Passport to Understanding: Center for Global Citizenship makes the world relevant to teens while they discover their places in it
by Joe Vogel, Director, Center for Global Citizenship

If you happen to travel the halls of Hathaway Brown School before Winter or Spring Break, you’re just as likely to overhear groups of students whisper excitedly about their upcoming trips to the Florida Keys as you are to catch snippets of happy conversations about impending sojourns to El Salvador, India, or Hong Kong.

That’s because at this small all-girls’ school outside of Cleveland, Ohio, immersive international experiences are an intentional part of everyday life. “At its core, 21st century education has to emphasize a broad understanding of the world,” says Joe Vogel, director of HB’s Center for Global Citizenship.

The CGC was established to complement the school’s core curriculum by helping to promote global understanding and citizenship; foster a deep appreciation for the cultures of the world; challenge students to think critically about the world’s most pressing global issues; and to help young women understand how the United States fits into a global context. These goals are met by Joe Vogel, Director, Center for Global Citizenship.

The centerpiece of the CGC is the Global Scholars Program, which is designed to allow high school girls to “major” in international relations. Participants engage in an intensive four-year course of study of foreign countries, travel the globe, and develop and defend well-reasoned theses.

And as these excerpts from students’ reflections attest, the benefits of these experiences run much deeper than any transcript could portray.

Sarah, Grade 8
“The small village of Kenangwen lies tucked into the islands of Panama. Surrounded by teal waters, luscious green forests, and engulfed in sunshine, it is far from a tourist’s eyes. It is centered around the gathering place and schoolhouse, two small but sturdy buildings that stand proudly for their inhabitants of the village, the Ngobe Tribe. The rest of the village unfurls around the gathering place and schoolhouse, consisting of huts and cottage-sized buildings that have a beautiful homespun-architectural look.

The people of Kenangwen, people of creamy coffee-colored skin, shiny dark straight hair and rich brown almond-shaped eyes, are even more beautiful than their land. I stand out completely when I join them, with my fair skin, chocolate wavy hair, round green eyes, and bright purple and pink clothes, but they greet me warmly and curiously.

Olivia and I start to work on painting a welcome sign for Kenangwen, striking up a conversation with two of the men mixing cement. They listen patiently as we try our Spanish, and aren’t angered when we say for the 17th time, “Repítalo por favor.” They laugh at the misshapen “B” I painted, and at our constant struggle to paint small triangles. Along with laughing, they smile a lot. I feel at ease talking to these strangers. Later, two women from the village join us. One woman, with gray hair and a look of wisdom, even asks me questions. Although she holds years of wisdom beyond me, she treats me as an equal. I feel at home, miles away from home.

As I head back onto the boat, someone says, “You may never have the opportunity to do something like this again.”

I believe one day I will return to Kenangwen. Whether I will actually step foot on the land, I do not know. I do not know if I will ever see the two men who mixed cement, or the wise women, or if even my welcome sign will remain. But what I do know, what I believe, is that in the future, I will visit Kenangwen.

When I decide to welcome others, I will be visiting Kenangwen. When I decide to ignore differences, it will be as if I am stepping off that boat and onto the island again. I believe Kenangwen will stay with me the rest of my life. I will visit it mentally millions of times. I do not know if my sign will hang up there forever, but what I do know is that the paint still stains my purple shirt.”

Megan, Grade 11
“The Mumbai terminal was humbling, and for the first time, I was aware of how childish I felt. India sweltered in a mess of luggage, language, and Saudi Arabians all dressed in white returning from a hajj; and I couldn’t quite place the pang in my stomach that told me that I was actually the foreign one here.

Oddly enough, I didn’t think of home: not when a security guard barked very rushed, angry Hindi at me while blowing a whistle because I was blocking the exit of the airport, nor when I realized that I was a minority for the first time. That same tremor of fear and discomfort turned into one of anticipation and contentment as I laughed along with our driver who grinned sheepishly for driving on the wrong side of the road. He turned up a fast-paced,
Bollywood-style song, the other girls in the car with me started dancing, and I watched with fascination the giant trees draped with colorful fabrics and shop signs growing out of storefronts.

I would come to know Bombay for the fluorescent lights that never went out, the hum of traffic, and the air full of heat and dirt as a rickshaw drove by. Ahmedabad would seem much akin to an Ohio spring-time, and the incredible residents would invite me to dance at a New Year’s party in a lawn lit up by hundreds of small lights. I would chase the waves on the shores of the Indian Ocean and dance with young, Indian girls from a small Catholic school who dreamed of being accountants, lawyers, and stock brokers.

The experience was never really know what I was eating. It was Chetna, who founded her own bank to aid impoverished women, and Hindus United with Muslims, who worked to stop the riots between the Hindus and Muslims that lived together in the slums. The experience was street food and dried mango, thickets of coconut trees and rungs of banana hanging from storefronts, standing in the midst of an emerging economic superpower and Marxist sickles painted on the walls lining the streets. It was the gorgeous Jain temple adorned with garlands and silent except for quiet prayers heard above, and it was the school kids asking us to play cricket with them at Gandhi’s ashram.

More than anything, the Indians taught me what it means to be a member of a truly global community. For snatches of time, I stopped being American, being foreign, and feeling out of place and started forgetting the western need for a schedule. In a way, it was humanizing to find that a young, Indian woman studying to be a nurse’s favorite color was yellow too. I never quite mastered the little head bob that the people give you when you ask a question that means neither yes nor no, but for a time we understood each other more deeply than what the hours should permit.”

Emma, Grade 9

“Since I had only read about China in textbooks, actually standing in the middle of a busy sidewalk in Shanghai was unfathomable. It never really hit me that I was on the opposite side of the world, about 6,700 miles from Cleveland.

I would come to know Shanghai for the Oriental Pearl, which consists of two glass observation areas and a revolving restaurant at the top. From exploring the city and shopping for two consecutive days in one of the busiest marketplaces in Shanghai, we all wished we could have had more time there.

Though everyone our group encountered was amiable, most people we saw walking down the street were not smiling; how they carry themselves in public demonstrates how formal and civilized they are. Because of the educational aspect of the trip, we had one-on-one encounters with many Chinese students. We realized how fortunate we are when we learned about their typical school days, which start at 7:30 a.m. and last until 5:00 p.m. Students remain in the same classroom all day and only have a one-hour break for lunch and recess. Almost all of the kids ride their bikes to and from school and they wear the same uniform every day. The difference that stood out to me was the food. Native Chinese food is unbelievably different from the American interpretation of Chinese food.

Over the course of the trip, we visited four major cities: Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Shanghai. We enjoyed every place we visited, but my favorite part of the trip was our stay in Shanghai. We visited the second-tallest tower in the world, the Oriental Pearl, which consists of two glass observation areas and a revolving restaurant at the top. From exploring the city and shopping for two consecutive days in one of the busiest marketplaces in Shanghai, we all wished we could have had more time there.

The other seven HB students and I did not know what to expect when we embarked on this journey, but we were all willing to shed the skin of our normal comfort zones and immerse ourselves in Chinese culture, tradition, and everyday lifestyle. The memories we brought home will stay with us forever.”

To learn more about Hathaway Brown School’s Center for Global Citizenship, please visit [www.hb.edu/CGC](http://www.hb.edu/CGC).