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Students to learn the effects of development and globalization in field course to the Philippines

A group of University of Lethbridge students will have the learning opportunity of a lifetime this summer as they trade the classroom for the streets of Tacloban City, Philippines.

“Instead of sitting in the classroom, they will get lectures in the field,” says Dr. Glenda Bonifacio, the U of L professor in the Department of Women and Gender Studies teaching the course and a former resident of Tacloban City.

During their month-long stay beginning June 20, 10 students will visit non-government organizations working in the area, evacuation centres and women’s co-operatives, attend community festivals, meet with representatives from different government agencies and hear on-site lectures by Filipino scholars, practitioners and local officials.

While much has been rebuilt in Tacloban City, the landscape still bears the scars of Typhoon Haiyan, which hit the Philippines in November 2013, killing thousands of people and destroying homes and infrastructure.

“It will be the first field course for women and gender studies and the first one to the Philippines,” says Bonifacio. “They’re going there to immerse in the society, in the community. In the end, the goal is to develop global citizenship from a gender perspective.”

The Philippines is still considered a developing country, although the literacy rate is about 95 per cent. In 2013, the island country placed in the top 10 in the world for gender parity while Canada was in 20th place. Bonifacio says the field course will give students the chance to understand and analyze how local and global forces manifest in the lives of people by looking at geography, environment, society, culture and economics.

“I was very excited because I love travelling and I’ve been on school trips before that have taken me to different places that I wouldn’t have visited on my own,” says Jasmine

Saler, a fourth-year U of L student majoring in kinesiology and women and gender studies. “To go with someone who has lived there, who knows the languages, who has connections there, that’s the perfect way to travel.”

Saler is also looking forward to learning a different way of living in the context of recovering from a natural disaster.

“I can’t imagine ever having that opportunity again,” she says. “I am most eager to see the festivals and the vibrancy of the culture. Understanding the connection between peoples is also what I’m really excited to learn about.”

Christina MacDonald, a third-year U of L general social science student from the Onion Lake Cree Nation, which straddles the Alberta-Saskatchewan boundary, applied for the field course in keeping with her parents’ teaching to take any opportunity to travel. Not having travelled outside of Canada before, she admits the prospect of a month in the Philippines is rather frightening.

“I’m really scared but I always learn something amazing from that fear,” she says. “I’m always interested in how other people live. We’re all human beings at the end of the day but we have these intersectionalities, such as gender, race and class, which we have to deal with every single day. To actually experience the intersectionalities that other people face firsthand will allow me to understand it better.”

Even though students have expressed interest in most of the spots, Bonifacio encourages other students who’d like to attend to put their names on a wait list. With five months yet to go, she says openings may occur and students on the wait list will have priority.

In addition to paying tuition for the six-credit course, students have to cover the cost of their flight, housing, accommodation and meals. They’ve received \$750 each from the Campus Alberta Grant for International Learning but with the cost of a flight nearing the \$2,000 mark, the students hope to raise more money through fundraising initiatives. Anyone interested in sponsoring a student is invited to contact Bonifacio via email at glenda.bonifacio@uleth.ca.

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