

# Darien News

## Thinking Beyond Borders Encourages Students to Gain New Perspective

By Larissa Lytwyn

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A new study abroad program is challenging students to embrace life with a whole new perspective.

Designed for students taking a Gap Year between high school and college, Thinking Beyond Borders is a 35-week program that gives students the opportunity to explore the distinct social, economic and political realities of four developing nations.

Upon their return to the United States, students share their experiences with leading politicians and representatives from corporations including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in New York City and Washington, D.C. They spend their final month touring high schools nationwide to discuss the myriad issues involving international development.

"While we've seen a lot of programs lead practical initiatives to improve a region, we wanted to do something that went to the root of what causes these problems," said Executive Director Christopher Stakich of Fairfield. "We wanted to develop a curriculum that could give students a greater understanding of how these issues occur with the hopes of developing long-term solutions."

The program's Director of Curriculum, Robin Pendoley, holds a Bachelors in International Development Studies from UCLA and a Masters in Education from Harvard. Like Stakich, Pendoley has a passion for education and international development.

Guiding questions leading the curriculum include asking students how they define themselves as Americans, their conception of power and their ideas on how global policies affect them. "Some students have parents who are executives at large corporations, which can create a very personal reflection when reading about the negative impact much of Corporate America has had abroad," Stakich said. "But the point is we need everyone to work together to make a difference." This, he said, is why students meet with organizations like the World Bank.

Last year's inaugural group of 16 students returned last month from their journey through Costa Rica, Ecuador, China, Vietnam, Thailand and South Africa.

Among these students was Darien resident Alexandra Duncan, 18. "The experience went beyond anything I could ever have anticipated," Duncan said. A top student at Darien High School, Duncan has long had a passion for international service. During her junior year of high school she saw *Invisible Children*, a 2003 documentary about the plight of child soldiers in war-torn northern Uganda.

The filmmakers went on to establish Invisible Children, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to assisting the children whose tragic lives they had captured on film. Duncan helped begin a chapter of Invisible Children, Inc. at Darien High School.

Thinking Beyond Borders, she said, was a way of gaining more valuable life experience before beginning college at Tufts. "I found out about [Thinking Beyond Borders] attending a Gap Year Fair," Duncan said. "I knew from the time I was in eighth grade I wanted to spend time traveling and learning more about the world before going to college."

"There is a growing trend gaining more and more academic support that a Gap Year allows students to really get a chance to know themselves better and find out what they really want to do with their lives," Stakich said. Thinking Beyond Borders only accepts students who have already been accepted to college. Additionally, program applicants should be "very mature and independent with fully supportive

families,” Stakich said. “The biggest challenge is probably to be away from family for so long.”

Each student lived with a host family in each country. After a ten-day training in Costa Rica last September, students embarked on their first five-week unit in Ecuador. The focus of the curriculum was clean water and development. In rural areas of Ecuador with limited sanitation, clean water can be scarce. Despite the challenges, Duncan said she was impressed by the strong sense of community she found in the village. “I felt closest to my Ecuadorian host family,” she said. “They were very warm, friendly and inviting.” Duncan also speaks Spanish, which she said allowed her to communicate easily with her host family.

At the conclusion of each country’s unit, students enjoyed an “enrichment week” exploring a cultural highlight of the area. Following the Ecuador unit, students hiked the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu in Peru. “I would definitely say my experience hiking Machu Picchu was one of the biggest highlights of the trip,” Duncan said. “I would love to go back to Ecuador, too.”

In China, the students explored public education and economic growth. Duncan found China’s vast cultural differences from the United States “fascinating.” In America, she said, “we have a very individualistic approach to life. American education emphasizes discussion. In China [discussion] is virtually nonexistent.” Duncan said she enjoyed the China curriculum the most. “I particularly enjoyed reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,” she said. The text, by Paulo Freire, examines notions of justice and equality within the education systems of oppressive nations. It is considered a leading book among educators in developing countries.

In Vietnam, students learned about the challenges of waste management in a rapidly developing country. In Thailand, the group studied sustainable agriculture. “It was interesting to learn about the idea of working together as a community to produce crops everyone could share,” Duncan said. Thailand’s sense of community, she continued, was strong. “One woman in the village was recently left by her husband,” Duncan said. “She had young children and no money. So the village held a meeting to determine how to help support her during such a difficult time.”

South Africa was perhaps the most heartbreaking stop on the journey, Duncan said. The students explored public health and the AIDS epidemic. “I remember seeing these young girls at the [health clinic] with AIDS who, even at their young age, knew they were [sick],” Duncan said.

In each country, students prepared five-to-seven minute multimedia presentations capturing their experiences. After their meetings in New York and Washington, D.C., Duncan said, the students would work in groups to create 45-minute formal presentations to present to high school students.

“I would definitely recommend this program to anyone who cares about making a difference,” Duncan said. “You learn you can make a difference everyday just by how you think, how you live.”

The biggest challenge during the months abroad, Duncan said, was missing family. “While you quickly become close with the other students, you definitely miss home,” she said. Duncan said periodic “Skype Nights,” allowing students to interact through live video with their loved ones, helped. Parents also created a special Thinking Beyond Borders Facebook page for their children to post pictures and blog about their experiences. “The Internet connection is fairly consistent throughout much of the trip,” Duncan said. “Obviously it’s not always every day. It was more like every week or so.”

The 2009 program will bring students to India to study sustainable agriculture in lieu of Vietnam and Thailand. “We want to vary the countries as much as possible,” Stakich said. This year, the program can accept up to 32 students. “We have already received several applications,” Stakich said. Applications are structurally similar to college ones, evaluating students’ community service, program interest and academic record. Enrollment is on a rolling basis.

The cost of the program is \$39,000. Need-based financial aid is available.

“We are hoping to acquire more corporate sponsorship to provide the financial aid necessary to allow more students to participate,” Stakich said. “We truly believe in this program’s spirit of social entrepreneurship, learning the “whys” to understand how these problems began so we can enact proactive, positive change.”

To learn more about the program, including how to apply or donate, visit <http://www.thinkingbeyondborders.org>.