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There is a unique richness that comes from being able to experience a country in the profound way that a field project permits. This summer, I had the opportunity to spend twenty-eight days in Laos, where I completed a field project interning with the Population Education and Development Association (PEDA). PEDA works throughout Laos to implement programs aimed at educating rural villages about various health challenges and how to prevent them. My time in Laos, where I was focused on PEDA's malaria prevention projects, rarely gave me what I was expecting, but often gave me more than I would have dreamed to anticipate. While working on project reports, designing future projects for PEDA, and observing their approaches to health education and malaria prevention, I grew as a person, as a student, and as an aspiring global health professional. My time in a country that was so unique and different from my own opened my eyes to realities I had never considered and helped me to better prepare for a career in global health.

I was challenged both professionally and personally throughout my time in Laos. Language was a barrier that, although expected, proved more challenging than anticipated. Most of the PEDA employees knew English, but accents were difficult to understand at times. The miscommunication that this created led to some frustrations, sometimes comical, sometimes detrimental to the work. The other interns and I had to rely heavily on PEDA to help us translate survey results and other materials, an obstacle in finishing our work.

Work pace culture was also challenging. Our Lao colleagues described the pace as “Lao time,” which was often several hours late. Coming from an environment where there always seemed to be more things to do than time available, I had come to Laos expecting to be very busy. I had understood that the Lao people had a very relaxed culture before I arrived, but I hadn’t realized the extent that this would impact the workplace. Only there for a short time, I wanted to accomplish as much as possible, but this goal was often impeded waiting for the necessary resources to complete our jobs. I had come to Laos with a purpose. I wanted to learn how to work in an international development office, and to work with PEDDA to prevent malaria in the region. It was difficult at times to feel that this purpose was being delayed by circumstances often outside of my control. The difficulty in progressing my work was very frustrating, but to the PEDDA employees, a slow work pace was simply the norm. PEDDA was very effective in their work; they simply approached it with a different, more relaxed mentality than I was used to. Throughout the time I spent in Laos, I was able to learn how to better appreciate and accept the Lao culture and the ways in which it was different than my own. Learning to work in a different culture, one where I was an observer and a guest, taught me to become more independent in the way that I conduct my own tasks and to work most effectively in whatever situation I find myself in.

The challenges described above were offset with rewards beyond what I could have imagined. The field project brought with it so many “once in a lifetime” experiences. There were so many moments in Laos when I would look around in awe and amazement at how incredible my surroundings were. These were the kind of “once in a lifetime” moments that could only come about by being completely immersed in a foreign culture.

I experienced a traditional Lao Baci ceremony, where my coworkers and an elder reciting a reverential prayer welcomed me. I sat with over thirty village chiefs as they learned about malaria and discussed the most effective ways to educate their community. On multiple occasions during our travels, I was awestruck by the beauty of a massive waterfall or an ornate mountaintop temple. These experiences often came about when I was going about my everyday life in Laos, which made them so much more special. One of the greatest rewards from my field project came from the moments where I experienced the richness of Lao culture in unexpected and unplanned ways.

Completing a field project, and the immersion it fosters, allows for the development of personal relationships. In my situation particularly, these relationships were, and continue to be, a reward that is crucial to the success of a project. PEDA is partnered with GlobeMed, a club to which I belong at Notre Dame. This partnership goes far beyond my summer, and into this year and the future. Personal relationships are crucial for the continued efficacy of this partnership. Relationships built during shared meals, long car rides, and days spent working hand in hand are so much deeper than those developed through emails or Skype. The relationships developed will improve communication and trust moving forward and allow for constructive criticism and increased collaboration. Friendships and trust were developed between people and partners that would not have been a possibility without the personal interaction of a field project.

My time spent working with PEDA allowed me to develop a greater understanding of the current state of malaria prevention and public health in the region. This is knowledge that I believe will benefit me immensely as I go forward into a future in international development and global health. Conversations with my colleagues introduced me to what

they believed to be the most important challenges in their country and how to combat them. They discussed their opinions on the relationships with the various partners trying to combat malaria throughout Laos and the importance of this continued relationship. I found myself immersed in the office, which allowed me to understand the complexities of working in an international development office. This understanding is very beneficial for me as I pursue a career in international development.

My understanding of the region was enhanced by my opportunity to experience Laos with my colleagues at PEDDA. This opportunity permitted for the most authentic experience possible. Instead of only visiting tourist sites or the restaurants listed in my tour book, we went to small Pho restaurants where ordering in Lao was the only option, and to waterfalls that only locals knew about. In the time that I was there, I felt that I was truly able to encounter the real Laos. I learned how to sit cross-legged on the floor for meals, eat sticky rice with my hands, and bargain at the night market.

When asked to describe my time spent in Laos, there are few words that adequately express the experience. It was indescribable to experience a country and learn in the way that only a field project could provide. I was challenged to confront the unknown, rewarded with awe and understanding, and transformed by the opportunity.