



Summer Behind the Taj

By LISA A. SWENARSKI DE HERRERA

As part of their undergraduate education, two Americans spent the summer talking to Indian villagers and working for an Indian NGO.

Like many Americans, John Lines and Taylor Triplett visited the Taj Mahal this summer. But unlike the others, they didn't fly 12,000 kilometers to have their picture taken on the same bench as Princess Diana. They headed to the back of the Taj, across the Yamuna River to the community of Kachpura, to talk to residents and understand their lives.

"It's one thing to sit in a classroom and learn about economics and disparities where all you can do is to reiterate what's been said," says Triplett. And yet it's another to spend your summer with the families represented by statistics in textbooks.

Triplett, 21, and Lines, 22, are from Sewanee: The University of the South, in Tennessee, one of many U.S. universities that encourage or even require students to spend time overseas as part of their undergraduate education.

The two worked with the Cross Cutting Agra Program, which is supported by the United States Agency for International Development in partnership with the Agra Municipal Corporation, the Archaeological Survey of India and the Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence. The program's

goal is to work with low income communities to generate livelihood options linked with Agra's tourism economy and to improve living conditions. For example, unemployed youths have been trained to guide tourists through the monuments behind the Taj. These monuments form the Agra Heritage Trail, home to Humayun's mosque, a Mughal garden and several low-income communities. The project also started vocation centers where women and girls sew shoe-cleaning mitts, dish covers and other items that are sold to hotels.

Nearly 250,000 Americans studied overseas in 2007, up 150 percent from the previous decade. And while Europe continues



Top left: Rajesh Kumar (center, left), Taylor Triplett (center), John Lines (right) and Kachpura residents at the first group meeting of their project. Above: A street in Kachpura, Agra.

Left: Lines, Meera Devi, who benefitted from the program, and Triplett.

For more information:

Sewanee: The University of the South

<http://www.sewanee.edu/>

Cross Cutting Agra Program

http://www.usaid.gov/in/our_work/activities/Eco_growth/cc_agra.htm

Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE)

<http://www.cureindia.org/aboutus.html>

to be the most popular destination, that trend is slowing. India hosted 24 percent more Americans in 2007 than the year before.

Students who experience a foreign country come back with better skills and a better vision. Triplett and Lines were able to practice their interviewing skills, apply statistical analysis and learn the importance of questioning their assumptions. For example, Triplett says that many people who have not had an overseas experience have the impression that poor families are in their situation because of their own doing. Yet, his experience taught him otherwise.

“I’ve never seen a greater sense of hope and perseverance,” he says, after spending four weeks in Kachpura. Triplett and Lines also represent a trend in shorter stays overseas. More than 55 percent of Americans who study abroad do so for eight weeks or less. Only 4.5 percent spend a full academic year overseas.

Lines, who studied the history of U.S. development aid, says that he learned in the classroom that the top-down approach to development is no longer considered useful. And he saw for himself in Kachpura how a more community-centered approach really works.

“Development is becoming more democratic,” he says. “The people are the ones who know their problems the most.”

When Triplett and Lines showed up for work, they thought they would focus on finding jobs for local residents, but they were in for a shock. The director of the Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence gave them their assignment: Analyze the effects of toilets and septic tanks installed with the help of the Cross Cutting Agra Program.

For four weeks, the two went door to door with Rajesh Kumar, a team member who helped them interview dozens of families. The results were surprising. Earlier, women had to practice open defecation, which subjected them to harassment by men and even rape.

Now, finances have also improved. Women reported that earlier, they spent about 700 rupees on health care expenses during the monsoon season to cure their children’s diarrhea, vomiting and typhoid. Also, the women lost money because they had to care for the children when they would normally be working.

“They’ve gone from women having to scurry through the shadows to do something completely natural to being completely empowered,” says Triplett.

Triplett says that while in India, he reflected on his college back home.

“The biggest thing I’ve learned from interning abroad is we’re lucky to have wonderful professors from all over the world,” he says. He has two professors with roots in India.

“Dr. Yasmeen Mohiuddin and Dr. Krishna Ayyangar tried to

India-Born Teacher Inspires American Students

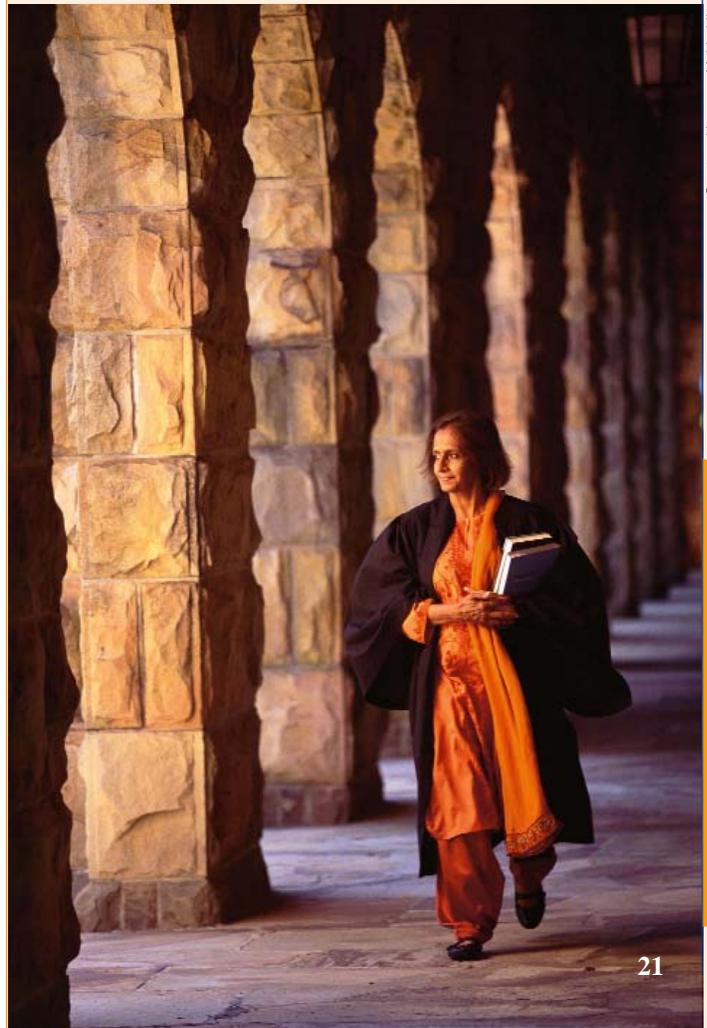
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An interview with **Yasmeen Mohiuddin**, Ralph Owen distinguished professor of economics at Sewanee: The University of the South, in Tennessee.

Yasmeen Mohiuddin designed and directs the Social Entrepreneurship Education Program that sends university students like Taylor Triplett and John Lines to work as interns with NGOs, financial institutions or development programs in India, Bangladesh and other countries as part of their economics and finance curriculum.

What is the history of overseas internships at your university?

The major overseas internship has been the Biehl Program in International Studies, a self-directed social science research internship conducted outside of the United States. Few of these



Courtesy Yasmeen Mohiuddin

have focused on international development though.

The more recent internship program, launched in 2007, is SEED, the Social Entrepreneurship Education Program. Taylor and John did their internships in Bangladesh in 2008 and at CURE in Agra in 2009 under this program. The program is an intensive, eight-week social entrepreneurship immersion program that has three components: the summer study-abroad program in India and Bangladesh for two course credits, one on microfinance institutions in South Asia; a four-week internship at a finance/microfinance institution in the U.S., Latin America, Asia or Europe; and a week of intensive pre-business training at Sewanee in finance, accounting and entrepreneurship.

Sixteen students participated in the SEED program in summer 2009 at six organizations in India, Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic and the United States.

Why are these internships important?

Each one of my students who did these internships has shared with me that the internships were one of their greatest learning experiences—not just about microfinance...or a foreign culture, but about the world, their place in it, and life itself. All the interns learned or improved their skills related to financial analysis, report writing, research, making presentations and using technology. They received excellent on-the-job training and gained valuable experience that would serve them well in their careers. Each of them developed a deep understanding

of the work of their organizations, which not only increased their own sensitivity...but also generated a genuine enthusiasm for making a difference.



Courtesy Yasmeen Mohiuddin

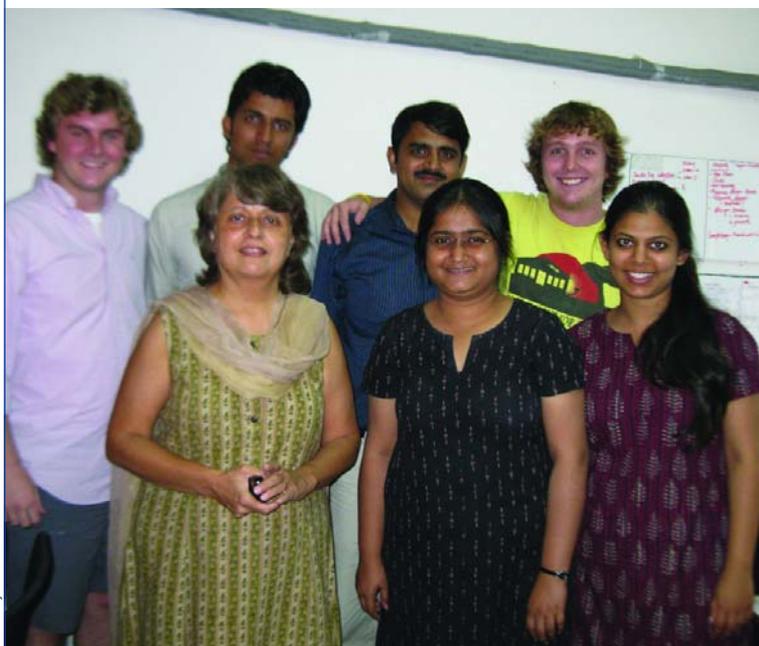
videos of unique development programs like the Grameen Bank. I have known both [Muhammad] Yunus of Grameen Bank and [Fazle Hasan] Abed of BRAC for about two decades and have sent several of my students for internships at these organizations. I have also taken field trips at times to the “third world within the first world” type of places like shelters [for the homeless]. Finally, I engage them in a lot of discussion on development issues, with real examples from developing countries. And...many of our students have traveled a lot to different parts of the world.

How did you end up in the United States?

I was born in India in 1947 and my family migrated to Pakistan soon afterward. I came to the U.S. in 1974 to Vanderbilt University on a Ford Foundation scholarship for one year for an M.A. in economic development. But my story, like that of so many others, shows that the U.S. is a land of opportunity like no other if you work hard. I did very well at Vanderbilt, and Ford Foundation extended my fellowship for a Ph.D. for four years in what was labeled “The Year of the Woman,” saying that I would be the first Pakistani woman with a Ph.D. in economics from the U.S. Sewanee hired me in 1981. I went back to Pakistan twice to settle there, but finally decided to migrate in 1985. Sewanee had kept the position open for me from 1983 to 1985 while I was in Pakistan even though I was temporary then. So I stayed in Sewanee. My fields of interest are gender studies and micro-credit. And yes, I am a U.S. citizen.

What is it like for you, as a teacher with an international background, to teach students in a community like Sewanee, Tennessee?

It is both a challenge and a pleasure for me to bring the world to them. I have done it through sharing with students my research, conference, World Bank and United Nations experience in more than 30 countries. I have also done it through taking groups on study-abroad programs to India, China, Thailand and Bangladesh. I have also invited guest speakers from diverse international backgrounds to come and talk to students and shown them



Renu Khosla (front row, left), president and founder of the Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence, team members Anindita Mukherjee, Nandita Gupta, Triplett (back row, left), Sukant Shukla, Rajesh Kumar and Lines.

shape my way of thinking so that it wasn't so Eurocentric, to look at things through the eyes of the people.”

So what will these two young Americans do with their education?

Lines is from Florida and is finishing up his degree in political science. His next step is either law school or working for a think tank.

Triplett is from Mississippi and just graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in international development. He is looking for a job with the U.S. Senate. Will he remember the people of Kachpura when preparing briefings for a U.S. Senator?

“This is one of the best life experiences I'll ever have,” says Triplett. “These are people I may not ever see again, but people I will always remember and care about.”