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When I am asked about my time spent in Laos this summer on a Kellogg Experiencing the World Fellowship, I find it difficult to stop myself from speaking about it at great length. This is due to the fact that there were so many incredibly rewarding parts of the experience that I encountered alongside of challenges, which are inevitable with research and travel. Needless to say, the experience deeply impacted not only my knowledge of the subject I researched and the region of the world that I researched in, but also, my overall outlook on the world.

To begin, there were quite a few challenges that I encountered during my Kellogg Experiencing the World Fellowship. To name a couple, two of the most significant challenges were having to revise my research plan and not knowing the language. When I arrived in Laos and met with the Association for Autism for the first time, it was clear that my initial research plan to interview 30 families, two times each, was not totally plausible. Luckily, however, I was able to consult with Mimi and Michael, two of the directors of the Association for Autism, as well as Dr. Manivone Thikeyo, an American trained Lao psychologist, and discuss what would and wouldn't work as a research plan. I decided that I needed to hold a group discussion with the parents of children who used the Association for Autism's services. This worked very well as an initial and necessary basis of research because I was able to determine what questions were and weren't important to the parents and what topics would be the most essential to investigate more deeply. After the focus group, I was able to conduct more in depth and fruitful one-on-one individual family interviews. Although I was not able to conduct 30 one-on-one

interviews like I had originally planned, the interviews that I was able to conduct were more productive and informative.

Additionally, a second major challenge was that I do not know Lao Loom, the language of Laos and of the people that I was interviewing. This meant that for the focus group and all of my interviews I needed to hire a translator. The translator turned out to be much more expensive than I had anticipated. While the translator was good at her job, I did feel like it would have been a much more beneficial experience if I could have conversed directly with the people I was interviewing. It is a given that there is always something lost in translation, especially with topic as sensitive as autism. It would have also been an incredible experience to work more directly with the children who received the Association for Autism's services. Due to my inability to speak Lao Loom, however, I was unable to engage with the children in the way that I wanted. The main positive aspect of this issue, however, was that I had the opportunity to learn how to work with a translator.

Overall, my experience was filled with countless positives and rewards. To name a few of the major rewards, my ETW Fellowship funded field project provided me with the opportunity to speak with and learn from so many people of diverse backgrounds, helped me further discover my research interests for my IDS capstone project, and to truly live and experience life in a completely different culture. I can now call a number of people from Laos good co-workers and friends. While I learned so much from all of the official research interviews I conducted, I also learned much more than I ever expected from everyone else that I worked with, met, and spoke with.

My time in Laos this summer helped me further discover my research interests for my IDS capstone project. Coming into the summer, my research question focused on whether, in Laos, defining individuals as autistic creates a negative social stigma that leads to a decline in quality of life, or if it provides opportunities for acceptance, inclusion, and resources that lead to an improvement in quality of life. I knew that what I saw and learned this summer would help me determine my more specific interests around this category, and this was definitely the case. Although I am not exactly sure which direction I want to take with my capstone research project as of yet, I know that I am very interested in the impact that Lao Buddhism's belief system has on the understanding of autism and disabilities. Additionally, I am interested in the role that Thailand's medical and hospital system has on and with the Lao medical and hospital system. Due to the poor quality of Laos' health system, people must go to Thailand in order to be diagnosed as autistic. After speaking with many parents about their experiences with the relationship between autism and Buddhism and also about their experiences with the Lao and Thai medical systems, I have become very interested in perusing these areas of research in more depth. Without the ETW Fellowship, I would never have discovered that these are important and relevant areas of research, which I am interested in.

One of the most rewarding parts of pursuing my field project was the opportunity to live and experience life in an extremely different culture and country for an extended period of time. It is one thing to learn about a culture through readings or simply talking to people, and a completely different thing to actually become a part of the culture. Beyond just learning more about the region, the most beneficial part of engaging myself with the people of Laos was truly understanding on a deeper level the common humanity

that is found in all of humankind. While this may sound cliché, I find it necessary to mention because it is something that I profoundly experienced and came to understand during my ETW Fellowship this summer.

Overall, my ETW Fellowship was an experience filled with many incredible rewards and with beneficial challenges that were necessary for me to grow as a researcher and individual. I come from my ETW Fellowship with a deeper knowledge of not only the topics I researched, but also of where my research interests lay, as well as friends on the other side of the world, and a deeper understanding of a foreign culture that is no longer quite so foreign.