

As Is

Featuring Melissa Mokler

by Erin FAGAN

Melissa Mokler pulls several envelopes of pictures out of a white plastic bag and begins to sort them on the table.

In the lower level of Steele building, better known as the UPEI Nursing School, we have sought out a boardroom with bright blue couches and classroom tables. Melissa, a fourth-year nursing student, explains that the old student lounge had been converted into more labs over the summer.

Something else happened over the summer: Melissa spent six weeks in Vietnam, participating in a WUSC international seminar.

One year ago, Melissa found out that the summer's seminar would be in Vietnam, and also discovered that the program fit exactly with her schedule. "I anxiously awaited the phone call."

Thirty Canadian university students are accepted from different faculties (Melissa was the only nursing student who attended that summer). Each delegate undertakes a mini-research project in the general area of poverty reduction, but under one of three themes: health (Melissa's area), education and arts, and environment. Melissa's particular project was in nursing education and primary health care, studying the wide range of the roles of the nurse within community development in developing countries. As an interesting side note, the first such international seminar took place in 1957 in Ghana, and Pierre Elliot Trudeau was in attendance.

Melissa added that there was great flexibility in the research, including some field visits, "taking the research where we wanted to go."

"If you wanted, you could hop on a train, or a motor scooter and go different places."

This is where she shows me the most interesting and ironic photograph of the bunch: Melissa just happened to have an issue of *The Cadre* with her in Hanoi, and this picture has



Melissa Mokler reading *The Cadre* in Vietnam.

her showing the "mole people" issue to one xeom driver in the middle of traffic.

The motor scooters, it seems, were the ultimate experience on the streets of Hanoi, where the bulk of

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motorized transportation consists of xeoms (breaking down the word, xe means "motor scooter", and om means "to hold on" — if that offers a good mental picture of the experience).

"You get on this motor scooter, there's just hundreds of motor scooters just honking and honking, you can touch the people in the next lane, you can go in and out of lanes, people are yelling at you. . .there are no traffic lights so they use honking as a communication system ... and you're going about 60 km/h ... and you're praying that this man that you don't know will get you to where you want to go."

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"You get addicted to it," Melissa grins. "It's such an adrenaline rush."

The other motor scooter souvenir which Melissa shows me is what she calls a "Vietnamese tattoo." The scar is still on her ankle, where she burnt herself on an exhaust pipe while disembarking. She tells me that it's one of the most common injuries in Vietnam. It was a frightening experience for her, since it got infected (an added risk in a tropical country), and had to go to the hospital for treatment.

In Vietnam, the delegates also worked with twenty local university students through a mutual learning initiative. The Vietnamese students learned about the research methods of Canadian students, including the ways in which they could form their own opinions and ideas after analysing the data.

"They do what we'd call plagiarism. . .they restate what someone else has done before."

In Vietnam, getting into university is drastically different from

here. You must be in the top 1 percent of students, and there is an entrance exam.

"Entire families are working for them, for money for education. For example, one was the youngest in a family of nine, and the extended family are all working so they'll have enough money, which [the family] would get back later."

Melissa did find that the culture was, "very much different than ours," and did find herself in unfamiliar situations, but it was the return home which caused her to experience the greatest "culture shock."

"When I got home, I remembered some of the things I experienced, from conversations with others. I felt a bit lonely. You have this extra life experience. When people ask you about Vietnam, you have thirty seconds to tell them how Vietnam [was]."

"You have all this inside you ... that you can't express."

"I think that ... one thing in Vietnam, I didn't feel pressured to have to be cool. My Vietnamese counterparts were very accepting ... I felt I could really be myself."

Since she has come back, Melissa has found herself "remembering that, and recognizing that in my family and friends." She says that she was impressed by the loyalty extended towards friends in Vietnam.

One requirement to participate in the international seminar is to be returning to a Canadian university (not necessarily the same one), and willing to get the word out on WUSC and the seminar on campus.

The deadline for next year's seminar, which will also be in Vietnam, is November 9th.

"They look for someone with involvement in WUSC, local commitment. It is also for those with little or no experience with developing countries."

Requirements include a two-page research proposal, three reference letters, a letter stating interest, a fundraising scheme for the \$3,000