

Honors Program

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Student Efforts Yield Three “Mercy Houses” in Vietnamese Province

SHIPPENSBURG, Pa. — A member of the Shippensburg University Honors Program recently returned from two and a half weeks of field work in Vietnam, helping to build three mercy houses for impoverished Vietnamese families.

Grace Burkholder, a junior accounting major from Harrisburg, traveled to southeast Asia from Dec. 21 to Jan. 7 with 10 other Shippensburg students and alumni from United Campus Ministry, an interdenominational Christian organization at Shippensburg University.

UCM has sent a team to Vietnam—one of five remaining Communist countries in the world—every two years since 2002. For each visit they partner with the U.S.-based group Peacework, which arranges the trip and recruits students from Ho Chi Minh University to join the American students as translators and fellow workers.

“I went into this realizing the families we would be helping were really poor, but it was still shocking,” said Burkholder, 20. “It’s one of those things that you know, but until you experience it, it doesn’t hit home. Even our dorm rooms would be considered opulent compared to what they have.”

The team members stayed first in Ho Chi Minh City, where they attended lectures about Vietnam’s economy and history, and then in Rach Gia, where they traveled by boat to reach the village, or commune, of Giuc Tuong in Kien Giang province.

Many of the village’s homes were little more than one-room shacks with dirt floors, held together with fence posts, bamboo, or tarps. Most lacked running water and electricity. The average yearly income of a family in Giuc Tuong is around \$250, according to the Rev. Jan Bye, the campus minister who heads UCM and who accompanied the students.

“The Vietnamese people have few resources, but they lead happy and productive lives,” said Bye, whose daughter is adopted from Vietnam. “What is of value for them is relationships, not things.”

A contractor who lives in Giuc Tuong led construction efforts, with the students from Shippensburg and Ho Chi Minh working alongside the villagers. A brick and rock foundation was laid for each home; concrete poles comprised the frames, and bamboo was connected across

the poles and draped with giant coconut leaves to form walls. The roofs were made of aluminum and the floors of tile.

“Everyone was really enthusiastic about building the houses. They would show us how to do pretty much anything,” said Burkholder. “It wasn’t just ‘here’s some money, here’s your building.’ It was really, really important to them that we were there. They were so excited that we were the first foreigners in their community.”

On a typical day, the students worked from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. with a break for lunch around noon, when the women of the village would prepare an authentic Vietnamese meal that featured a far greater variety of foods than the average Vietnamese family enjoys.

“The Vietnamese people are incredibly gracious,” noted Bye. “It’s amazing to work with them, and that’s why we continue to go back. It’s life-changing for everyone involved.”

The UCM students held several fundraisers last fall to help cover the price of the trip and construction supplies. In addition to organizing pancake breakfasts and labor-for-hire drives for Shippensburg faculty and community members, they also chipped in from their own pockets and received donations from area churches.

“A core component of our mission as an Honors Program at Shippensburg is to see students actively serving their community,” said Dr. Kim Klein, director of the Honors Program. “Grace has set an excellent example of what that can mean on the global stage.”

“Being away from home for 16 days was a challenge. You’re thrown into a different culture,” admitted Burkholder. “But that was part of the adventure. Experiencing a completely different way of life opens your eyes to something you can’t get through a classroom.”

The Shippensburg University Honors Program is made up of more than 150 undergraduate students of diverse backgrounds and interests who are accepted to the program based on academic achievement, intellectual curiosity, and evidence of leadership and community service.

The Honors Program offers small, dynamic classes with excellent instruction; opportunities for research projects, internships, and study abroad experiences; and cultural events, social activities, and service projects. For more information, contact Dr. Kim Klein, Honors Program director, at 717-477-1604 or kmklei@ship.edu.