Editorial: Global Growth

Two UH Hilo community members’ experiences studying abroad

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Photographs courtesy of Carolina Lam and Rosannah Gosser

Carolina Lam’s own experiences studying abroad are the reason why she chose to help establish the Center for Global Education and Exchange and continue to develop the opportunities that UH Hilo offers for students interested in extending their education overseas. While pursuing both her undergraduate and graduate degrees, Lam studied abroad first to Peru, China, and then to Chile, and it was these experiences overseas that changed the course of her studies and, ultimately, her life’s direction.

 In Peru, Lam was studying Spanish but found that instead of dissecting it as a language, she simply enjoyed using it the way she had been while immersed in a foreign culture. During her year in Peru, Lam began to question why it was that communities were so impoverished when the environment around them produced such abundant natural resources, and through encouragement from her professors and mentors, she began taking economics and sustainable development courses.

 In the end, Lam decided to reroute her career towards international education in order to help students connect their interests and transform their perspectives the way she had experienced as she studied abroad. “I want students to realize that as long as you’re doing something that makes you happy, you can earn a living from it,” Lam states.

 Since the opening of the Center for Global Education and Exchange in 2005, roughly 600 students have travelled through UH Hilo’s study abroad programs. These programs are offered as part of a Direct International Exchange Program, through which students pay UH Hilo tuition but attend an overseas university, or through an International Education Organization, where students pay tuition to a host university or program. Applications must be submitted at least one year in advance, and students must take a one-credit preparatory course to discuss different aspects of travelling abroad, such as obtaining passports and learning how to acculturate in a foreign environment.

 “It’s like the phrase ‘the world is your classroom,’” said Lam when I asked what students gain besides course credits while studying abroad. “It’s an entirely transformative experience, and it makes me so happy to observe the growth in students once they return from overseas.”

 Not only do students build their resume, accumulate credits, and hone their academic and professional interests, but being abroad teaches them about how to maneuver in a larger sphere of life. Lam hopes that through the Center for Global Exchange, the university can help build global citizens who understand cultural sensitivity, mature away from ignorant attitudes, and strive to become social entrepreneurs working to find ways to improve communities and the world as a whole.

 Lam also emphasizes the social skills that students develop from meeting new people, engaging in a different culture, and learning from mistakes, as well as confidence and independence that she often notices students return with.

 “It’s amazing to see the glow that’s there in the face of returned students and how they seem to be so much more sure of themselves than before,” says Lam. “But it’s also important to remember to be kind to yourself. When you have no expectations about studying abroad, you have the best experience because then you’re receptive to anything that comes your way.”

 This past May, I participated in Hawai`i Community College’s Cultural Ecology of Ireland program. Our group spent three weeks based on the northwestern coast of the island, learning about the Irish people, their environment, and how the two’s relationship has evolved over thousands of years. We studied everything from the difference between clovers and shamrocks to Celtic mythology to the rich history of Ireland’s literature.

 Our program, run through the Institute of Study Abroad Ireland, paired morning lectures with day excursions to prepare us with background information before we went to experience the material we were learning about in person. Before working on a bog stacking logs of peat moss, we discussed how the agricultural practices of Ireland’s Neolithic people combined with unique chemical processes in the soil transformed the landscape into rolling hills of spongy, verdant fields. Following our lecture on the events of Bloody Sunday, we visited the murals commemorating the site where the assassination of unarmed civilians by British police in 1972 escalated the conflict known colloquially as “the Troubles.”

 Our group also examined the parallels that can be drawn between Ireland and Hawai`i.

The cultural worldviews of both native Hawaiians and ancient Celts traditionally involve inseparable reciprocal relationships between human beings and their natural surroundings, embodied as powerful supernatural deities that are believed to control many, if not all, aspects of human existence. To be pono, or to maintain the sacred equilibrium of the universe, is a central tenet of Hawaiian culture and is upheld in relationships between the akua (gods), the people, and the `aina.

 The ancient people of Ireland had similar beliefs with regard to their relationship to the land and the universe, manifested through the careful orientation of sacred structures to the equinox sun, myths that draw upon the animistic properties of all living things, and widespread rock carvings that suggest concepts like infinity, balance, and the cycle of life.

 In addition, the location of both islands was seen by foreign powers as strategic: Ireland as right off of the British Isles and Hawai`i as a midway point in the middle of the Pacific. Over the last millennia, they became targets of conquest and oppression towards the people who called the land home. Language revitalization is a key focus for both Gaelic and Hawaiian cultural groups as they fight to strengthen their traditions that were undermined by the influence of colonizers. Learning about the comparisons between Ireland and Hawai`i helped our group recognize how two places can share commonalities while being distinctly unique in their culture and environment.

 As a director of Global Education at the Center for Global Education and Exchange, Carolina Lam loves seeing how venturing abroad often plants a seed in students’ lives, shooting them in new directions with new aspirations. For me, the distance from home and the freedom of anonymity made me realize that if you are trying to discover what you’re passionate about, it often lies in something that’s always been right in front of you. I understood this both during my study abroad program and during the two weeks I spent alone in Dublin, where I met more people than I can name and crossed the River Liffey more times than I can count.

 Although one month abroad is not exactly a long period of time, I grew because I went into it vowing to remain open and ready for answers. I swore to take every fragment of myself that I thought I knew and dissect it, hold it up to the light, and question its place. I aimed to ask myself, over and over until the thoughts ran threadbare, what exactly it is that makes me feel like I’m serving a purpose, what it takes to not let the opinions of others inhibit my own happiness, and what it means to act out of love and not fear.

 In the end, I did not have some enlightening, earth-shattering epiphany. Instead, I reached a degree of understanding that asking for an immediate answer about who I am and where I’m headed is an impossibly daunting, unrealistic expectation. Being abroad solidified things that I already knew but desperately needed to be reminded of, and I realized how much I need to allow for time to work itself out as it always does. Most importantly, it taught me that in order to show authentic love to others, I first have to treat myself with love that’s complete, confident, genuine, dynamic, unrefined and unrestricted (an ongoing process).

 I think that these kinds of larger perspectives about where you fall on the timeline of your life and how your struggles now are going to matter in the long run are much easier to understand when you get out of your comfort zone and into that beautiful mess of a place we call our planet. This awareness is essential in anyone’s life, but it’s especially significant as students.

 Besides being a piece of parchment pricy in both money and time, the diplomas that we’re all working towards represent how we plan to make our contribution to the world. Experiencing a corner of the globe different than the one you’re used to can help cement the ways in which you hope to brighten your own community, expose an entirely new direction to take, or simply open your eyes to all of the possibilities that will remain out there despite feelings of self-doubt and discouragement.

 Lam’s hope for the Center for Global Education and Exchange is to make study abroad programs part of the culture and vocabulary of UH Hilo students. She prompts students who feel hesitant about taking their education overseas to examine their lives on a bigger scale.

 “Break it down,” urges Lam. “How old are you? How old do you think you will live to be? If you’re 19 and live to be 80, four months of studying abroad is only a fraction of your life, and in that period of time you will gain so much. Why shouldn’t you?”