

Volunteer Travel: High School Grad Helps Orphans in Bali

It was once known as the "gap year," a year of independent travel and volunteerism abroad between high school and college. The concept became popular following World War II, when youth travel and cultural exchange were considered useful tools to promote global understanding.



Recently, Wood River High School (Idaho) graduate Julia Bowman raised money locally - and spent some of her own - to fund a gap-year journey to the island of Bali in Indonesia. She returned this month after spending three months working at an orphanage for girls.

"Since spending time abroad, my ideas for the future have relaxed," she says. "I have seen many ways of living and many different kinds of success. One thing that I have realized is how important it is for Wood River Valley students to take time off from school."

"I have Community School and Wood River High School friends who have gone directly to college and are shocked by all of the terrible things happening in the world. Even though I was involved with Amnesty International in high school, my knowledge of world events was terrible."

Bowman plans to attend the University of Denver Business School, where she is enrolled in the Honors Program and the Pioneer Leadership Program. While she is eager to pursue her studies, she said her travels put the notion of "success" into a broader perspective.

"I learned that a college degree is not essential for success or happiness. I have also learned that my future will probably have little to do with orphanages or other service work."

Bowman said she will remain connected to the orphanage where she worked, perhaps finding ways to help the girls there in the future. "I made many friends - for three months they were my family. I have some vague ideas about what action I can take to help the foundation and other orphanages like it but nothing more than ideas."

Bowman said she has plans to share details from her experience abroad with the Wood River Valley community, which made her \$2,000 donation to the children of Indonesia possible. She paid for sewing machines at the orphanage where she worked, and paid for rice at a Muslim orphanage she visited.

"Originally I had planned to donate the money solely to the Widhya Asih Foundation, where I stayed, but there was a much greater need at this other orphanage. There was an outdoor, dirt-floored kitchen. Twenty-seven girls slept in two rooms together with only two bathrooms, which had no roof."

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Bowman raised money from the Rotary Club and through the Wood River Middle School's Goal Setting Program. Seventh- and eighth-graders sold buttons to help pay for Bowman's time abroad. Bowman paid for her airfare.

"Instead of going directly from one cultural bubble to another, Wood River Valley to university, I recommend that students take a year off from school. There is a world of difference between knowing that people live in poverty, and actually seeing a family of seven supported on \$3 a day, or visiting their homes and eating their food. There is a difference between reading about a riot and meeting the girl who fled during the night with her family and watched her village burn."

Her father, County Commissioner Tom Bowman, said he is proud of his daughter for taking time off and working overseas. "Sometimes parents are too protective of their children," he said. "There is a lot to learn out there outside of school."

By Tony Evans (Idaho Mountain Express)

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