



Rec students to Guyana

By Dr. Alan Warner

Living, Learning and Making a Difference in the Rainforests of Guyana

"We will get to know each other in ways we probably can never imagine right now. You will never forget us." I think back to the great wisdom of Elizabeth Beesley's words in one of the early meetings when I met with a group of senior Recreation Management students to begin a very long and deep dialogue about what it would mean to go together to live and learn during the winter term of 2008 in remote villages in the rainforest of Guyana on the north shore of South America.

Over 12 months, six students worked with me and numerous others to raise the money, plan the trip, prepare the risk management plan, and gain the skills and understanding to engage in a unique international community development project. We had been invited by the leaders of three Arawak communities to help them document their traditional practices of canoe-making, hammock-making, cassava processing and

pottery building. Their young people do not value the traditional indigenous activities and as the elders are dying, this knowledge is being lost. The students lived for five weeks in pairs in three separate villages, working with elders and youth to compile booklets on each process. The booklets are now being used in the community schools, which have very few books of any kind, and none until now that tell their own stories and portray their own community. The Minister of Amerindian Affairs for the government of Guyana will present the work this summer to the Conference of Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean.

What did I learn?— how powerful and transformative university learning can be when it is connected to personal experiences and service to others. Here are a few examples of the concepts I teach in the classroom that meant so much more when reflected upon through personal experience.

- **Global Inequity** – One pair nibbled quietly over days on their one weekly treat, a large chocolate bar from the

market. It cost \$5. An average daily wage in that community was \$6.

- **Cultural Diversity and Social Identity** – A student's comment that "the Toronto Airport was so sterile and 'white' upon our arrival back. It felt comfortable to head to our baggage carousel where the majority were persons of colour."
- **Community Development** – Sitting to the side as two elders move between 30 people, young and old, helping them to build pottery in a dimly lit shed with clay that they had fetched for the first time in fifty years.

Dr. Alan Warner

When we first arrived, a government official told us that "Tapacuma [our village] is trying to catch up, lifestyle wise, with the coast [mainstream Guyana] and the coast is trying to catch up with the US." Indeed, at first the people in the community seemed embarrassed about their traditions. Yet through our work they went from being ashamed and trying to hide their traditions, to wanting us to eat their food, sing their songs, and dance their dances. They do not have the material resources we have, but we were able to work together and pool our knowledge and resources to help overcome some of their challenges.



Above: Mike Koza officially provides the booklet he compiled with Robin Campbell documenting cassava processing to village councilors in Tapacuma.

Mike Koza

Uncle Morris Thomas, the elder I spent most of my time with, is a quiet man, who earns his living making dug out canoes. I had the privilege to document this process; however the project brought much more than a wooden canoe. I met a man who had gone

through a rough time in his life and had turned strongly to his community, family, friends and church. Now he indulges in family activities and is passionate about passing the tradition on to his son. His commitment and willingness to show each step and tool hypnotized both my partner and I throughout our work. Staying in touch will be the key to ensure that the strong friendships we built over the five weeks continue.



Jenna Harper takes notes as Elder Morris Thomas works on the canoe.

Jenna Harper

Traveling to Guyana was an opportunity of a lifetime. The trip opened my eyes to the true spectrum of humanity. I now genuinely appreciate my education and want to use it to affect positive change globally. The people we met and built relationships with were hard working and inspirational. They welcomed us into their homes and shared their deep concerns for their community. The small amount of work we did was received with immense gratitude. I wish we could have stayed longer but hopefully the booklets we left with them will remind them how proud they should be of their rich history.

Elizabeth Beesley

I learned the most about myself. I learned a lot about how I look at different cultures and how my culture and environment has influenced my thoughts. I learned a lot about my personal strengths and weaknesses and the challenges of communicating with people of another culture, let alone language differences. I have realized that most often people returning from such journeys share their most positive experiences; but, I believe it is important to recognize that it is not always as wonderful as our positive memories depict. It most definitely comes with its struggles and challenges. I believe it is important for people to realize this and not

let it deter them. I would love to engage in another international project, and feel as though next time I will be just a little more prepared for what I may be facing, not that I will go with any expectations!



Hammock Maker Eileen Charles, Lloyd Pereira and Elizabeth Beesley admire the finished work.

Morgandy Burkett-Cook

The trip enabled me to put to use skills that I have gained from the Recreation Management degree in a meaningful way: fundraising, planning trip logistics, risk management, and executing the community development project. We learned so much about international development, global issues, the state of our environment, and the discrepancies between first and third world countries. These were hands on lessons and memories that will stick with us forever.

Jennie Ford

I now appreciate what I have so much more: things such as running water and a good education system. As Canadians we are extremely privileged and take for granted what we have. For the first time in my life when I buy a product from a store I will wonder how it came to be, from having seen people live off the land. Everyday while I was in Guyana I watched amazing crafts and food being made from scratch and realized how easy we have it in Canada. It was a life changing experience for me and the memories will be with me forever. ✕



Jennie Ford shares the booklet she compiled on traditional pottery with school children in Wakapoa.



Above clockwise: Elder Ada Jacobson helps Morgandy Burkett-Cook build a small pot.

Desiree Pearson works with Robin Campbell to peel cassava roots.

The Acadia Recreation Management Research Team: Front Row L-R: Elizabeth Beesley, Dr. Alan Warner, Jenna Harper; Second Row L-R: Morgandy Burkett-Cook, Mike Koza; Third Row L-R: Robyn Campbell, Jennie Ford