

LEADING AND LEARNING ABROAD

Programs allow CCCU faculty and students to engage in social justice around the world.

By Elaina Loveland



Residents welcome a group of Pepperdine University students to the Mbale Remand Home, a prison for juveniles who have been arrested and are awaiting trial in Mbale, Uganda.

A **N IDEA FROM** students can change the world. That's what happened at Pepperdine Law School.

In 2005, a group of students approached Jim Gash, then dean of students at Pepperdine Law School, with the idea to travel to Uganda to work as interns with the Ugandan Judiciary in order to improve access to justice for children. After two years, the Global Justice Program officially began.

Today, the Global Justice Program partners with a global network of foreign judicial systems, human rights agencies, development organizations and international universities. Law students work as summer interns around the world for a variety of initiatives, including juvenile justice, judicial

reform, anti-human trafficking efforts, war crimes and human rights advocacy.

During a summer internship in 2007, two Pepperdine law students proposed the Ugandan Judiciary adopt a system of plea bargaining in order to expedite the criminal justice process for those arrested and detained waiting for trial. Students in the Global Justice Program have been working toward introducing a plea-bargaining system in Uganda ever since, and their persistence paid off. Plea-bargaining is scheduled to become part of Uganda's constitution this year.

Along with students, attorneys have also gone on trips to Uganda to help introduce plea-bargaining.

"We take new attorneys each time we go to Uganda and give them an opportunity to get their hands dirty working with Ugandan lawyers and law students and American law students, giving prisoners an opportunity to have their cases heard," Gash explains. "We hope that it might inspire a larger effort to get more groups of attorneys to go to Uganda and multiply the effect of what we're trying to do."

Law students in the Global Justice Program don't have summer legal internships only in Uganda, but they also work in other countries such as Rwanda, India and Thailand, among others. Each year, approximately 15–16 law students in the Global Justice Program intern abroad in one of these countries.

Photo by Allison Brown.

Susan Vincent, a 2013 graduate of Pepperdine Law School who now serves as clinic director of Christian Legal Aid of Los Angeles, chose to attend Pepperdine in part because of the Global Justice Program. "The experience put my career in context in a way that nothing else did," says Vincent.

As a student, Vincent worked on the Ugandan Judiciary's plea-bargaining pilot program. She also studied abroad in other locations as part of the Global Justice Program, working in Thailand and Rwanda, where she assisted the chief justice of the Rwandan Supreme Court to develop best practices in reducing case backlog and increasing access to justice.

Vincent says that a lot of underdeveloped countries are young in terms of their independence since colonialism and as a result "there are still judicial and legal structures that need to be put into place."

"While I was in Rwanda, I realized the incredible privilege and opportunity that I had to even go to law school," says Vincent. "People there have to deal with immediate needs in the aftermath of the genocide, rather than taking years to study and learn."

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

When Petra Belkovic Taylor was 11 years old, war broke out in the former Yugoslavia; she and her family lived in a part of

Croatia close to the conflict. For three months, Taylor heard grenades falling on nearby villages and sounds of war getting closer with each passing day.

"At night, the bullet shells fell on our roof, sounding like a downpour of autumn rain," Taylor recalls. "Finally, my mother, father, brother and I had to run for our lives through the army lines and look for a way to save ourselves. We'd get stopped by various armies and miraculously be let go – sometimes these were really close calls – to go to the next roadblock. The other option was being taken to one of the notorious Bosnian concentration camps where death, hunger, torture and rape were commonplace."

Taylor and her family became refugees.

“I had to learn for the next four years what it meant to be a refugee and be at the bottom of human society,” she says.

Taylor later attended Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, where she met her husband. Together, they started Gordon’s Balkans Semester for the Study of War and Peace, an interdisciplinary, humanities-based study abroad program centered on the themes of conflict and reconciliation.

In addition to academic coursework, students learn firsthand from people on both sides of recent wars and genocides who are grappling daily with problems of justice and forgiveness and with navigating a path toward sustainable peace. The introductory course runs for two-and-a-half months and concludes with an “applied classroom” journey through six cities in Eastern Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia, where some of the heaviest fighting took place and where people are still struggling to find a way toward a peaceful and multiethnic future.

Since the program began in spring 2014, 35 students have participated, including students from Wheaton College and Messiah College as well as Gordon students. The program’s goal is to have more involvement from other institutions, and it is open to any student in the CCCU, along with any student who can sign the statement of faith, Taylor says.

When Jordan Heres, a recent graduate of Wheaton College, participated in the Balkans Semester in 2014, it wasn’t his first time in the region. At the age of 3, Heres’s parents took him and his brother with them to Bosnia where they worked on refugee resettlement and provided psychosocial support to traumatized children.

The experience stayed with him, and as a college student Heres decided to search for a study abroad program in the Balkans that combined “interethnic, interreligious and interpersonal conflict, all done ideally from a Christian perspective.” He was delighted to find all of the aspects he was looking for in Gordon’s Balkans Semester.

“[The program] broadened my awareness, shaped my perspective and trained my imagination as a Christian,” Heres says. “My moral imagination was nurtured through



Student interns from Uganda Christian University Law School and Pepperdine University assist an American lawyer in preparing a prisoner’s case for resolution at the adult prison in Mbale, Uganda.

the rigors of Christian philosophical debate, coupled with the simple yet powerful beauty of firsthand stories of hatred turned into forgiveness, love overcoming violence.”

Sarah Cox, a Gordon student, also participated in the program. “As a political science major, I was certainly accustomed to studying politics and war from a theoretical perspective,” she says. “However, the Balkans Semester forced me to lift my eyes out of my books and asked me instead to look at the human realities surrounding conflict. Every day in the Balkans, I was challenged to acknowledge the human elements of a society recovering from war.”

Cox says that the semester “also stirred up deep questions about the self,” such as “What does it mean to be a human?” and “How do I love my neighbor?”

“These questions become much more complex in war,” says Cox.

The firsthand storytelling aspect was the most powerful part of the program for Cox. “Hearing the stories of those who had endured great suffering was truly transformative,” she says. “I cannot be passive about peacemaking. From now on, wherever I am, I will be looking for ways to be actively pursuing peace.”

Gordon’s Balkans Semester has a strong Christian philosophy of teaching. “Much of our work here in the Balkans focuses on our students and helping them think more deeply about their lives and their roles in the Kingdom,” says Taylor.

Additionally, the program strives to help students develop an intercultural under-

standing. Taylor would like to work more with people who were affected personally by the conflict.

“A long-term goal of ours is to involve students from all former Yugoslav republics in the program,” she says. “We think that this way both our American students and local students can benefit greatly by allowing each other to enter the other’s world while thinking about war and peace, conflict and reconciliation – things that bind us and things that tear us apart.”

SOCIAL WORK AS SOCIAL JUSTICE

Gwyneth Jones was pursuing a master’s degree in social work when she was working at the CCCU’s BestSemester Uganda Studies Program (USP) and needed credentials to supervise bachelor’s degree social work student field placements. Her situation sparked an idea, and the USP’s social work emphasis track was born. Since its inception in 2009, 72 students have participated in the social work emphasis as part of USP.

“We are living in an increasingly globalized world, which requires the next generation of social workers to be equipped to work effectively within it,” says Lisa Tokpa, USP’s social work coordinator. “This happens by not only equipping students with more knowledge, but with more firsthand experience – often acquired through hard but profound cross-cultural experiences. ... The skills that I see students acquiring every day through living and learning here in Uganda will help them be more effective change-agents in society.”



TOP: Ali receiving guidance from her supervisor. BOTTOM LEFT: Ali facilitates a group discussion with young clients at Kisoga Child Development Center. BOTTOM RIGHT: Ali and Betty Tonui (Spring ‘14) at a birthday party for the children in the Child Survival Program at Kisoga Child Development Center.

All students in the social work track conduct 400 hours of practicum in Uganda. Tokpa says the social practicum in this program reveals societal global problems to students in ways that they may have never encountered them before.

“When students hear the plea of a mother for the support needed to send her child to school, or sit with a client as they share how many people they have lost in their family due to HIV/AIDS, social justice issues become more than a paragraph in their textbook – they are as real as the people they now know,” she says. “[This] create[s] a deeper understanding of not just social justice issues, but the people that the issues impact [and thus] creates more informed, compassionate and effective social work professionals.”

As a senior social work major coming to USP from Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Ali Prius did her social work practicum in Kisoga, Uganda, a remote part of the country, when she attended the program in spring 2014.

“I knew that I was going to learn, I knew I was going to have to adapt, and I knew it would be difficult, but I didn’t know that it would change entirely how I see the world,” Prius says. “As an American entering on the grounds of a rural Ugandan village where most children under 10 had never seen a

white person, my social work lens was completely redefined.”

Prius discovered that in Uganda, a different culture brings different norms in social work practice. For example, in the United States, mental health care is dependent upon confidentiality, but Ugandans “are all about relationships and being connected.” She found that social work practice in Uganda isn’t “a relationship of the helper and the distressed” but one of “one human entering in on the same level as another human.”

Prius went on to earn her master’s degree at Abilene Christian University and works as a medical social worker at a hospital in Grand Rapids. She says her experience at USP changed how she does her work today.

“If I take my American lens, of what I think they need based on what works in my culture, and apply it to Ugandans, I would be doing more harm than good,” she says. “This has impacted how I do social work here in the United States. Each person has a different version on their own happiness, success and stability. I must allow people to have the freedom to explore what that is from their own perspective.”

Elaina Loveland has been a professional writer since 1999. She is the author of two books: *Creative Colleges: A Guide for Student Actors, Artists, Dancers, Musicians, and Writers* and *Creative Careers: Paths for Aspiring Actors, Artists, Dancers, Musicians, and Writers*.

A CHANCE MEETING; TWO LIVES CHANGED

JIM GASH, professor of law and director of Pepperdine University’s Global Justice Program, first traveled to Uganda in January 2010 with Pepperdine law students to help provide pro bono legal assistance to children caught without representation in prison detention centers and to prepare their cases for trial.

Gash met a teenager named Henry and knew immediately there was no way he could have committed murder. He described his initial impression of Henry as being “very gentle with a warm smile.” Henry revealed to Gash that he had been praying to God to give him a sign of hope to get him out of prison.

For the next five years, Gash worked on Henry’s case to ultimately prove his innocence and secure his freedom.

Gash became the first non-African to appear in court in Uganda as an attorney on behalf of a Ugandan. Henry was acquitted. He is now a medical student at Kampala University in Uganda.

“Henry and I have recently completed a book we wrote together about how God brought our lives together,” he says. *Divine Collision: An African Boy, An American Lawyer, and their Remarkable Battle for Freedom* (February 2016). A documentary, *Remand: Global Justice in Uganda*, has also been produced, which shows through the eyes of 12 law students how they worked to help reform the criminal justice system in Uganda.

Gash is humble about the impact he’s had.

“I’m just a law professor who became involved in a project that got really big unintentionally,” he says. “It’s interesting that if you’re willing to show up as an advocate for change and develop relationships necessary to allow people to trust and implement change, you can have an impact.”

Jim Gash (right) and Henry cowrote a book about their experience proving Henry’s innocence and freeing him.



Photo by Allison Brown.

Photos courtesy of Uganda Studies Program.