

Service Learning Goes Global

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The mention of India may conjure up images from the stories of Rudyard Kipling or more modern visuals coming from the booming Bollywood movie industry. For 13 Tulane undergrads, however, India is synonymous with public service after a life-changing month this summer spent helping refugees from Tibet adjust to life on the subcontinent.



This summer, Tulane undergraduate students traveled to Dharamsala, India, as part of a program to help refugees from Tibet adjust to life on the subcontinent. (Photos provided by Michael Pizzolatto)

The trip grew from a program first organized in 2002 by Ron Marks, dean of the [School of Social Work](#), for his graduate students. Marks says he worked with the [Tulane Center for Public Service](#) to develop a program for undergraduates after the public-service graduation requirement was added to the university curriculum following Hurricane Katrina.

“This is the second year they have taken undergrads on the trip,” says Marks. “They've taken it and run with it.”

The students spent a month in India, most of it in Dharamsala, home of Tibetan refugees and the Central Tibetan Administration, the government in exile. They worked with the refugees to help them develop English language skills so they can better adapt to life outside of their homeland.

In preparation for the trip, during the spring semester the students took classes focusing on social work, refugee issues and Tibetan issues. They also communicated with refugees via e-mail prior to touching down in Delhi. The trip put into practice the academics learned in the classes.

“The program is an unbelievably eye-opening experience for the students,” Marks says. “Through this experience, the students have an opportunity to learn about the way of the world outside of their own comfort zone. The community we go to, and immerse ourselves in, is a dramatic shift for them. This community of devout Buddhists is all about putting others above one's self.”



Arianna Johnson, right, a senior psychology major, tutors a Tibetan refugee in English.

Michael Pizzolatto, Center for Public Service program manager, accompanied the students and agrees that the trip this summer was a watershed experience for the

students.

“It breaks down the student's own personal understanding of the world,” Pizzolatto says. “It gives them a chance to see things from a totally different perspective that you can't get just from studying. They can read all they want about Tibetan refugees, but simply being there gave them their own perspective about what that actually meant.”

Neil Guidry, an adjunct social work instructor, also traveled with the students. Guidry, a social work alumnus, is the founder of the Louisiana Himalaya Association, a nonprofit group working in Dharamsala. He assisted Marks in setting up the original program for the graduate students.

Vincent Ilustre, executive director of the Center for Public Service, says the program was successful in terms of developing the students' ideas of what public service means on the world scale.

“We see the international service programs as a way for the students to expand their service outside of New Orleans and look at issues facing the global community,” Ilustre says.

While Marks agrees that the program is about giving to others, he thinks those who participate in the program generally come away with as much as they put into the program, if not more.

“They're not just exporting their expertise,” Marks says. “They also bring back tremendous life lessons. It often seems we're getting more than we're giving. Upon returning, we are able to give to the communities in greater ways. There is no escaping personal growth there.”

Marks and social work graduate students leave for their annual trip to Dharamsala at the end of August.