

# BONNER LEADERS: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE THROUGH PROJECTS IN CAMBODIA AND JAMAICA

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## BONNER LEADERS IN CAMBODIA

Kathryn Litle

In 2004, Defiance College was named a Bonner Leader School by the Bonner Foundation of Princeton, New Jersey. As one of the nation's largest privately funded service scholarship programs and a philanthropic leader in the anti-hunger movement, the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation seeks to improve the lives of individuals and communities by helping meet the basic needs of nutrition and educational opportunity.

The Bonner Foundation supports Defiance College in its efforts to nurture and mobilize thoughtful, caring, and diverse leaders dedicated to community service. "Bonners" from all institutions, both colleges and congregations, work to uphold the six common commitments of the Bonner Program: community building, social justice, civic engagement, spiritual exploration, international perspective, and diversity.

In the decade before being named a Bonner Leader School, Defiance College supported international service projects to Jamaica, China, and Africa through its service learning program. These trips provided the opportunity for Defiance College students to serve various communities around the world through specific service projects.

During the 2005-2006 academic year, Defiance College sponsored Bonner Leader projects in Cambodia and Jamaica. These projects were supported in part through a grant from the Bonner Foundation.

Four senior Bonner Leaders were selected to travel with the McMaster faculty fellows and student scholars on their two-week trip to Cambodia over the Christmas break. Under the leadership of Kathryn Litle, AmeriCorps VISTA Leader and Bonner Coordinator, Bonner Leaders Erica Anspach, Erika Coleman, Ernest Clover III, and Kyle Minnis worked directly with the Southeast Asian Children's Mercy Fund (SACMF) and McMaster fellows and scholars to identify areas of need.



Bonner Leaders joined the Cambodia learning community to participate in discussions and reflections relevant to the trip. In addition the Bonners set their own objectives that related directly to their project and grew out of the Bonner common commitments:

- ◆ Examine the idea of community engagement, specifically asking how service in the Defiance community compares to service in Cambodia;
- ◆ Utilize community-based research techniques to study communities in Cambodia;
- ◆ Use of the Bonner model to provide meaningful reflection on the trip.

There were two primary projects that the Bonner Leaders focused on in Cambodia. The first was to contribute to Mat Hahn's soccer field building project. The group learned in their research that rural schools lack the means to provide recreation activities for students. During the time of the Khmer Rouge, all Western practices were done away with, including sports such as soccer.

While in Cambodia, we saw very few soccer fields, but we witnessed many children playing soccer on the streets with woven baskets, "mud" balls, anything round that could serve as a ball. So we began our work of erecting soccer goals at five schools that receive support from SACMF. Bonners dug

holes, filled them with cement, and inserted the steel goal poles, which had been welded together. The ground included a mixture of cement, sand, rock, and even garbage. Digging was not pleasant work, but it was still rewarding to the Bonners, especially when the children at each site began to play soccer with an enthusiasm that is hard to describe.

The second project in Cambodia focused on another building project, one that marked the new year for us. Bonner Leaders, McMaster scholars, and their mentors spent New Year's Day in Cambodia in a unique way. We all joined together to build a fence for Hin Kaingch, an elderly blind woman who lives in the country with her grandchildren who lost their parents to AIDS. Unable to make a living and supporting four children, she receives aid from SACMF and personal, emotional support from Sophal Leng Stagg, the co-founder of SACMF and the McMaster School's primary partner on projects in Cambodia. Defiance College wanted to contribute by helping this woman build a fence, which was needed to keep her cow from wandering off. This specific cow was on loan from Hin Kaingch's neighbor and, as she told Stagg, if Kaingch cared for the cow, the first calf born would be hers. In the meantime, the cow would provide milk for her and her family.

The Defiance College team was willing to do anything to help this woman, but all she wanted was the fence. The Bonner Leaders came to understand the full value of a cow to survival in rural Cambodia – and the worth of a



fence! In Cambodia anything made of metal is considered valuable and can be sold for cash on the street. Thus, it was important to build the fence properly. We had to engineer a fence not only to contain a cow but to keep the fence from being stolen.

We faced other challenges, as well. Before digging holes for fence posts, we had to move several large mounds of dirt along the planned fence line. The heat made the day seem endless and the work harder than we had expected. The tools we used consisted of wicker baskets for transporting materials and moving dirt, a few wooden-handled pick axes, and wooden-handled shovels that tended to break if too much force was applied. And water had to be transported in makeshift containers for cement mixing.

Neighbors gathered to watch the group construct the fence, and we eventually hired them to help complete the project. As we all came together to build a fence for Han Kaingch and her family, we were able to witness and experience community. The fence project was a success for Defiance College, but most especially for Hin Kaingch. She thanked each of us at the dedication ceremony and made her way to feel the fence. We presented her with a gift of rice and bicycles for her grandchildren. It was an emotional time to see how one project as simple as a fence could have such an impact on the well being of a family.

## REFLECTIONS

### ***Bonner Coordinator Kathryn Litle***

*As the Bonner Leaders began digging at the school, small faces peeked out of windows, trying to get a glimpse of these new faces. When the bell rang, children flooded the playground, eager to see what was being built. They quickly figured out the concept and were eager to help. The Bonners put them to use by having them collect small rocks to help secure the goals. This soon turned into a game as to who could find the most rocks most quickly. Once the goals were set, the game of soccer came to life. Children from all corners came running, wanting a chance to kick the ball and play the game with their new goals. We were quickly invited to join the fun, and there was no language barrier during the game.*

### ***Erica Anspach***

*During my time as a Bonner Leader, I have become quite familiar with the six common commitments. From social justice and community building to spiritual exploration and civic engagement, I have made it a personal goal to embody each of these ideals. However, while traveling to Cambodia, I had the opportunity to fulfill the remaining two Bonner Program commitments: diversity and international perspective. These two commitments merged for me in Cambodia and contributed to a life-changing experience. How do you put into words that which you cannot*

comprehend? In many ways, I still struggle to understand my international experience. While the thoughts and scenes of the journey have faded, the feelings and emotions remain. And those are difficult to convey. I know that my inability to articulate the significance of this experience is not in the least detrimental to the outcome. While this trip may have helped me complete my formal commitments to the Bonner Program, more importantly it opened the door to a lifelong commitment.

### **Erika Coleman**

*The children there are amazing! My feelings for the children of Cambodia have gone from sympathy to complete admiration. They do whatever they have to in order to survive, even helping take care of their families, and always do whatever must be done with smiles on their faces. As a Bonner Leader, I have committed myself to being the difference through my service work at the college and in the community, but I would not have thought my work in Cambodia would have the impact it did. As my first international experience, traveling to Cambodia has helped me develop a new perspective on community. The project of putting up goals was simple in our minds but produced greater results than we could have imagined. We later learned that neighboring schools got word of the soccer field project and wanted goals built at their schools. It is our hope this project will continue.*





***Ernest Clover***

*I have been to many different countries and have talked to many different people, but the experience I had in Cambodia has left the largest impact on my life. I was able not only to go to a third world country but to play an active role in the lives of the individuals I met. I have told everyone about my experience and how it has shown me that even though people can be separated by distance, culture, and history, we are all connected on a deep, deep level due to our humanity. This is what the McMaster School program is all about.*

## ONGOING SERVICE IN JAMAICA

Donald Buerk

Since 1999 Defiance College students, faculty, and administrators have traveled to Jamaica on a yearly basis. The primary purpose has been to provide housing for Jamaican families who otherwise lack the financial means to obtain it. Additionally, the trips have included visits to various schools and community centers that provide social services to the residents of St. Mary's Parish on the northwestern part of the island. Defiance College Service Leaders—now Bonner Leaders—have contributed their time and effort while simultaneously experiencing the unique culture of a foreign land. By returning year after year to work in the same community, Defiance College has been able to establish relationships that go beyond a one-week trip. For instance, in December 2005, the Defiance team was hosted for lunch at the home of Suzette McLean and her family. The previous year, we built the house and enjoyed getting to know the family through the process. It was a pleasure to renew a friendship and see the family thriving, particularly for the two of us (Buerk and Rutter) who had accompanied the trip the previous year.

The December 2005 Jamaica trip was different from those of previous years in that it included implementation of weekly learning community meetings prior to traveling to the Caribbean to exchange information pertaining to the economy, history, religions, and political system of Jamaica and of its



people. The learning community was comprised of Bonner Leaders Chelsea Ford, Stephanie Granger, Andrea Koch, Amanda Misencik, Eric Nicely, Ray Rateno, Jamie Ridenour, Blake Stambaugh, and Aleisha Wiemken, as well as faculty and staff members Donald Buerk, Mike Jacobs, Randi Lydum, and Craig Rutter. Before departing, students, faculty, and staff gathered to share their research—as well as their concerns—in order to help each other prepare for what they were about to experience. Beyond that, the meetings provided the context for collaborative learning that is an essential component of a Defiance College education. Learning community members demonstrated their leadership skills by organizing the meetings, providing an agenda and study materials, and leading the often spirited discussions. This collaborative, interdisciplinary approach presented numerous opportunities for Bonner Leaders to draw meaningful distinctions among academic disciplines. How several students, each representing a separate major, might frame an issue was always a goal of the learning community. This innovative approach proved to be rewarding.

Once in Jamaica Bonner Leaders spent most days building a pair of ten-by-twenty-foot structures for families in Highgate, St. Mary's Parish. At both job sites, the new owners were present throughout the construction process. This situation afforded Bonner Leaders the unique experience of getting to know first hand those for whom they were providing homes. Evenings included professional reflection sessions and trips to the Swift Purcell Boys





Home, the Lyndale School for Girls, and the Pringle Children's Home. Additionally, Bonner Leaders had the opportunity to visit the families for whom homes had been built the previous year. The McMaster Jamaica trip offered both Bonner Leaders a concrete opportunity to provide meaningful service and an academic, interdisciplinary learning experience.

The development over the past several years of the Bonner Leader Jamaica experience is a vital component of the new Defiance College vision. This vision seeks to develop an institutional culture of engagement combining academic excellence and community involvement. These goals are realized in part by globalizing the curriculum so as to offer far-ranging opportunities for students to increase their knowledge and awareness of different cultures. But there are other benefits as well. Interdisciplinary study calls for students to consider distinctions among their academic disciplines. They can then consider connections across apparently dissociated parts of the Jamaican experience and reflect on them in a professional way both before and after the trip.

## REFLECTIONS

As part of their experience, Bonner Leaders kept reflection journals during their week in Jamaica. For some, the trip constituted their first international adventure. Their initial reflections reveal trepidation and uncertainty. For others, the physical requirements, along with the emotional stress of working in a foreign environment, were challenging. Many were struck by the fact that Jamaica lacks much of what is taken for granted elsewhere. Upon reflection, one Bonner Leader showed an appreciation for basic things, such as clean drinking water and adequate housing, and adjusted his thinking accordingly. The following journal entries reveal how a few of the Bonner Leaders handled these issues while in Jamaica.

**Stephanie Granger** (Christian education major reflecting just before departure)

*I want to learn all I can, experience all I can, and have as much fun as possible. I'm looking forward very much to getting to work. I'm kind of nervous to do something I've never done before, but that's the only way to learn. I've also been asked to lead devotions in the morning. I feel this is just one more way for me to get ministry experience.*

**Andrea Koch** (forensic science major, writing about her first day on the job)

*Today was such an exhausting day. We began at 6:30 a.m. when we loaded the trucks. Breakfast was over in a flash and we were off to the worksite. I was the water police. One of my jobs was to make sure the group was drinking enough water. I have no complaints except the little kids trying to help but not really helping us. They are on the worksite all day and by the afternoon they are running around with*

*the tools and nails. When we were ready to leave, a few girls followed us and wanted to go with us. They understand they could not go; however, they were very disappointed.*

**Jamie Ridenour** (information technology and management double major)

*One goal today is to come back in the summertime, as I want to make a purification system for personal water. As we visited the boys' home, I decided to help them if I can because Karl [a seventeen-year-old Jamaican] probably won't continue with his education, which is sad, so if I can it would be nice to help out. But the number one goal is to get both houses done!*

**Stephanie Granger** (reflecting at the end of the trip)

*This trip has been completely amazing. Every day has been a learning experience. The challenge for me was seeing so many people in need and not being able to help them. It really was a struggle. It is difficult to believe the conditions some people live in. I appreciate the learning experience and the chance to be able to help two families have better homes than what they were living in before.*

The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity provides DC students with a unique opportunity to travel abroad and apply their skills outside of the traditional classroom. Traveling to lands far removed from northwest Ohio and interacting with those from far different cultures has become an integral part of the Defiance College experience.

