Village India Program provides ‘life-changing experience’

In summer 2007, six undergraduate students accompanied Glenn D. Stone, professor of anthropology in Arts & Sciences, to Kalleda Village in Andhra Pradesh, India, to teach and do field research. But they came away with far more than they could have imagined.

“I expected to learn about Indian culture, or about my research, or even how to teach English. Once I was there, I realized I was learning about myself,” says Kelley Greenman, IA09. “The experience challenged the way I live in America, the types of interactions I have, and the friendships I make. I found I could make the occasionally tough and very different way of living into the greatest adventure of my life.”

For Venu Reddy, EN08, who taught a course in Kalleda on the Indian diaspora, the fledgling program was a first step to making his dreams come true.

“The Village India Program provided me the opportunity to help rural India,” says Reddy. “It has been my dream to open a health clinic in India, my motherland, and this program has given me a prelude to my future career.”

Stone, who for eight years has been conducting research in India on biotechnology and the practices of cotton farmers, describes the program’s inaugural season as “quite a remarkable summer.”

His students taught English to the native Telugu-speaking Indians as well as photography, video blogging, creative writing, and environmental studies at Pai Junior College (grades 11-12) in Kalleda Village, population 2,500, in the Warangal District. The school, along with Kalleda Rural School (grades 1-10), makes education affordable for the poor and helps provide children with food, textbooks, notebooks, training, and extracurricular activities. Both are run by the Hyderabad-based Rural Development Foundation.

Stone’s own work in India has dealt with how indigenous agricultural knowledge has broken down due to rapidly changing technology and topics related to local cotton-farming practices.

Below, top: Students at Kalleda Rural School learned English from Washington University students. Below, bottom: A.J. Singletary (second from left), Arts & Sciences Class of 08, teaches environmental science to students at Pai Junior College, located in Kalleda Village.

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In 2008, Ken Botnick, associate professor of art and director of the Nancy Spirtas Kranzberg Book Studio at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, joined the Village India Program. With his help, the Washington University participants collaborated with their pupils on a book documenting village life in photographs and text.

But the most significant takeaways for the Washington University student participants are not so tangible, according to Stone.

“It gets them out into a village—something that’s tough to do in most study-abroad programs,” says Stone. “They also get to work closely with an NGO (nongovernmental organization), the Rural Development Foundation, to see how interventions for the poor really work, to learn the pros and cons.”

Those sorts of experiences can have a profound impact on students.

“Going to India was a life-changing experience,” says A.J. Singletary, IA08. “The trip helped me learn about a world of which I don’t have experience, but I also learned a great deal about myself. I was always interested in environmental problems that affect the developing world, but seeing these issues in India added humanity to my course work and focused my career path on sustainable development.”

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