



My Travels to Southeast Asia

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“Once you have traveled, the voyage never ends, but is played out over and over again in the quietest chambers.

The mind can never break off from the journey.” Pat Conroy, American author

I was born and raised in Puerto Rico and when I was young my dad would drive “the family” in our station wagon from Rio Piedras, where we lived, to Old San Juan. Our journey would last about two hours. We never got out of the car and throughout our trip my mom would point out historical buildings or places of interest while giving my sister and I a lesson in Puerto Rican history. I recall this Sunday afternoon ritual with great fondness. For me, visiting Old San Juan was like being transported to a faraway place. I believe this experience was formative and planted the seed for what would later become my love of travel and cultures.

Traveling and experiencing other cultures has allowed me to realize the vastness of human perspectives and experiences. Traveling allows me to see how other people live and what they must deal with on a daily basis. Traveling humbles me by exposing me to situations I could not never imagine. Traveling to places with impoverished areas or places impacted by political upheaval enhances my understanding of the world and forces me to recount the many blessings I am privileged to have.

My trip to Southeast Asia this past March exceeded my expectations. I felt blessed by the opportunity and appreciative of the people I met who opened their hearts and homes.

Earlier this year my husband and I had the opportunity to join our dear friends and traveling companions to visit Southeast Asia. During our 18-day trip, we visited Bangkok in Thailand, Luang Prabang and Vientiane in Laos, Phnom Penh and Siem Reap in Cambodia and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. Our journey was typified by day trips to remote areas and cultural exchanges with local people. Our interpreters were also cultural brokers, who consistently provided a historical perspective of the region and increased our understanding of the culture.

It is hard to describe every place and experience I had and therefore, I will focus on a few highlights to give you a flavor of my journey.

UNESCO World Heritage City of Luang Prabang, Laos

To me, nothing is more fulfilling and energizing than getting into a town and facing an uphill walk of 328 steps to see the sunset. This was my introduction to Luang Prabang. Phousi Hill sits high in the center of the town and every evening one can witness a glorious sunset with a 360-degree view of the town by going up to the top of the hill. I made it my mission to reach the top as fast as I could. I didn’t want to miss the experience.

At the top, I found many other people who were also eager to witness this unique experience. We shared the small space and sat quietly to see the sky’s transformation and display of soft tones of pink and yellow.

In Luang Prabang the size and length of the Mekong River serves to heighten the importance of the river for economic and social sustainability. Fishing and farming are at the center of family life. Many families lack financial resources and depend on the day’s work for food. Religion is tightly intertwined with daily life as evidenced by the number of Buddhist temples and monks in the town.



It was at Phousi Hill that I saw my first group of Buddhist monks; boys and young men dressed in bright orange robes. When I was at the top of the Hill that first evening I heard chanting coming from the temple that stood in this location. I recall sitting outside this small temple

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mesmerized by their profound sense of spiritual peace.

One of the most sacred and well-known Lao traditions is the Buddhist Alms Giving Ceremony. I had the opportunity of seeing and experiencing this sacred ceremony 3 times, once as a participant. Alms giving occurs once daily, very early in the morning. Locals await silently with their baskets of



sticky rice at the side of the road, kneeling on blankets or sitting on very low stools. Monks walk in single file as the locals place a handful of sticky rice and fruit or other snack in the monks' basket. The monks collect food to eat for breakfast and lunch, their only sustenance for the day. This ceremony was deeply spiritual and moving.

That sense of peace and spiritual connection stayed with me throughout my time in Luang Prabang. It served me well as I continued to engage in experiences far removed from my daily routines in Boston.

One of the most memorable and enriching moments took place when we visited a local village and met elementary school students from the Tin Keo School in the Tin Keo Village. The students, a mix of Lao-Loom people and Hmong Hill tribe, attend a one-room school. They appeared attentive to the teacher and oblivious to us, foreigners, peeking through the open win-

dows. Once we entered the classroom the students welcomed us with open arms. They had prepared a few songs for us and the activities continued outside the classroom as we shared games and songs. We, adults, were transformed by the experience of playing games we had not played in years and sharing joyous moments with children who did not speak our language and whose lives were markedly different

than ours. The happiness that emanated from these children is an experience I will never forget.

We also had the opportunity to visit the village. We walked through dirt roads, met locals, farmers and weavers, and visited their homes. These homes could have been described as "uninhabitable" by some, given the lack of electricity, furniture and kitchen appliances. However, these homes were very functional and met the needs of the community. They were proud to show us their new water system, which allowed all villagers to get potable water. Most important, the people appeared content and the feeling of tranquility and inner peace were extraordinary. It was a good reminder that sometimes my challenges in my extremely comfortable life are, in the broader picture, insignificant.

Phnom Penh & Siem Reap, Cambodia
I was eager to visit Cambodia. My son's fiancé, Sarah, had done work with local groups to preserve their

stories and narratives as part of a Global Arts project. She was visiting Cambodia at the same time we were and although we were in different towns, we followed her guidance and visited the local markets and restaurants she had recommended. We also met Sofia, who validated what Sarah had shared with us: "People are wonderful! You will fall in love with Cambodia!"

Sofia was our tour guide and interpreter during our time in Phnom Penh. Her warmth and welcoming manner contrasted sharply with the turbulent life she described having as a young child. Her life's story was a devastating window into the reality of the Killing Fields and a grim reminder of the bloody past of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. She took us to visit the Tuoi Sleng Genocide Museum and the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek. Her mother was the only survivor of 9 brothers and sisters, all killed by the Khmer Rouge. Her work as a tour guide was a testament of her mission to share the history of the country and ensure people had knowledge of the atrocities of the regime and the lasting effect on society. Sofia helped me to understand the depth of her resilience and the value of sharing the past to impact the future.

In Siem Reap we had the opportunity to travel on the Tonle Sap Lake, where we took a boat to visit a floating village. I had never been to a floating village and did not know what to expect. We visited one of the homes and met the village's midwife,



her husband and other family members. The midwife had delivered most of the children in the village, including her own grandchildren. The com-

munity seemed tight and families helped each other to meet their needs. Life seemed complex and yet very simple. This extreme interdependency within the community members was unfamiliar to me, yet it seemed to work well as evidenced by the longevity of the community.

In Siem Reap we explored many temples, including our visit to Angkor Wat, often described as a masterpiece of Khmer architecture. Magnificent and impressive, this temple was built between 1113 and 1150 to honor the Hin-

du god Vishnu. It is the largest religious monument in the world.

My favorite however, was the calmness experienced from seeing this temple from afar. Sitting across from Angkor Wat, I saw a local pausing to sit by the river. Maybe we were all trying to capture the moment and the tranquility that the scene brings.

I look forward to returning to Southeast Asia and further explore all it has to offer. For now, my mind will never break off from this special journey.



Medical Interpreter and Translator Week will take place the week of September 24-28, 2018, and MIS has a full Schedule of Events planned. Each year Medical Interpreter and Translator Week is celebrated about the celebration of International Translation Day which is September 30th each year, the feast of St. Jerome, translator of the Bible into Latin. This past year, the United Nations General Assembly declared 30 September to be UN International Translation Day

Monday, September 24: The Medical Interpreter and Translator Week Kickoff Breakfast will be held in the GRB 015 Conference Room from 8:00 am to 10:00 am. All staff and freelance Medical Interpreters are welcome to attend.

Monday, September 24: From 10 am—1 pm there will be a Medical Interpreter Services (MIS) Table in the White Corridor. The entire MGH community is invited to stop by the table, talk with our interpreters, and learn more about MIS.

Wednesday, September 26: A special Workshop on Endocrinology will be held in the Haber Conference Room from 4:00-6:30 pm. Any member of the Medical Interpreter community is welcome to attend. CEUs from the IMIA will be offered for this workshop for CMIs. To register please contact Chris Kirwan at ckirwan@partners.org.

Thursday, September 27: MGH Medical Interpreter Staff and Freelance Interpreters are welcome to attend a pot luck lunch in GRB 015, between 11:30 am-2:00 pm. There will be a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board and we hope to honor our Language Access Champion at the lunch.

Friday, September 28: Interpreter Grand Rounds, GRB 015, from 12-1pm. Staff and Freelance interpreters are welcome to attend, please contact Chris if you would like to attend.

Welcome to Joyce and Farewell to Yocelin

By Andy Beggs, CMI

On August 17, 2018 Interpreter Services held one of our famous Potluck lunches. We did so in order to give a warm send off to Yocelin Blanco Mejia, this year's Summer Youth Jobs intern. While here, the plan was for Yocelin to do some shadowing as well as helping us with badge lamination, ISTS reconciliation and some other small projects. She went beyond these tasks in many ways, even helping out at the Front Desk at times. In addition to Yocelin, both her mother and sister attended a farewell potluck for her at our office, and were treated to the customary variety of excellent foods from all over the world, brought in by each interpreter. Yocelin's mom even brought a traditional El Salvadoran plate, Pupusas.

Yocelin was such an asset to our department during her short summer with us. She enjoyed her summer work here and said that she enjoyed meeting people from so many different cultures and backgrounds. Yocelin recently graduated from East Boston High School and she

will be attending Suffolk University in the fall. Yes, she is only going to be across the street! At Suffolk she is going to begin her studies by concentrating on learning about Asian culture and languages. We will miss Yocelin, and we wish her the very best in all that she does!

During our Potluck we also took the opportunity to welcome Joyce Miller to our GRB 015 family. Joyce is the newly hired Volunteer Coordinator. We are very excited for her and the Volunteer Department.



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An excellent article entitled “Where Interpreters are Scarce, Immigrant Health Care is Lost in Translation,” by Sheila Mulrooney Eldred, was published on the website Undark on August 15, 2018. This article is of interest not only to medical interpreters, but also to providers and clinical managers. In tracing the story of Marlon Munoz, who found himself forced to interpret for his wife, and friends and family, when there was no interpreter available, it shows the pain and heartache that this man had to undergo in literally giving his wife a breast cancer diagnosis, and the strain this caused on their relationship. The article also highlights the legal requirement, including “the 1964 Civil Rights Act and subsequent orders and laws” which require health care organizations which receive federal funds to provide language access free of charge 24/7, in the form of qualified medical interpreters. As the article goes on to say, these accommodations not only improve clinical outcomes and reduce disparities, but increase patient satisfaction. The case has even been made that they may provide cost savings, as “a 2017 study...found that an academic hospital could save an estimated \$161,404 each month by avoiding 119 readmissions when patients had consistent access to interpretation.”

This is a “must read” for interpreters, for all those who utilize their services, and for those who may rely on ad hoc interpreters in the form of staff untrained in interpreting.

Here is the link: <https://undark.org/article/health-care-medical-interpreters/>

Work from Home Program Nominated for Nathaniel Bowditch Award

By Andy Beggs, CMI

In October of 2017, the MIS Work from Home (WFH) program was nominated for the prestigious Nathaniel Bowditch Award. This award was established in 2000 when the MGH Board of Trustees received a grant for “an annual prize recognizing efforts to improve patient care while reducing costs.” This is not the first time that MIS has been honored through this award. In 2009, Patricia Rowell, Director of Volunteer, Interpreter, Information Ambassador and General Store Services, and Jim Noga, Chief Information Officer, received this award for establishing the video medical interpreter (VMI) service.

In 2015, when one of our Medical Interpreters moved out of state, instead of losing her as an interpreter, MIS leadership decided to do something unprecedented in our department: to continue with her as a remote video interpreter. Partners IS worked with MIS to set her up with a router, laptop and video phone to connect her into the Partners network and the Interpreter Services call manager. On January 2, 2016, the project went live and was deemed an enormous success. The technology into which this equipment connected was already in place providing the VMI service to MGH and other area clinics along with Nantucket Cottage Hospital. But having an interpreter work from home was a new experience for the department; and it was a great success.

The interpreter’s productivity climbed dramatically because she was dedicated solely to phone and video interpreting and not having to navigate the 36 buildings of the main campus with crammed elevators and providers who were delayed seeing patients. This on-demand service was being accessed by providers precisely at the moment they needed it. Providers’ feedback was extremely positive and patients recognized

the interpreter and felt a measure of comfort. Due to its great success the department was able to use capital money to expand the program to include 5 more WFH stations. These five interpreters went live on June 27, 2017.

Based in part on the efforts of the WFH interpreters, MGH Interpreter Services cost per encounter was reduced by over 22% (in total since FY 12). The 92% increase in productivity is unparalleled and has made a significant contribution to the drastic annual increase in overall volume over the past 2 years. In FY12 MIS conducted over 83,000 encounters; in FY 17 the total was over 121,000. That is a 46% growth in volume in 5 years.

While all of these numbers are certainly impressive, what is most important is that our patients and providers are utilizing our team of highly qualified interpreters and meeting the needs of more and more LEP patients and their families each year. These interpreters are familiar to both staff and patients and provide the highest quality and safest care around. This program has also helped the department to make on-site, in person interpreters available for more complex appointments such as family meetings and complicated procedures where phone/video cannot be used. Achieving this delicate balance helps us put the department’s greatest resource and a vital member of the health care team, our interpreters, in a position to serve the most patients and families we possibly can.

1 Mass General News, April 24, 2009, <https://www.massgeneral.org/News/newsarticle.aspx?id=1669> (accessed July 26, 2018).

2 Patient Care Services Annual Report, 2009.