

Looking Back on Forty Years of CUSO

by Erin FAGAN

The UPEI contingent of CUSO assembled this past week to celebrate the organization's 40 years of work in international development. An assortment of activities took place from September 26th through the 28th, under the organization of the International Centre, a UPEI committee, and CUSO itself.

The non-denominational, non-governmental organization has sent over 12,000 Canadians to volunteer in over 30 developing countries overseas. Volunteers work for roughly two-year contracts in developing countries, receiving training in the language and the culture, while sharing their skills in such areas as agriculture, business, computer technology and health.

The Faculty of Arts hosted a laid-back opening reception in the Faculty Lounge the evening of Wednesday, the 26th of September. At one point, musician Scott Parsons played an acoustic version of The Beatles' "Yesterday," as former co-operants and current organizers mixed and reminisced.

"It was wonderful experience. . . I'd love to go back," says Catherine Mullaley, a sessional instructor for the English department, of her two and a half years as a junior high school teacher in Sarawak, Malaysia (on the island of Borneo). Mullaley was the first CUSO volunteer from Prince Edward Island, participating from 1965 to 1968 after having just graduated from St. Dunstan's University.

"It is appropriate for us to be at a university," noted Ruth Schneider, Chair of CUSO, in an address to the reception. "CUSO began forty years ago because of a group of very dedicated students and faculty at another university."

Schneider spoke of the litany of projects undertaken by CUSO over the years, with the support of Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and with about 70,000 private

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donors across Canada. Schneider noted that the strongest financial support has come from the Atlantic region.

"Former CUSO co-operants are doing very interesting things . . . CUSO is supporting Canada," she affirmed.

"We have aged," Schneider acknowledged. "We are still working strongly with our partners overseas. We are listening more to our Southern voices. We are still known for our responsiveness, our flexibility, for living in the communities overseas . . . we work the way local people do. We're still looking for donors with strong beliefs in the work we do."

The dean of arts, Phillip Smith, thanked CUSO for their "very substantial contribution," and the Chair of the Charlottetown Rotary Club's World Community Services Committee presented a donation of \$3,200 to Schneider.

A little later in the evening, a panel discussion took place in an AVC lecture theatre. Presenter Chris Bryant, a former CUSO CEO and Community Development Worker, spoke of CUSO as a "learning community." He was flanked by three panelists, Teresa Mellish, Catherine Mullaley and Dr. Irene Novaczek.

Bryant examined CUSO in terms of its abilities in such areas as its shared vision and team learning, and also examined some of its past disabilities. He concluded that CUSO "stacked up very well in comparison to other organizations." Emphasis was placed upon CUSO's impact, such as the way it has encouraged "learning how to learn together," "challenged our deeply held assumptions" and allowed returned volunteers to see "longer term patterns behind events."

"I owe CUSO most of what I've achieved on this planet," Bryant concluded.

Teresa Mellish, a CUSO volunteer (along with her husband) from 1971 to 1973 in Malaysia, served as a strong example of the long-term impact of her experiences.

"It had a profound effect on our . . . lives," Mellish said, "We also learned that Canada is a wonderful place to live."

The Mellishes, continuing their interest in global issues, formed the organization Farmers Helping Farmers in 1980, an Island-based organization which has linked local residents with several important, agricultural projects in Northern Tanzania and Kenya. In January 2002, the organization is setting out on a new expedition to Africa with a delegation of about 15 people and a Guardian reporter.

Catherine Mullaley also spoke of her work in Sarawak.

"I learned a great deal . . . that I really loved teaching . . . and how hard it is for different peoples to live together," she related, hinting at ethnic tensions in Borneo at that period.

"When I went travelling in the jungle, for some longhouses I was the first white woman they had ever seen. . . but they had seen jets [overhead], foreshadowings of the future."

After having her luggage lost for a year, Mullaley was "very humbled by their [the community's] care," such as the gift of a bike from one of her neighbours.

"I was sorry to leave," Mullaley concluded.

Dr. Irene Novaczek, a marine biologist, lived in a remote region (the "Newfoundland") of Indonesia with her

husband and two young daughters from 1996-98. Her work was with coral reef conservation and marine resource management. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of CUSO representing the Atlantic region.

"I also went there to learn," Novaczek explained after listing her responsibilities in Indonesia. "It was daunting. . . we experienced a new world of plants, animals and undersea life. It was a whole new way of seeing the world."

Tragically, by 1999 about 98 percent of the coral reefs of that region bleached and died as a result of warmer water temperatures.

"We literally got there just in time . . . to show my children,"

**"If we ignore our impact, it will come back and bite us."
-Dr. Irene Novaczek**

Novaczek said, "We were learning about fragility...and how people in those communities manage their resources. I've used a lot of what I've learned since."

Novaczek expressed concern over CIDA's budget cuts and policy changes, but suggested that CUSO had to adapt to "their corporate culture" and other increased challenges for funding.

Referring to contemporary events, Novaczek concluded that, "If we ignore our impact, it will come back and bite us," and referred to CUSO as "the little candle of shared vision."

When the discussion was opened up, Dr. Ralph Hazelton brought up that the average age of co-operants has become 42 and over. "The primary purposes are no longer in relaying young people coming out of university. This is extremely unfortunate."

Bryant and Schneider both responded, citing that the CUSO countries are requesting more professional people and that graduating students are