

Postcard Sampler

News from students who traveled far and near for internships and other summer adventures ...



Dear Record,

Hola from Managua, Nicaragua, where I'm spending the summer working for a group called Agora Partnerships. It's a new business that provides consulting services and venture capital finance to local entrepreneurs. The people I work with are passionately committed to helping their fellow Nicaraguans realize the dream of starting up their own businesses.

At SIPA, I am studying economic and political development, with a focus on the role of the private sector in emerging markets. Thus my summer work experience relates directly to my studies. In theory, Agora considers all business proposals and looks simply for good opportunities. In practice, it has a wide range of contacts who recommend prospective entrepreneurs and help with evaluating their business plans. Right now the company is working with a baby food manufacturer and an oyster farmer. We've decided to invest in both of these businesses.

Come fall, we'll be assisting a couple of more farmers: one of them wants to export cardamom products, the other, a potato farmer, plans to supply the growing local market for frozen French fries. We'll also be supporting someone interested in exporting dried tropical fruits; a young woman hoping to provide human resource services recycling company and now has ambitions of starting up a plastics recycling plant.

I like living in Nicaragua, though Managua itself is a bit depressing. The downtown area was flattened by a major earthquake in 1972 and has never been rebuilt—it looks like a series of vacant lots. I've taken quite a few trips out of the city—to deserted beaches, volcanoes and the world's fourth largest lake. On my travels I always meet people and we talk about their memories of the civil war followed by the Sandinista government.

My biggest challenge has been developing the requisite flexibility and patience. Nothing ever goes exactly as it's supposed to, whether at work or outside the office.

—Mark Pedersen, M.A. student
School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA)

Dear Record,

Ph.D. students don't really have summer vacations, and I am no exception. Apart from ten days in June when I returned to Columbia for an oral history seminar, "Living to Tell," I've been in Bosnia and Herzegovina interviewing people about the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). My dissertation asks whether the process of bringing the perpetrators of atrocities during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) to justice has advanced the transition to democracy. What do Bosnians think about developments in The Hague? My findings should be relevant to other post-conflict societies, such as Iraq.

I have already interviewed many individuals, including members of nongovernmental organizations, victims of the Srebrenica genocide of 1995 and regular citizens. In July, I participated in the events surrounding the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Srebrenica enclave. And today I met with local activists about setting up an oral history project on Srebrenica, with the help of Columbia's Oral History Research Office.

In September, I am planning to interview Bosnian military officers and to survey approximately 300 members of the Bosnian armed forces about the ICTY. I expect to call upon the knowledge gleaned from attending the Columbia workshop in June. I benefited greatly from exchanging ideas with other researchers who are confronting the challenge of working with populations who have lived through trauma, and from learning about the established methods of doing oral history interviews.

When I leave the country, I hope to hand over at least part of my oral history archive to a Bosnian NGO that has already compiled over 7,500 stories.

This may be my last postcard. Assuming all goes well with my committee, I will soon be joining the ranks of Columbia alumni.

—Lara J. Nettelfield, Ph.D. student
Political Science



Dear Record,

I'm writing from Metro Manila, where I just finished two weeks of research on the institutions that manage water resources in the Philippines. I came here on behalf of the University's International Research Institute for Climate Prediction (IRI). IRI has a five-year project in the Philippines. One of the project's aims is to improve the allocation of water from the Angat Reservoir, which supplies 97% of the water requirements in Metro Manila. The idea is to systemize the use of climate, or seasonal rainfall, forecasts in operating and managing the reservoir.

I came to Manila from Bangkok, Thailand, where I attended a workshop on these topics. Having spent time in my Earth Institute classes debating whether rainfall predictions can be useful in resource management, I found it fascinating to talk with people who are working with Southeast Asian farmers. It turns out the farmers are desperate for any kind of climate information that might prove useful. Unlike my classmates and me, they aren't preoccupied with the margin of error associated with the data.

I have particularly enjoyed being in Manila because my mother and sister traveled all the way up from our home in Mindanao (southern Philippines) to see me. I hadn't seen them for almost a year, since I came to New York last August.

—Kareff May Rafisura, M.A. student
the Earth Institute

Dear Record,

I'm writing from Capitol Hill, where I'm working in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as a summer intern. I'm in the minority office, so technically I'm working for Senator Joe Biden of Delaware. Thanks to my Columbia courses, I'm already familiar with many of the issues the committee deals with—Iraq and Afghanistan in particular. But I'm also learning some lessons that classes can't teach, such as what is really meant by political maneuvering. For instance, the committee held a series of meetings on the security, economic and political issues the United States is confronting in Iraq; and the administration failed to provide any witnesses. At our staff meeting we discussed how to let the public know about the administration's reluctance to face up to the deteriorating situation in Iraq.

One of the biggest surprises has been how small the committee staff is relative to the amount of information that has to be covered. Individual staffers are responsible for entire continents and must be versed in the affairs of each country within that continent.

I love being back in D.C. for the summer (it's where I grew up), though as a city it doesn't really compare to New York. I miss NYC pizza: Koronets is one of a kind. Have some for me!

—Lukas McGowan (CC'07)
political science major

