Anthropology department launches ‘Village India’ program

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In 2005, Glenn Stone, professor of anthropology and environmental sciences, and his daughter Abby Stone helped start the Kalleda Photo Project, in which rural Indian teens aged 13-15 were given digital cameras and shown techniques to create their own photo blogs.

The following year, senior Emily Hawkins, an anthropology major and Stone's research assistant, helped continue the Kalleda Photo Project. “I taught a small course on composition but more importantly, I wanted to show them how to create art.”

“We've got a 'greatest hits' blog, where we go and pick the very best of the pictures. There's more texture, more ethnographic content--they photograph palm-wine collectors and capture daily life,” said Stone.

“The first cohort of photobloggers is graduating from secondary school and going to the junior college. Because of these kids and their photography, there will be more money going towards their education.”

Recently, the BBC featured an article on the Kalleda Photo Project, which was, at one point, the most e-mailed story of the entire Web site.

“24 hours after the story appeared on [the BBC] Web site, it was read by over 135,000 people. When you compare it to the kids themselves, it's quite remarkable. Suddenly they're on the BBC with over 100,000 people looking at their art—it's really huge.”

“Just seeing the expressions on their faces and how excited and happy they were was gratifying. I saw this change in the level of their English skills... and it made me realize that we were finally understanding each other,” said Hawkins.

This summer, the Department of Anthropology will be starting a new six-week study abroad in Andhra Pradesh, India. Dubbed the “Village India” program, students will be able to earn up to five academic credits during the program while participating in anthropology research and teaching English at Pai Junior College, an 11th-12th English-medium school.

“I had been going to Kalleda for a number of years, and I have been very impressed by the school there and the foundation that ran it. I thought it would be potentially a wonderful place to bring Wash. U. students, except for the language barrier.”

Stone noted that Kalleda schools had difficulty finding English teachers to live in the rural villages. Both Pai Junior College, which is slated to open in June 2007, and Kalleda rural school are run by the Rural Development Fund, a non-government organization based in Andhra’s capital city of Hyderabad.

“I started talking with the people in this foundation about how we could bring Wash. U. students over there. The people

Teenagers in rural India took this photo for the anthropology department’s Kalleda Photo Project. Undergraduates will continue the project as part of Village India this summer.
in Kalleda were extremely interested in it, because not only does it provide English teachers, but it also opens up the world for these kids.

University students will participate in two studies, one on Stone's current research in biotechnology and the other on the effects of education on fertility and reproductive decision-making.

Stone first became interested in the Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh, where Kalleda is located, after the suicide epidemic among farmers in 1998. He subsequently spent several years studying the impact of genetically modified crops, such as cotton, on these farmers.

"Both the industry and the green activists claimed the suicides supported their side in the debate, but neither actually knew what would happen. How would the farmers understand the new technology? Would it produce new dependencies?"

Stone attributed the success of the Village India program to James McLeod, Dean of Arts & Sciences. "He is incredibly supportive of innovative programs. He could easily have said this causes a hundred problems and headaches for us, but he's been very enthusiastic."

In addition to receiving subsidies from Arts & Sciences, the program has also received contributions from private donors to help offset the costs to students. Interviews were conducted earlier this week to find between six and eight students to participate in this summer's study abroad program. Among the students selected were two Danforth scholars, a student representative to the Board of Trustees and a student that specializes in rural entrepreneurship.

"I was excited about the chance for Wash. U. students to have such an unusual overseas experience. This is not a dorm in a foreign university—it is living in a village. This is the real thing," said Stone. "It's not the sort of program I would even consider starting in a university that didn't have the sort of talented and adventuresome students we have here. And judging by the students who have applied for it, it's going to be a great program."

Junior Venu Reddy, a biomedical engineer, became interested in the program because he wants to start a clinic in Andhra once day.

"My father grew up in a village and most of [the people] are very disadvantaged, and I just want to go back and help out in any way I can. You feel like these people supported you to get you where you are," said Reddy, whose family has roots in Andhra.

Sophomore Kelley Greenman, who is also participating in the program, said that her involvement stemmed from her interests in environmental issues, such as depletion of ground water in India.

"Mostly I'm looking forward to the teaching and getting involved with the local kids, and seeing what their world is like, and how it differs from ours."