A Springtime Visit with Eugene M. Lang '38  
Ariel Finegold '13

Of all the remarkable and enriching experiences I have had at Swarthmore, my casual lunch with Eugene Lang at his offices in New York City tops my list of most memorable. The six of us (pictured above, left to right: Minh Vo '14, Ariel Finegold '13, Eugene M. Lang '38, Adam Bortner '12, Tom Liu '12, Victoria Pang '13, and Lizah Masis '12), all Lang Scholars from different years, boarded the bus from Philly for what was to be a birthday surprise visit to Mr. Lang. He was turning 93. We had all met him on what we considered “our turf” — on campus, that is — but we wanted to get to know him a little better on his home base. What we discovered about the fundamental spirit which inspires this tremendously generous, thoughtful, and extraordinary man was our surprise.

Mr. Lang graciously invited us into his professional world of a lifetime of international travel, philanthropy, and education. He showed us an astounding collection of awards for his public service, medals of honor, the key to San Francisco, photos with President Clinton and Stephen Hawking and so many amazing tributes to his life’s work, that it was dizzying. Mr. Lang talked about his first camping trip to Nepal, about young women he met near the Taj Majal who were fascinated by his camera, about his many business ventures and the art of trademarking inventions, and especially about how he always felt compelled to contribute to society to help make it better. But the most joy he expressed that day, was talking with each of us about our passion for our Lang Projects. He listened intently, asked perceptive questions, and gave us so much encouragement. We truly matter to him — to me, that was the most enlightening part of our four-hour visit.

I’m sure all of us recall the genuine warmth of his handshake and hug as he bid us goodbye. However, I will always remember more poignantly what he said to me a couple of weeks later, back on campus at an alumni event. He told me that my passion for my Lang Project, which is to help low-income families learn the basics of financial literacy, made him feel “insignificant.” I will never feel petite again...despite my five foot frame!

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Permaculture in the Peruvian Amazon
by Sarah Scheub '12

In Nuevo Egipto — the location of my Lang Project called Centro De Experimentación Sostenible Onon Jonibo (Sustainable Experimentation Center of the People of the Ants) —  poverty stems from an economy centralized in tourism, a lack of agricultural skill, and a rise in overfishing and pollution of waterways. In recent years, the lakes and rivers surrounding the Shipibo communities have become polluted and overfished to the point that these ancient fishing communities cannot sustain themselves with fish or hydrate themselves with clean water. As a method of coping, the dynamics of the communities have changed so that the women are the money earners through the sale of tribal crafts to tourists who come from the nearby city of Pucallpa and from all over the world. Some men participate in the artisanal market while others leave the village for weeks at a time to find work in other communities, which means the women work full time and raise children. The people farm and fish minimally; they buy and eat processed imports from the city such as rice or pasta. Their typical diet consists mostly of “empty calories” such as potatoes, yuca, plantain, and rice. For these cultural and financial reasons, the people of Nuevo Egipto are stricken with poverty and hunger.

My project sought to address the social problems of poverty, malnutrition, and degradation of the environment through sustainable living, reforestation, and a diversified economy. As with all human settlements, the people here have reached the point in civilization where resources are being consumed more rapidly than they are naturally produced in the area. The middle-aged people talk of a time in the past when their grandparents could hunt and fish and collect wood right in the community. They talk of long lost species of flora and fauna. They understand that over-harvesting is the reason they can no longer find the species they need. On site, I watched every morning as young and old alike walk out into the community land farther and farther in search of firewood. They are learning an important lesson, just as we did in the United States and as every other modernized society did: nature is not limitless.

In order to address these issues, I decided to create a group of Shipibos from Nuevo Egipto who were devoted to working with agriculture in a group to improve their quality of life and their environment. The basic structure of my project was different from most projects in the region. Usually foreigners come to the indigenous communities with a great idea but never bother to find out if the people like the idea. This was the first difference. I formed my ideas of what the community needed through conversations with community members. Afterwards I began to establish a group of those members who were committed to working together to solve the problems they identified in their lives and their community. Our structure was always group-based, as it is an inherent part of Shipibo culture. We did elect a group leader (who was also elected president of the community that year) and a treasurer. When making decisions we always talked it over together and with the common good in mind. This format was extremely successful and culturally relevant.

I believe putting the power in the hands of the people was the most important part of my project. Additionally, the project differed from others as we chose to solve problems not through the sale of products, but through the production of necessities. By this I mean we identified what the group members used in daily life and how we could produce those necessities.
Scheub, cont’d

Permaculture and self-sufficient living were the most environmentally friendly and cost effective methods of addressing the issues of environmental degradation, poverty, and malnutrition. In line with the permaculture paradigm, we chose to construct a volunteer house, reforest a portion of the community lands with human-centric species, and to make and sell composting toilets and fuel-efficient stoves.

To provide monetarily for the group members while the plants in the reforestation project were growing, we built and sold these inventions. The sale of stoves will help to transition the project from start-up expenses to a running business with income. Not to mention it will alleviate the need to search for firewood for miles every other day. Rocket-type stoves function on little bits of wood rather than large logs, which means the community will cut fewer trees to do the same amount of cooking. Another success was our introduction and sales of bucket composting toilets that are more comfortable, sanitary, and environmentally-friendly. With the use of these toilets, waste will not contaminate underground water and parasite lifecycles will be destroyed in the composting process.

With these inventions and the project in general we are working not to just alleviate a current problem, but instead to prevent a number of issues. By teaching agriculture, the project not only provides relief to issues of malnutrition and poverty but also improves the environment through reforestation and sustainable living practices. The old adage about teaching a man to fish instead of giving him one is highly applicable. We are teaching the community how to sustain themselves monetarily, bodily, and environmentally through on site production instead of through the sale of goods to tourists.

The efforts of the group are spreading to the community as the community itself adopts the practices being used by group members. Bucket composting toilets are the new hot commodity in town as they allow the user to sit. They also have the added benefits of ending parasite lifecycles and preventing ground water pollution.

Rocket stoves of varying designs are used in the homes of all members and at the center. The library also makes the guides for stoves, toilets, water filters, and permaculture living available to anyone who can read Spanish. In this way, others in the community can purchase these products or make their own using the guides at the library. Every project they had received before mine told them that they needed help from an extrañero (outsider). Now they have confidence that the library and the knowledge of their elders will suffice in aiding them with projects on the land.

The instant impact of available paid work for the local economy has also been visible. Families that we bought materials from then had income to buy the necessities they had been without. Past this immediate impact though, is a larger sentiment of hope for a future in which the staples of human life – firewood, food, and the natural environment – will not be in danger of depletion.

The impact of the project is sustained by the physical place of the center as well as the minds of every current and future group member or volunteer. As the center grows so too do the seeds, plants, crops, trees, and animals. The point is to have a long-term forest in the backyard of the community that provides for everyone in the community. By creating a group that accepts this center as their livelihoods, I have created a safety net of individuals who accept the responsibility of caring for each plant and animal with the expectation of food and economic security for the future. I truly believe now more than ever that this project can be replicated in other communities and even in this community.

CLASS NOTES (cont’d)

October 26, 4:30-6:00pm in the Scheuer Room, Swarthmore College. For his Lang Project, Mike worked with the Urban Bridges Educational Outreach at St. Gabriel’s Church in Olney, Mike recruited potential leaders from this North Philadelphia-based community and in a classroom-based program, taught them effective community organizing skills. Mike’s training sessions were modeled on the leadership development curriculum developed and refined over several decades by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). After the training was completed, Mike helped these new community leaders to organize political actions to influence critical community issues.

Since 2003, Mike has been an organizer with Empowered Queens United for Action and Leadership, and other affiliates of the Metro Industrial Areas Foundation.

Since graduating from Brown’s Masters of Arts in Teaching Program, Ashia Troiano ’11 now teaches history at West Brooklyn Community High School.
Scheub, cont’d

Variations on this project can range from a fully developed permaculture center that sources volunteers to learn permaculture techniques and that includes a library/business center to something as simple as a family reforesting their chacra (field) or portion of community land in agroforestry techniques rather than in monoculture or cultivated crops.

For a full scale replication of this project in another community, a funding source and group of dedicated individuals must be located. From there, the group would be able to network with our center (Onan Jonibo) and our contacts in the area. For projects outside of this area, our model can be replicated through communication and our forthcoming reports. The project is replicable not only within the surrounding communities but also more generally as a model of sustainable agriculture as a rural development tool. The project model will be detailed and dispersed to a select group of nonprofits as an example of one way to work with indigenous groups. This project demonstrates that when project leaders are chosen correctly, rural development need not come from outside—it can occur from within the community.

While I set out to teach others something I had a little knowledge about, in return I learned as well. When I began this project I thought mostly of my career goals and what I would be learning to further my interests academically. I thought about the experience of designing and planting a permaculture food forest and what that experience would teach me in practical knowledge. I also thought about cultural emersion and learning more natural remedies and folklore of the villages. Never in all my planning and thinking did I expect to learn something about the one thing I felt like my own culture did so much better than Swarthmore or most of the U.S.: community. I know what community means, or at least I thought I did then.

To me, “community” was potlucks, church fellowship, stopping on the road to roll down your window and chat with a neighbor, sharing food in times of plenty and in times of need, and the best representation—the county fair. Little did I know that what I thought community meant was just the beginning of my understanding. Nuevo Egipto taught me what community really means. I only hope that the work of the group through the wonderful gift of Mr. Lang will allow the community to continue and flourish.

BREAKING NEWS

Sarah Scheub ’12 executed her project in the Shipibo community of Nuevo Egipto in the Peruvian Amazon because of the work previous Lang Scholar, Diego Garcia Montufar ’09 did in a nearby community. Diego worked in the community of San Francisco de Yarinacocha to establish a waste management system. Sarah’s project worked, in part, to utilize the products of Diego’s project to complete the cycle of nutrients in the village by using waste as resources for agricultural development. Both projects have become pivotal to the work of Alianza Arkana, a non-profit created by Diego’s project partner. Members of Alianza Arkana applied for and received a $50,000 USAID grant to replicate their Lang projects. They will start 12 waste management and three permaculture projects in other communities on the Ucayali River!

Lang Scholar Reunion, NYC

In spring 2012, Mr. Lang and his Lang Scholars met for an informal gathering at a midtown Manhattan restaurant. A diverse group of scholars attended: Malado Baldwin ‘97, Morgan Bartz ‘14, Ana Chiu ‘06, Tony Cho ‘01, Omer Corluhan ’08, Tamara De Moor ‘10, Camila Leiva ’09, Melkizedeck Okudo ‘03, Riana Shah ’14, and Eugene Lang ’38. They reminisced about their Lang projects and updated each other on their current involvement in social change. The event was organized by Ana Chiu ’06 and Omer Corluhan ’08.

If you’re interested in organizing an alumni gathering in your city or state, please contact Jennifer Magee.

WITH GRATITUDE

Heartfelt thanks to Eugene M. Lang ’38 for his continued support and generosity to the LOS Program!