

The Pangaea Project to reunite world

Spirit Mountain Community Fund gives \$15,000 to young adult program

By Ron Karten

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Some kids have a lot of spit.

Take 21-year-old Savannah Gregory, graduate of the Portland Youth Builders alternative high school, who started off saying that she joined The Pangaea Project because "it was just a good way to get out in the community and go out of the country for a really cheap price," and ended up thinking she would return to Thailand to teach English.

"I cried my eyes out over the landfill communities," Gregory said of her trip to Thailand. "They live 50 feet from the stinking place. It smelled horrible and the kids were playing in this horrible waste."

"And here were these gorgeous happy little kids who were having the time of their life. It made me truly happy. I want to go back and teach English there."

Or take 18-year-old Deán Dhadwal, also a graduate of the Portland Youth Builders alternative high school, who learned, "It's nice to care about people."

"The children aren't little whiney brats," said Dhadwal. "They leave their families to work in the city at 13 years old. And they're the happiest kids I've ever seen. They're not concerned about wearing the newest pair of tennis shoes."

The explanation for this counterintuitive success is simple, as Dhadwal explained it. "Their parents and the community love them."

Or take 17-year-old Isabel Burri, soon to graduate from the Open Meadow alternative high school. She joined the group that went to Ecuador.

"You can actually relate your experience to something," Burri said.

The community of Quichua (also spelled, Kichua), in the southern Amazon forest possesses untapped natural resources that multi-nationals want. The otherwise poor Ecuadorian community has so far outsmarted the multi-nationals by setting homes and places of commerce far apart. That way, it is too hard for companies to pull the community together and convince them that corporate ownership of their resources is in their interest.

"We got there by canoe," said Burri, "but the water was so low that a three-hour trip took us seven hours. We walked to the center of town. It was a one-and-a-half hour hike to get there. They were so nice. The 10 year olds were carrying our bags, and they were running so far ahead of us."

"The mud was six inches deep," said 19-year-old Roger Lealamanua, also a student of Open Meadow.

Not only that, said co-founder Deb Delman, but the women also pulled oil workers aside and surrounded them, telling them that taking the oil from the earth would destroy the community.

Communities in the northern Amazon were not as well prepared

for the coming of multi-nationals.

"The northern part of the Amazon is completely separated into blocks," Delman said, "and owned by multi-nationals."

This is the work of the Portland-based nonprofit The Pangaea Project, funded this year by Spirit Mountain Community Fund with a \$15,000 grant. Spirit Mountain's gift is in good company. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave the group the first of a three-year grant commitment this year.

Pangaea's funding comes 60/40 from foundation grants and individuals, respectively, said co-founder Stephanie Tolk. Pangaea requires \$200 from each student for an experience that costs about \$5,000 each.

The money pays for a "nine-month leadership development program that empowers low-income high school students to become local community leaders with global perspectives," according to the group's Web site.

"By engaging teenagers from underserved neighborhoods in local and international service-learning projects, the Pangaea Project promotes the development of leadership skills, increases global awareness and fosters a commitment to work toward social change, profoundly transforming both the participants and their communities."

Co-founders Tolk and Delman both have plenty of "foreign immersion" in their own right. Tolk served in the Peace Corps, and both are scions of "some privilege," Tolk said. "We realized that a lot of kids never get out. And we had the same dream: to show the world to low-income youth."

The group's name, Pangaea, aims to "inspire an image of a reunited world," the philosophy statement said. "Pangaea is the name of the original supercontinent 200 million years ago when all of the continents were connected, and the earth was one."

The effort is broken down into three parts:

1. The first four months include 150 hours called "World CLASS," where students immerse themselves in cultural practices, religious beliefs, politics, history and environmental issues in the country they will visit. They learn about global wealth disparity, human rights and local social justice issues. They meet other "change-makers."

2. The students then take one month abroad, called International Inspiration, this year in either Ecuador or Thailand, for cultural immersion. Pangaea has contact with facilitators in the countries where the visits take place.

3. During the final four months, called Local Leadership, students speak to hundreds of high school students, community members, City Council and radio audiences, giving them a chance to educate the public and use their leadership skills.



Photo courtesy of Pangaea Project

A group picture of the students who worked in Ecuador, studying environmental justice, with the Pangaea Project. Spirit Mountain Community Fund granted the Pangaea Project, a Portland-based nonprofit, \$15,000 this year.

Editor's note: This is the ninth in a monthly series of stories in 2008 by *Smoke Signals* that showcase the real-life effects of Spirit Mountain Community Fund donations. Since its inception in 1997, the Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, has donated more than \$40 million to groups in 11 western Oregon counties. These stories focus on the good work those generous Tribal dollars do within nearby communities and the effect they have on people and programs.

This year, the Ecuadorian group studied environmental justice as a theme. The Thai group took on labor rights and fair trade. In each case, the students learn the subject both here at home and then from activists in the host countries, who, they say, are doing a better job than we are here in the United States.

"We prize individualism," said Dhadwal. "Asking for help is sometimes considered shameful here. It's like the fingers of a hand: they can work alone or together. They are very community centered."

"You get a global perspective on the issue," Burri said.

The lessons of the experience are many and varied.

"I clarified my understanding of how strong simplicity can be," Lealamanua said. "And the importance of family."

"I used to overthink," Burri said. "You had to enjoy the moments."

Burri spoke no, or little, English with her host family, "and that makes for a lot of laughs, and laughing makes things so much easier," she said.

In Thailand, the diet included scorpions and grasshoppers. "The grasshoppers," said one, "tasted like popcorn."

Dhadwal helped slaughter two pigs. They were "free range and organic," he said. He also started thinking about establishing a col-

lege fund. "They can get a four-year degree for \$3,500 a year," he said, "and live better lives."

In Ecuador, the community in Yunguilla has been so successful at sustainable agriculture that the students couldn't help but notice how many foreigners visited the community for advice and to see how their efforts work. Visitors included staffers from the United Nations.

"The kids, women, men, everyone works," Burri said. "And they play soccer in a big plaza after as the way to cool down from the day's work."

The group met on their returns from Thailand and Ecuador for a potluck on Aug. 18, when they began developing themes for the last part of the program.

Pangaea is growing quickly. The 5.5-year-old nonprofit served six students from one high school in 2007 and this year grew to 18 from five high schools.

In the latest issue of *The Pangaea Passport*, the Spring 2008 issue, it says: "It is important to always take the opportunity to make a difference no matter how small of an effort it is. There are ways that we can all help our community to grow and change. I have hope that, with the hard work of good-hearted people, we can bring the world back together." ■