



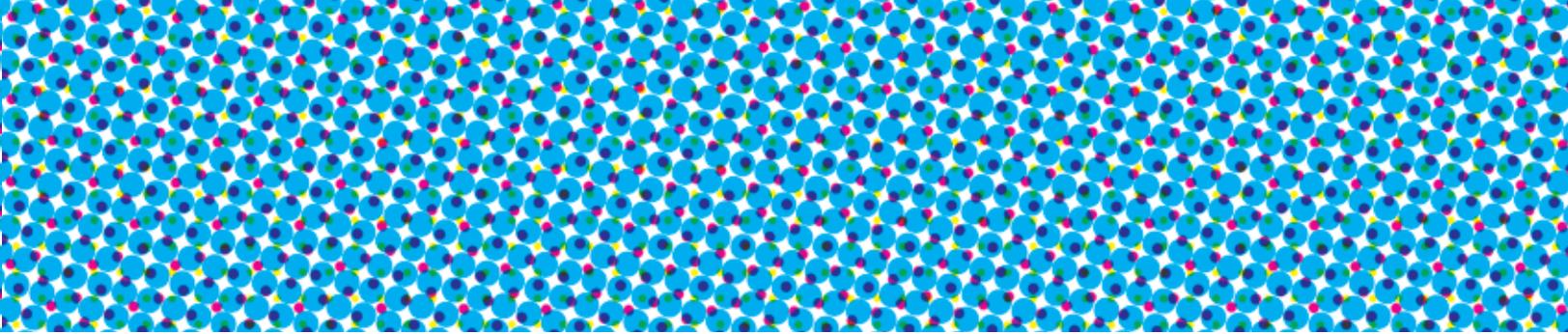
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OVERSEAS

Catherine Paul '09 Makes Friends in Malaysia



On the morning before I graduated from Fordham University, I was having coffee with my family and the university president, Reverend Joseph McShane, S.J. We reflected on my time at Fordham, my undergraduate degree in psychology, my upcoming year with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC), and my ambition to pursue graduate studies in social work. Father McShane listened attentively and then asked, "And why haven't you applied for a Fulbright yet?" So, upon graduation, I began the application process. With the loving support of my family and friends and assistance from Fordham's Office of Prestigious Fellowships, I submitted my application for the Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) Program. I am proud to say that I was accepted by the Fulbright U.S. Student Program and that I have spent



this last year living and working in rural Malaysia. As an ETA, I was placed in Jengka, Pahang, a small, primarily Malay-Muslim town surrounded by palm and rubber plantations and thick jungle. My roommate and I had the privilege of being the first Americans to live in Jengka, and we were welcomed with open arms. We fielded all America-related questions, from the hysterical (“Your eyes...so blue, so beautiful... Are they original?”), to the nonsensical (“You and Taylor Swift...sisters? Can she eat rice like you?”), to the heartbreaking (“America...9/11...are you afraid of Muslims? I am so sorry. I hope you feel safe here.”). For many in my community, my initial presence symbolized the unknown; I came to Jengka as a non-Muslim, unable to speak Bahasa Melayu, and from a country that has not had the most amenable relationship with the Muslim world. However, over time and with open-mindedness and respect, we grew in love.

My students, fellow teachers, and neighbors shared their homes, food, and lives with me, inviting me to learn about Islam and to participate in religious holidays and traditions. As the only non-Muslim in my school, I decided to fast during Ramadan as a sign of respect, but also to learn more about Islamic traditions. However, I barely made it a week before the teachers at my school decided I “looked so terrible and was too weak”

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and began leaving meals for me in my office, though they themselves were fasting. During Eid, my mentor, Norafidah Osman, invited me into her home with her entire family and hosted me for the first two and holiest days of the holiday. In the subsequent two days, I was generously invited to 17 more houses for 17 more home cooked meals. I have never felt so welcomed or so full!

Moreover, my community welcomed me to share my own religious and cultural traditions. At my school, SMK Jengka 18, I designed my own social justice-focused curriculum and organized several English language programs, including a Women’s Empowerment workshop. Though I was frequently met with “Miss, are you sure?” as I conducted my lessons, I watched my students practice compassion and acceptance even when they did not agree with me. I was constantly met with the same tolerance, respect, and understanding that I endeavored to live. Nothing could have prepared me for the love, generosity, openness, and absolute hilarity I encountered this year in Malaysia. This year, I learned that fish is a breakfast food and that rice should be eaten three to six times a day. This

year, I was a teacher, friend, sister, and auntie. This year, I learned every Taylor Swift lyric and discovered that monkeys are the worst kind of house pest. This year, I learned how the differences and challenges that arise in cultural immersion are beautifully enriching. This year, I am certain I learned more than I taught.

Since arriving home in early December, I have been so homesick for Malaysia that I have decided to return. I am planning on living and working in Kuala Lumpur for four months (and surprising my community in Jengka!) before I begin my Master of Social Work in the fall. •

