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SMC Students' Jan Term Visit to Cambodia Educates and Illuminates

Submitted by Omer Malik



Saint Mary's Jan Term students in Cambodia. Photo Provided

"Clean, fresh water! We all took it for granted it until we travelled to Cambodia on our service trip," said Saint Mary's College student Omer Malik.

As part of a Jan Term course offered at the college, Malik and 15 other Saint Mary's undergraduate students embarked on a water and education mission to Cambodia for more than two weeks last month. "Our effort has received a tremendous amount of support, raising over \$2,600, funds for 35 water wells, and 1,000 pounds of vitamins," he said.

The group partnered with Friends of the Cambodian Child's Dream Organization - a small non-profit organization that works closely with students from around the Bay Area in hopes of inspiring awareness and giving opportunities for sharing and learning through service, benefiting rural communities and, in particular, children.

"It was a unique opportunity to not only serve the underprivileged people of Cambodia, but also to experience their culture and travel to some of the most breathtaking and historic locations in the world-the famed temples of Angkor Wat," Malik said. The group spent nearly half of their trip volunteering in two rural schools.

"We spent many hours teaching English to children ages six to 20 years old. I count myself lucky enough to have been part of this enriching experience, which was led by inspiring professors Ksenija Olmer and Alexandra Rollo." With their guidance, the SMC students maximized their presence in and out of the villages.

"We developed what I would like to coin 'active travel,' or the act of traveling with a motive of truly engaging with those often less fortunate than ourselves, and not only teaching and aiding them, but learning from them. In a sense, the course's scope was not just to leave some of ourselves behind but to bring Cambodia home with us, giving a voice to a country and its people, which is lacked on the global stage."

Indeed, this was an endeavor that cannot be replicated in a lecture, book, video, or even conversation, explained Malik. "I never realized how much one learns about oneself by teaching others. In the villages we witnessed genuine gratitude, happiness, and perseverance. From teaching at the schools we developed an ever greater appreciation for the power of education and realized the advantages of being a native English speaker," he said. "At the temples we discovered spirituality, a kind that does not discriminate by religion. And finally, we felt a deep sense of grief and loss at the infamous Khmer Rouge Killing Fields. We learned of technological simplicity as we helped build one of the wells with our bare hands and only a few simple tools."

The group's social networking outlets continued to grow, even several days after returning from the trip on Jan. 26. "Our Facebook page, originally created to keep close friends and family in the loop, has transformed into a traffic hotspot averaging nearly 1,250 new views a week. We all agreed that this trip was an essential experience that every student should partake in for a complete college education. Thus we inspire to change lives-others, but also ours!"

There will be an informational meeting at 7 p.m. Feb. 27 in Saint Mary's Galileo Hall, room 201, for the community and interested students. For more information about Cambodian Child's Dream Organization, visit www.friendsofcco.org. To view the Jan Term Facebook page, visit <https://www.facebook.com/pages/St-Marys-College-of-CA-in-Cambodia-Jan-13/426282020777990>.

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