With Gratitude

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

Alumni Features

Sék-Mis/Civil Eyes: Documenting LGBTQI Rights in Africa
By Dr. S. N. Nyeck ’07

I was admitted to Swarthmore College about two years after I arrived in the U.S. from Cameroon. Before leaving Cameroon, I was working on a short video documentary that featured the lives of ordinary gays and lesbians and their contributions to society in Cameroon. Prior to 2005, there was no international funding for political organizing around LGBTQI rights in Africa as we know it today. Yet, many of us were working toward the transformation of socio-political attitudes toward same-gender relations. The idea of a documentary came to me in 2003 after I started writing an international column about LGBTQI people in Cameroon from a feminist theology perspective. My abrupt departure from Cameroon put the video documentary project on hold although a great part of it was already shot.

I received my admission letter to Swarthmore College a few months after Cameroon initiated the first witch hunt of gays and lesbians in sub-Saharan Africa. Tabloids and leading newspapers printed names of suspected queers and calls to either imprison or kill the gays monopolized public debates for two months. With this development, I felt that I could not complete my project without documenting this historical event that inspired anti-gay sentiments in Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya and beyond.

The Lang Opportunity Scholarship Program allowed me to work with my crew remotely to complete my Sék-Mis/Civil Eyes documentary, featuring the many ways in which queer people evade and resist social gaze in their daily lives in Cameroon. The documentary has not been released to the general public yet. As a Lang Scholar, I traveled back to Africa and to the Gambia to deliver the first statement at the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights demanding the protection of same-gender loving persons in Africa. This statement was a response to the arrest of eleven gay men in Yaounde, Cameroon.

Political organizing for LGBTQI rights in Africa is thriving today. Small and big victories have been secured at the national, regional, and Pan-African levels. The Coalition of African Lesbians was granted observer status at the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights in 2015, the same year Mozambique decriminalized homosexuality.

My graduate studies added a few arrows to my social justice quiver and my interests branched out in different, but complementary directions. Currently, I
write about public policy and development with a special focus on public-procurement and public-private partnerships (Public Procurement Reform and Governance in Africa, Palgrave-Macmillan, April 2016) and maintain an interest in sexuality and politics (Sexual Diversity: Politics, Theory and Citizenship, McGill-Queens University Press, 2013) in Africa.

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Building an Ecosystem for Social Change, Minh Vo '15

In addition to her work, Ariel serves on the Board of Directors of the Family Services of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, a nonprofit which has been making a positive difference in the lives of children, seniors and families with a wide variety of social programs for more than one hundred years. Through Family Services, Ariel continues her passion for VITA, which assists low-income individuals and families with their federal and state tax returns. She started volunteering with VITA as a freshman at Swarthmore, served as Swat’s VITA coordinator, and eventually centered her Lang Project around financial literacy for VITA patrons.

Sponsored by Minh Vo ‘15 and Project Sugar, more than a 100 youths participated in a city-wide treasure hunt, meant to raise public awareness over stigmas faced by HIV children.

Orphans are a large under-served population in Vietnam – UNICEF (2009) estimates that the total number of orphans under 18 years old is 1.4 million. The Lang Project of Minh Vo ‘15, Life Skill and Mentorship Program for Young Orphans in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, stemmed from his desire to pioneer change in the lives of this vulnerable population. At first, Minh piloted a mentoring and character development program located at a single orphanage – the first of its kind in Vietnam – with 110 orphans from age 5 to 25.

Since summer 2014, Minh has replicated the "volunteer-as-mentor" model he piloted as part of this initiative with an organization called Project Sugar. Project Sugar, a 6-year-old volunteer corps, has more than 1500 alumni volunteers and strong relationships with more than 15 children’s homes. Says Minh, "Like my project, Project Sugar seeks to improve social outcomes for orphans, but they do so by mobilizing public support for orphanage children in Ho Chi Minh City while my prior work focused primarily upon capacity building among volunteers and program development...They were therefore my ideal partner as I could turn this volunteer corps into a mentor corps for orphans!"

Looking back, Minh reflects, "Since the beginning of my project, I have graduated from the role of a service provider at one particular orphanage to an ecosystem-building role, which will support many more orphans across Vietnam and leave a legacy for the next generation of youth entrepreneurs."

Minh's vision for the organization from 2016 onwards is to become the largest volunteer-as-mentor corps with a sustainable presence in more than 20 orphanages in Vietnam.
Upcoming Events

Visiting Swarthmore?
If your travels bring you to campus during the school year, or for instance, if you plan to attend Alumni Weekend (June 3-5) we hope you'll let us know so that we might connect with you in person!

Submissions Welcome
If you have a "class note," "dogfish story," photo (jpeg), or other information you'd like to share with Lang Scholar alumni, please send an email to Jennifer Magee by March 1 or October 1. This newsletter is distributed during spring break and fall break each year.

Lang Scholars Alumni Network
Join the Lang Scholars Alumni Network on LinkedIn! You can find it by searching "Lang Scholars Alumni Network" on LinkedIn.

In the News
- Jason Heo '15 Named to First Class of Schwarzman Scholars
- Lang Scholar Fatima Boozarjomehri '17 Brings Sustainable Eyewear to Iran
- New Class of Lang Opportunity Scholars Announced
- Now You SEE It

The Dogfish Story

Named for a defining experience in the life of Eugene Lang ’38, this newsletter seeks to chronicle the tales of transformation and accomplishments of Lang Scholars. Here below is original "dogfish story."

As a freshman (age 15) at Swarthmore, Eugene M. Lang ’38 volunteered to be a club leader at the Friends Neighborhood Guild, a settlement house in the slums of Philadelphia. "I would come in on Monday evenings," he says, "to meet with a group of 13 or 14 kids, almost my age, all African American. For each meeting, I had to think of an agenda that could keep them interested.
For my finest hour - inspired by the lab experience of my then current freshman bio course - I decided to engage my kids at the Guild with a cooperative but guided dissection of a dogfish - an agenda, enthusiastically shared and destined to have a far greater impact than I ever could have imagined. After the meeting, each kid went home with an identifiable souvenir piece of dogfish.

About five years later, Lang, who by then had graduated with an Economics degree, received a letter via Swarthmore from one of his Guild kids expressing how the dogfish experience, refreshed by periodic references to his souvenir, made him re-evaluate his life, and go back to school with the goal of becoming a doctor.

"Most significantly, he wrote the letter to me when notified of his admission as a pre-med scholarship student to a prominent university. I can never forget that," says Lang with a brief pause. "It was a defining experience in my life."

-- Excerpted with permission from "Eugene Lang: The Masterless Man, " by Aliya Padamsee '14