punching it. They told the students how they'd be met with an equal and opposite force (i.e. the harder they punched, the more difficult it would be to break the surface of the gooey material). After everyone tried their hand at puncturing the surface of their cups of quicksand, students began playing with the squishy mixture.

After spending time observing the science experiments in the classroom of older students, I ventured over to the classroom with the youngest group of students made up of children in grades one to three. In that classroom, the PolyU cohort designed an activity involving "invisible ink" to spark curiosity in the local children and, hopefully, excite them about scientific possibility. First, the students were given sheets of paper cups with the "invisible ink." They were instructed to write a secret message or draw a picture on their blank pages. The students were then told to wait until their papers dried after which they were handed a second cup of liquid made up of a coffee mixture. The students were given q-tips to apply this second mixture to their paper, which, when spread over the paper's surface, revealed the students' secret messages and drawings.

By the end of the day, the local children were eager to get back outside and play with their friends, and the PolyU students were sufficiently exhausted, having learned about all of the hard work that goes into being an educator.

After packing up their classrooms and doing light preparatory work for the following day, the four teams of PolyU students were given various assignments for the rest of the afternoon. Two of the groups would stay at Ivanovka to participate in a reflection section with Catherine. The other two groups would attend home visits, each group going to a separate house to speak with the locals who lived there. I accompanied one of the groups on their home visit, where they met with a grandmother who was raising three adopted children.

Two New Students

In the days that followed, I observed activities similar to the first day. As familiarity between all involved grew with each lesson, I also noticed increased levels of participation and perceived enjoyment. After speaking with students at the end of the first day and in the latter two as well, I also learned that the inevitable misbehaviors had started to crop up. And this made complete sense. As the students became more accustomed to their PolyU teachers, they also became more likely to act out, reminding me that classroom disruptions are, of course, universal phenomena.

On the second morning, I went back into the classroom made up of the youngest students to observe the lesson plans for day two. The PolyU students were attempting to quiet down their class with what they termed their "attention beat," as they would later tell me. Whenever things were getting two rowdy, the PolyU student in charge of that lesson would clap to the beat of a specific rhythm and the children were instructed to follow suit. The collective focus this simple rhythm actually required was enough to get the class to settle down and listen to the plans for the next activity.

After the attention beat had gathered attention, I looked over to find a group of boys still quietly giggling at the back of the room. I was pleasantly surprised when among them I noticed two new students: the two older boys from the home visit the day before. I waved at them and they smiled then turned away.

The PolyU students at the front of the room were then explaining the next game: James Bond. The game was meant to simulate the experience of "spies" dodging laser beams. To achieve this, the PolyU group has created a large square perimeter designated by yellow tape they'd stretched across the floor. Then, they asked the students to step into the square area.

The students were told that their goal was to stay inside square and also avoid being hit by the "lasers" which were two large yellow pieces of string. The "lasers" were handled by the four members of the PolyU and IUCA team, who stood across from each other, each holding one end of the string. The four of them then slowly moved the "lasers" up, down and across the square and the children had to dodge them by ducking or jumping over the string.

By the end of the game, it was smiles all around and the students were told that if they behaved well, they'd be able to play again at the end of the day. They happily agreed. Over the next two days, I noticed even stronger bonds forming between students and their PolyU instructors. More and more PolyU and IUCA students were joining in the lunchtime basketball games, people were exchanging Instagram accounts and taking many, many group photos. By day three it was a time for some bittersweet goodbyes.

Interview with Sophos

PolyU student

“An alternative experience to get in touch with children with different personalities and experiences.”

At the end of the third day, I took the time to speak with one of the PolyU students, Sophos Yu, as she commented on her experience teaching at Ivanovka. After sitting with her PolyU team during their reflection led by instructor Catherine Chai, I heard Sophos remark on an experience that demonstrated her engagement with one of the three learning objectives: care. She told Catherine about a particular student who had greatly influenced her time working as a teacher that week. During the interview, I asked Sophos to tell me more.

Sophos began her story by describing this troublesome student she met on the first day, “one of the most unforgettable experiences is that in my group there was a very very naughty boy,” she said. She explained how “he used to fight with others and disrupt the discipline in the class,” so on the first day she became frustrated with his behavior. “I still remember at the end of that day, I punished him outside the classroom,” she said, explaining how she talked to him individually and had “another local student helper to translate directly. She then told him that if he still wanted to join the summer school activities, “then he needed to follow instructions clearly, otherwise I would invite him to go home.”

Sophos then described the shift in the boy’s behavior in the days that followed. “After that conversation and then on the second day,” she began, “I think I could not even recognize him.” She explained how the clothes he wore on the first day were very casual, “but on the second day he put on a shirt and looked very polite and serious and became another guy.” In addition to this shift in dress, he also “became very obedient and helpful starting from the second day.” She said that he “tried to help me organize students to form groups and find other students when they were not in their group and also helped me to tidy up the trash in the classroom and asked other students to be quiet.”

She also told me about a special moment that happened that morning. Usually, the PolyU team does not have breakfast with the children, because the kitchen runs a staggered breakfast. First, one group of students eats and then they go outside to play while the second group eats and so on. Given the nature of this schedule, the PolyU team waits to eat after all of the children have finished and are back in their classrooms. They then take turns going to the kitchen themselves while others stay behind to watch the students. Sophos said that "on the last day" that male student "became very caring" especially during breakfast time. She said that although teachers do not eat with the students, when this student finished "he also invited us to join, so that moment is a bit sweet."

As we neared the end of our interview, Sophos reflected on what her experience had taught her about both service and working with children more generally. "I found that children are really flexible like clay," she said, adding "because how they perform and how they can correct their behavior really depends on how the teacher puts time and effort to teach with them. I think this service trip really gave me an alternative experience to get in touch with children with different personalities and experiences."

Sophos then told me that she will miss this particular student a lot. As the interview came to a close, I followed Sophos back inside to take some final group pictures. We took many and the young boy whom had become her favorite kept pulling me back to their corner of the classroom to take more and more. As I witnessed final goodbyes at Ivanovka and thought more about Sophos' story, I was reminded of something a close friend once told me years ago: sometimes the troublemakers are the ones we love the most.

Interview with Fiona

Executive assistant at the Global Youth Leadership Office

“A miracle for me to get to know somebody who is from another world.”

As the final day at Ivanovka was winding down, I also took time to speak with Fiona Lai, who works as an executive assistant at the Global Youth Leadership Office. Fiona started by explaining "my role this year is to arrange the logistic arrangements, like meals and cars and to communicate with Ivanovka school staffs and to make sure things are getting ready for the students." She added, "I'm also observing PolyU students for their interactions and for what they do for the projects to make sure that they have good programs arranged for the students."

I first met Fiona in the pre-trip orientation session and I had been her roommate throughout the trip. During that time I had also learned that Fiona occupied an especially unique status on this year's trip. She had come to Kyrgyzstan to fulfill her own service-learning requirement just three years before. With this in mind, I asked her to tell me more. "So, with the program it's actually the 5th year of the SOAR youth leadership program," she said, adding "and I'm actually from the 2nd cohort, so I was doing similar things, but teaching different school and different subject." During Fiona's year she participated in a computing service-learning course. She told me, "I taught kids how to do programming and how to make use of robots," adding, "I think that was a great experience, because it is very rare that we communicate with people with different languages." After witnessing the interactions between PolyU teachers and their primary school students first-hand, I couldn't agree more.

Then I asked Fiona to tell me about a particularly meaningful part of her first trip to Kyrgyzstan. The first year she came to IUCA, she met Natasha. "She was my translator in my project group when I came here for the first time," Fiona told me. She continued, "we interacted with each other in projects, so we were cooperating with each other in the course," adding, "and outside of the class we talk a lot about cultural stuff and what she does and what she wants to do in the future." Fiona explained how at the end of her trip, she and Natasha "exchanged WhatsApp numbers and we've kept contact for around 3 years." She then remarked on the serindipitous reunion they had had the day prior. "I don't think I would ever come back to Kyrgyzstan," she told me "but I did and I think it's a miracle that we've met each other again. So I think it is a very good experience to know someone from the other side of the world and to know something that is really new. So we exchange our ideas of what we think about life and sometimes it is also a miracle for me to get to know somebody who is from another world," adding how the two actually share some similar values and outlooks despite being from different backgrounds. Later, in our shared dorm room at IUCA, Fiona showed me the candy that Natasha had brought her during their visit together this year.

Taiwan Fund for Children and Families - Kyrgyzstan Branch

The final two days of service were spent at the Kyrgyzstan branch of the international NGO, the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families. There, PolyU students and their teams of IUCA translators held day camps for local children and their mothers. These camps targeted similar learning objectives as the lessons designed for the students at Ivanovka. One of the most exciting games that promote collaboration between the children at the camp was the "tank game." Groups of 5-6 kids were given sheets of newspaper to tape together and produce a giant wheel. They were then told to all step inside their circular newspaper and work together to walk forward, turning the paper underneath them, all the while not ripping anything.

After working with the children, the PolyU students also led a crafting workshop for the mothers, where they taught them how to tie a traditional Chinese knot. The students brought in various colors of string and sat with them weaving together their colorful knots. Despite the language barriers that were especially pronounced during these complicated moments of instruction, there were many beautiful knots tacked up on the white board by the end of the afternoon.

Closing thoughts

As my time in Kyrgyzstan was coming to a close, I used my free moments to sit and chat with the PolyU students with whom I had grown quite close throughout the week. We laughed over our final meals together, comparing memes from Hong Kong and the US, discussing favorite bands, television shows, and movies, and even developing some inside jokes of our own. On my last night I also took a walk with Fiona and discussed the impact of this service-learning trip on each of our own lives. We made our way slowly around a track just outside of the IUCA campus, each eating some Kyrgyzstan ice cream we'd purchased at a shop nearby. We talked about the way this trip had allowed us to put our lives back home on a momentary hold. This gave us the time and space to dive head-first into our interactions in Kyrgyzstan with both the PolyU students and locals alike. We also noted how much we had learned about the different ways of life in a new part of the world. One of our favorite discoveries from the trip related to the various names for the different suits of cards in different languages. I began this discussion one night while playing card games with some of the leaders of the trip: Fiona, Kace and Catherine. I told them how, in English, we call the four suits: hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades. Apart from the suit of hearts, these names were unfamiliar to them and I asked what they were called in Chinese. Though there were some distinctions between the suit names between Cantonese and Mandarin, they came to the consensus that the suit names most closely translated to the following: hearts, tile, plum blossom, and palm leaf fan. I loved learning this and switched my English suit names to the ones they had told me for the rest of the trip. Later, I also asked the local students to translate the suits into their Russian names for me. I was pleasantly surprised when I soon learned that I had even more ways of referring to these card categories. Hearts remained universal, but the three additional suits most closely translated to: bricks, worms, and black crow. I shared this with Fiona, Kace, and Catherine during our next card game.

On our last night Fiona and I talked more about culture in Kyrgyzstan and what the local students had taught us about marriage, gender roles, general lifestyle and even cuisine. We noted the ways the similarities and differences with our own lives back home. We also discussed our favorite foods from the trip, laughed about our supermarket adventures and lamented how ants had discovered some of the desserts I had purchased one morning. I told her I wanted to come back to Kyrgyzstan to hike in the mountains and also visit lake Issyk-Kul. As the sun was setting, we said that we'd both miss our time in Tokmok a ton. Having reached the end of my time as a journalist, I couldn't help but think about all of the ways that my travels this summer have shaped me and will stick with me for years to come. I can only imagine that there's a similar feeling for each of the PolyU students who have participated in these projects. The lasting lessons learned and the meaningful relationships that have been formed remain some of the major benefits of these compulsory service-learning courses and I am thankful to have experienced a small part of that during this summer's programs.

The journalists

From left to right: Meredith Morran, Lucas Schroeder, Yeok Cheah, Aziza Albetova, Lauren Shin and Nico Page

Aziza Albetova was born and raised up in a small city Aktau in western Kazakhstan, which is located on the azure coast of the Caspian Sea. She is recently studying her third year at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, majoring in BAESP (Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Programme in English Studies for the Professions). Aziza is fascinated about studying different English speaking cultures and wants to professionally develop her effective communications skills. This storytelling journalism experience was a great start the way to achieve her academic goals. Besides language, culture and communication, Aziza is a photography and video making lover. Despite she is a beginner in video editing, with the help of her colleagues Yeok and Lucas, she tried her best to deliver all the valuable work done by PolyU Service Learning students in rural areas of developing countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Rwanda and Kyrgyzstan. During this trip.Aziza made friends with wonderful people, tried so many delicious traditional Vietnamese, Indonesian and Cambodian food and became an eyewitness of indescribably beauty of nature.

After coming back to Hong Kong, she started discovering new places with her new friends from Brown University. After 2 full years she has lived in Hong Kong, Aziza thought she became an expert about where to go to eat, walk or do sport. But it was far from being so after visiting so many new cafes, coffee shops and malls as a tourist who came to Hong Kong for the first time.

At the end, Aziza wants to thank all the people who made her 2 summer months so unforgettable and meaningful. Sending a big hug to all those amazing people!

Yeok Cheah is a Malaysian hailing from Penang. He is a photographer currently pursuing a degree in Electronic and Information Engineering. Before the trip, his writing experience mostly consisted of writing guides and textbooks for engineering companies. He loves travelling, being immersed in a different environment and listening to the stories that they behold. But most importantly, Yeok is a beach bum who has been transplanted into the heart of a thriving metropolis. The service trips were an emotional roller coaster - one that he thoroughly enjoyed. Many times he was moved to tears. On one hand he sees the struggle, on the other hand he sees the beauty of humanity. He will continue to write and pass on their stories - of the small FPR flag jabbed in the side of a mud hut in Rwanda, or the Khmer child who decided to plant himself in front of him as he let out a wide smile - the little things that had made such a big impression on him. In the team, he was responsible for shooting photos on site, editing the video for Kampung Speu, and highlight videos here and there. He loved being with the students from Brown as they live such a different life. The two months of working together was truly life changing. He was also responsible for introducing the journalists to the veggie bun place.

Meredith Morran was born and raised in Austin, Texas. She recently graduated from Brown University where she studied film and creative writing. Much of her documentary film work engages with topical social issues including aging in rural America, medication-assisted treatment programs for opioid addiction, and generational poverty. Her writing and new media work examine interactions between humans and technology as sites for humor and for questioning our existing forms of meaning making.

During her time in Hong Kong, Meredith enjoyed camping out for hours in local coffee shop, taking day trips to hike Dragon's Back and Lion's Rock, and not getting stung by wasps at Tai Po waterfall. Writing about her summer would be incomplete without mentioning Hung Hom's Veggie Bun Place (I see you, Nico) and the mouthwatering peanut butter waffles she purchased too-frequently from "the street with no cars." Finally, the meaningful friendships—internationally and cross-culturally—that this program fostered will have a lasting impact; for that Meredith is incredibly grateful.

Nico Page was born in Santiago, Chile, and was raised there and in Los Angeles, California. Nico is a filmmaker, activist and poet whose work often approaches class, labor, gender and borders. Interested in the permeable edges of documentary practice, Nico often mixes mediums and is in the third-and-a-half year of studying creative writing at Brown University in the Literary Arts program. This summer was rain and heat, tea and coffee of every imaginable sort (heaven!), the struggle to find vegetarian food with Meredith and the unwavering support of Hung Hom's Veggie Bun Place; it was constantly marveling at the height of Hong Kong, legs sore from hiking and dancing, and—this is cheesy but necessary—it was finding friendship and love everywhere.

Nico will continue to reflect on and write about the experiences in Cambodia, Rwanda and Hong Kong for a long time to come, and hopes to make the time to edit a video with all the un-useful, too-zoomed-in footage from OSL's Sony Handycam. Incredibly grateful and humbled by the opportunity of participating in the Storytelling Abroad Program, Nico extends thanks and hugs to the other journalists for the inspiration, motivation and care they always gave.

Lucas Schroeder is a rising sophomore studying computer science at Brown University. His documentaries explore topics such as social justice and crossing long-standing societal barriers. An avid filmmaker and traveler since a child, he joined forces with Yeok and Aziza to edit and produce the highlight videos featured in this book. While sifting through mountains of footage from Cambodia and Rwanda, he learned to love the Multimedia Commons on the second floor of PolyU's library. Away from the editing suite, he enjoyed braving the blistering heat and humidity to hike Hong Kong's trails, gorging on the finest peanut butter street waffles around, eating alongside hippos on a Rwandan safari, and taking a week-long excursion to Taiwan's best night markets with Yeok and an old friend from high school.

He hopes to continue pursuing his passion of highlighting stories with video and combining it with a visual computing degree in the future. He will carry the knowledge and experience shared with the other storytellers into his future projects.

Lauren Shin is a new graduate of Brown University. She studied Political Science, in which her studies on international policy and human rights has provided a meaningful framework for her experiences abroad. She is a photographer experimenting with portraiture as a medium for storytelling, using her camera to highlight the unique but often silenced stories of her subjects. Most of her photo projects have been concentrated on Brown's campus, focusing on issues involving race, class, and gender. She also began experimenting with fashion photography at Brown, yet still tries to incorporate a photojournalistic style to her shoots.

In her time in Hong Kong, she enjoyed running outside along the Tsim Sha Tsui promenade, sitting for hours in local cafes, experimental-cooking with all the various noodle brands, riding the excellent public transit, haggling at the street markets, and eating dim sum with her fellow journalists. Lauren travelled to Vietnam and Indonesia with Aziza Albetova, and is responsible for the essays of each of these countries along with the photographs. Due to her studies at Brown, Lauren was mostly fascinated how the countries she visited have been shaped by their colonial and political histories. Yet, what was most meaningful was the opportunity to connect and feel welcome by such vibrant people and cultures. She hopes that her visual and written stories in this book pay homage to the beautiful countries and people she encountered.

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