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## Enlightening Jan Term for SMC Students

By Sophie Braccini



Photos provided

to build wells for villagers who do not have access to reliable sources of water. "This project creates job for local labor and gives a reliable and long term source of water to families," says Olmer, who became acquainted with Ou while visiting Cambodia herself.

Before leaving on their adventure, the students learned about the country and raised money to build wells. In the Cambodian villages, they taught English and dental hygiene to children. They were able to collect enough money to build 13 wells. The last part of the trip was dedicated to travel and cultural discovery.

"Working with the kids in the schools was my favorite part," said DeVries, "their happiness surprised me most. They are living in homes with holes in the floor, they have no water, they have to work in the field. They draw their happiness from the small things in their lives. I realized that happiness can be found where ever you want, you just have to be willing to find it."

Fellow Jan Term traveler Paul Nnaoji agreed, "What surprised me most was the gracefulness with which the people of Cambodia live their lives. They are a nation that has endured many hardships, yet when you look around, you can't help but notice the warmth and kindness that beams from the streets."

"Cambodia opened my eyes to unconditional happiness;" added SMC student Tara Bhatnagar, "the individuals I encountered had nothing in comparison to the average American, yet they were glowing and so positive. Dwelling on meaningless problems and allowing those issues to overtake a perfectly good day is something I will not allow myself to do. Happiness is not achieved with possessions or wealth, but by what you do with what you are blessed with. This is something that will resonate with me forever."

The students also reflect on SMC's Lassalian tradition of philanthropy. "There is no greater gift to yourself than helping those in need," acknowledges Bhatnagar.

"Never underestimate the size of your contribution, because even one dollar can make a difference in someone else's life," says Nnaoji, "and you're never too young to start making a positive difference in the world. I learned that from seeing my peers do amazing things throughout the whole trip."

Now back on campus, the participants continue to feel the impact of the trip. DeVries says that she measures everything in wells, "A designer bag is half a well," she says, "you really reevaluate the value of things." She says that in the long term, she hopes to return to Cambodia and apply the economics she is studying at SMC.

Olmer will make a presentation about the trip and the non-profit work in Cambodia to the American Association of University Women on March 20th, 10:00 a.m., at the Serbian Orthodox Church in Moraga. Guests are welcome.

To learn more go to [www.friendsofccd.org](http://www.friendsofccd.org).

Traveling to a poor country can be both sobering and humbling. A Jan Term trip to Cambodia left some Saint Mary's College students reevaluating the meaning of happiness, and how it is achieved. Sophomore Chelsea DeVries describes the trip as a learning experience that has changed her life.

Jan(uary) Term is a unique Saint Mary's academic session in which, during the month of January, students are required to take a single course and encouraged to choose one that is outside their major. Offerings include on- and off- campus classes, and independent study projects.

DeVries, an Orinda resident, was among the 18 SMC students who chose to travel to the developing nation that is both struggling and determined to transform itself. The course was developed, under the leadership of Susie Miller-Reid, SMC's Director of the Center for International Programs, and Orinda's Ksenija Olmer, an experienced traveler and philanthropist, to teach, build wells and broaden the life experience of the young adult participants.

The trip was organized partially around Cambodian Panha Ou's Child's Dream Organization, which raises money



Photos provided

Reach the reporter at: [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

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