

Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar in Panama

By Bram Fiebelkorn

Shortly after I was awarded a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship to study in Panama for a year, I set out to understand more about the Crossroads of the Americas. So I turned to the self-proclaimed Panamanian experts: David Lee Roth and the rest of Van Halen, whose classic 1984 song bears the country's name. I quickly learned the song has nothing to do with this vibrant Central American country, but it didn't stop me from blasting it through my iPod as the American Airlines 747 kissed the Panamanian tarmac last October, while I got my first glimpse of my soon-to-be adopted home through the aircraft window.

The excitement I felt from the second my foot left the familiar Floridian soil has never diminished even a year later. It's partly due to Rotary International's mission of seeking out people whose passion for cultural enrichment and understanding grows with each new experience. Each year, the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International sponsors over 800 scholars to study outside of their home countries, making it the world's largest privately-funded international scholarships program. With grants totaling approximately \$500 million, scholarship recipients from roughly 70 countries studied in over 70 different nations this past year. The program's good work has helped nearly 37,000 scholars create good will world wide since 1947.

The basic premise of Rotary's scholarships program is to champion international understanding among people of different countries and divergent cultures. In this era where technology is tearing down the barriers of communication, it is ever more necessary to understand the nature of our global neighbors. In helping to shape tomorrow's world leaders with broad global perspectives, Rotary sends men and women to the far-reaching ends of the earth as ambassadors to create pockets of peace through service and studies. Rotary prides itself on being a Global Network of Community Volunteers.

This service aspect makes a Rotary Scholarship stand apart from the many noteworthy scholarship programs. Therefore, my experience as a Rotary Scholar has been a unique blend of philanthropy, master's degree studies, speaking engagements and lots of travel.

Panama was my first choice because of the opportunities to further my knowledge of the Spanish language and Latin American market trends, two academic pursuits that were integral to my undergraduate years at the University of North Florida, where I served as president of Sigma Chi and the Inter-Fraternity Council. Since the start of the scholarship, my Spanish fluency and vocabulary have improved tremendously in large part to my lively roommates, class work and many speeches I delivered to Rotary and other clubs throughout the country. I have also since earned my MBA through the local university.

Since Panama is surrounded by water and boasts plenty of untouched land, traveling through the country is always a unique adventure. From kayaking across the Panama

Canal to feed wild monkeys to swimming with sharks off the Pacific, there's plenty of opportunity to enjoy the country's natural wonders.

However, the most rewarding experiences took place while repaying my debt to Rotary and the Panamanian community. One way Rotary expects its scholars to create good will is through social work. So with some sleuthing, I uncovered several opportunities to give back. As often is the case with community service, I felt I received more than I gave.

A volunteer program came to Panama to provide free used eyeglasses to those less fortunate, and they needed translators. My language skills came in handy, but they weren't nearly as useful as my sales skills. I remember having to convince an elderly grandmother of about 60 that her new Elton John-esque specs made her look ravishingly sexy. She just wanted to look good for her elderly husband. I told her in confidence that if her new Coke-bottle tri-focals don't make her irresistible, nothing would. With a feeling of new-found sexiness and thick pink spectacles, she strutted happily back to her man.

Another opportunity arose after I met Rigoberto, the manager for the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. He asked me to use my experience in marketing and public relations to help spread the word out about the foundation, which helps finance and build housing for those with little means. For me it was a perfect fit, since I had just finished my second year working in public relations. I had a feeling of great accomplishment when I handed over the finished strategic communications plan-- that they successfully implemented to gain some strong exposure and land community partners.

However, probably the most unique service project was teaching English to children of a local indigenous tribe, some 30 minutes outside of the capital. I knew I was in for something special when a white-faced Capuchin monkey hopped through the window during our first class. And because of our unexpected visitor, the kids at least now know how to say "monkey" in English.

My experience is not unlike other fellow Rotary scholars, who while dispersed across the globe help bridge this widening cultural gap through their service and studies. Benjamin Thomas, an American Rotary scholar who studied in Ghana, helped refurbish a hospital's dilapidated children's ward after raising over \$75,000 for beds, medical equipment and other items. Another scholar helped create a Sudanese refugee school in Egypt. Scholars studying in Scotland sponsored several service projects and fundraisers for underprivileged youth.

Mark Twain once penned, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, all foes to real understanding." Without a doubt, my year in Panama has had an immeasurable impact on my own views of this ever-shrinking earth. As I return to Florida, I ultimately intend to create my own business that interacts with Latin American nations by bringing relief and aid to lesser-developed communities. It's uncertain if I'll make it back to Panama soon, but I'll always carry with me fond memories of my time as

a Rotary Scholar and hope that I'm leaving behind greater cultural awareness and understanding in those I've helped and befriended.

For more information on Rotary's scholarships, which are offered to both undergrads and graduates, please visit www.rotary.org/foundation/educational. For an in-depth look at my experience, please click on <http://braminpanama.blogspot.com>.