This summer the MIRT 2006 program fellows (12 of them!) are living and learning in six different countries across the globe (Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Ethiopia, Thailand, and Republic of Georgia).

Our fellows have sent in mid-trip report that we would like to share with you.

In this special issue of the MIRT Newsletter, please read fellows description of their academic, social and cultural experiences from different corners of the world. We hope you will enjoy traveling with them!

“Eight weeks with MIRT has brought me the chance to be a part of something global and long lasting, and for that I feel extremely fortunate!”—Alisa Byquist, MIRT 2006 CHILE (page 2)

“I feel blessed to be where I am at this very moment. It’s helping me define where I want to be professionally and personally.”—Dodie Arnold, MIRT 2006 ETHIOPIA (page 5)

“MIRT has afforded me the unique opportunity to be able to learn about the Georgian healthcare system”—Thomas McHale, MIRT 2006 REP OF GEORGIA (page 14)

“As he is telling me about this I reaffirm that there is great value in having quality health care for people but even greater value in having quality health care for people that takes into account their culture.”—Yasmin Barrios, MIRT 2006 PERU (page 14)

“I am having an amazing experience on so many levels. I delight in being here and participating in this program, something I can’t imagine ever having been able to do without MIRT.”—Ines Gardilcic, MIRT 2006 ECUADOR (page 13)
Wow, so much has happened here in Chile, I don’t even know where to begin! We have had our share of Patagonian adventures outside of the research front, including an amazing trip to the national park El Torres del Paine!

We honestly walked alongside red foxes, wild Chilean ostriches, horses, llamas, pink flamingos, and with condors overhead the silhouette of the mountain peaks couldn’t have been more beautiful! My next big adventure was coming down with a nasty case of food poisoning. I spent nearly three days in bed from eating some raw sea urchin gonads (apparently they are a delicacy—Chile exports them in mass quantities). I think that definitely should be a once in a lifetime experience! But with each passing day we are falling more and more in love with the town and its people. There is so much to see and do, and we have had a great time just walking around getting to know each other and the city. The weather, which at one time filled us with a little apprehension, has actually been lovely! The sunrises are vivid—the sun just seems to sit on top of the earth like a glowing orange orb. And at sunset, the sky above “el Estrecho de Magallanes” is filled with nearly every pastel color, like a thick rainbow stretching up from the sea with blue, then green, then pink and orange hues. It is unlike anything I have ever seen, and spectacular!

In terms of our research here in Punta Arenas, things are progressing very well. I have learned so much more than I ever could have imagined possible in six weeks. My study is focusing mainly on the factors that prevent caregivers from bringing their children into the clinic to receive regularly scheduled therapy, which is an integral part of the treatment regimen for many of the disabilities presenting at the clinic. After doing some initial background research and talking to the clinic staff to see what they think may play a role in preventing patients from attending their appointments, I developed a list of physical and perceived barriers to healthcare access. The physical barriers included factors such as transportation, economic limitations, work restrictions, or caring for other family members.

The perceived barriers included opinions on the quality of therapy that the child was receiving, the quality of the therapist, satisfaction with the duration of each therapy session and the number of visits the patient was scheduled each week.

Perhaps the most challenging part of my MIRT experience thus far has been trying to contend with my imperfect Spanish language skills. On the one hand, I have this overwhelming desire to meet with patients, finding out more about their lives, and trying to inspire confidence in the work that MIRT is doing here in Punta Arenas. On the other hand, my Spanish abilities are anything but perfect, and I find myself having to give myself a brief pep-talk before I go out to great the patients. “You can do this.” I say to myself. “Even if you mess up, they will still be happy to talk to you, if you are genuinely interested in what they have to say.” And most of the time I really do surprise myself, and it turns out wonderfully. When all else fails, I’ve learned that it is possible to find ways to break through the language barrier that I didn’t even know existed! It has really taught me to think on my feet, but most importantly, these valuable interactions have helped me learn not to take myself too seriously.

My Spanish is improving by leaps and bounds. I have laughed and sometimes almost cry with the parents of the children of El Centro as they talk about what life is like for them and their children. I get to experience life through their eyes, which is something that can only be gained by speaking directly with the people.

“Eight weeks with MIRT has brought me the chance to be a part of something global and long lasting, and for that I feel extremely fortunate!”
Although my time in Punta Arenas is short, only 8 weeks, I feel like I have truly had a once in a lifetime opportunity for personal growth. I learned how to conduct a research project, starting with collaboration, setting goals, and project design, and ending with data analysis and conclusions. But more importantly I learned that each person has a story to tell, and that their unique story can help us see the bigger picture. It is this bigger picture that has the potential for enacting change—in the case of Punta Arenas, if the rehabilitation center can identify the specific barriers to access that are faced by its patients, the Lion’s Club can start to work toward elimination of those barriers. It has really been amazing to be a part of something that will help the clinic to understand their patients better, and that can help to bring about better healthcare in the future. Eight weeks with MIRT has brought me the chance to be a part of something global and long lasting, and for that I feel extremely fortunate!

The Centro de Rehabilitacion, Club de Leones, Cruz del Sur is a very warm atmosphere, the architecture allows that sunshine beam into the corridors and hit natural wood before shining down on the passing therapists, children, or parents. The air smells of soap in the morning, by mid day it smells like lunch which the cook, Sergio, prepares at no cost to the health workers or the students that stay at the clinic throughout the day, having once been a cook on a ship. By the end of the day, the waiting room air is stuffy having had up to a hundred visitors with squailing, energetic and playful children channel through between 8am and around sunset: 4:30pm. The MIRT crew, Chanaye, Alisa and I leave around 5pm as the clinic is just beginning to open for adults. Parents coming and going during the day with their children through the glass doors of the clinic’s entrance greet the therapist that comes out to the waiting room with kisses on the cheek. The employees that work at the clinic including social workers and therapists of all kinds have treated us as though they were family. Wonderfully enough, Punta Arenas or perhaps all of Chile has a welcoming custom of calling women “tia”, which means aunt, or “tio” for guys which means uncle. In this way, we are all related; we’re all family.

This MIRT experience has given me a wonderful gift of being able to prepare myself in speaking with and sincerely connecting with Spanish speaking strangers that need help, from themselves and their community. In research, it can be different for better or worse. Our work here will allow insight into the lives of the population the Clinic is serving by better understanding what their patient’s parents are going through in order to increase compliance and improve the home environment of the children by learning about risks for depression. Research can bring about immediate cures, and medical treatment could be long and painful with no end in sight, but I began to gain a great appreciation for the long term impact my work potentially has here in this clinic, and that is a wonderful feeling.

The Lion’s Club also appreciates our work and recognized the importance of maintaining awareness of the reactions and needs the population they are serving. They were very appreciative and hospitable toward us. Frankly, it feels that the whole town is glad we’re here, we’ve already been on Television twice(!) between all of us and on an Argentinian radio station as well as an informational sign posted to explain our presence at the clinic and the work we are doing. They asked me during the Lion’s club dinner if I would say a few words aloud and I stood up in front of the 30 Lion’s Club members as well as our MIRT gang and those from the clinic and had the opportunity to express how honored we felt to be working in the clinic, working to strengthen the connection between health workers and patients. It was euphoric since few times in my life have I been a public speaker. The Lion’s Club does such a great job that people from all around come to have the therapy, free of cost, and want more. Many of the parents bringing kids to the clinic are accustomed to going along with what the doctor says, what the therapist says—what authority says. It seems more hierarchical here more so than in the United States where I see more and more a social structure of male/female equality and individualism in everyday life. Becoming aware of this has made me more sensitive to my actions while conducting interviews for the need to not sway their answers either way.

There are things still left to see here, museums, and the cemetery filled with the histories of the settlers that came from Spain, Italy, Croatia, and more. That is yet to come in our last two and half weeks left in the end of the world (or the beginning, depending on perspective)

J, Tessita (for Chileans, everything ends with –ita)
Hi Everyone,

So I've made it to Punta Arenas, Chile - the Southern-most City in the WORLD!!

It was an interesting trip since I have never been out of the United States before.

Did you know that trying to go through Customs is a pain when you've been either in the airport or flying for about 25 hours and have only slept for maybe 5 hours? As you stagger from the terminal to the line in Customs, you try to bring your wits about you -- it doesn't work. You don't remember one little tiny bit of Spanish, the only thing you can think to say is "Si!", to whatever it is that they are asking.

My trip started in Seattle to Los Angeles to Lima, Peru to Santiago, Chile to Puerto Montt, Chile to Balmaceda, Chile and finally to Punta Arenas, Chile, I have made it ladies and gentlemen!!!

The weather here is actually not that bad. Of course, we're not quite in the coldest part of the season. It feels kind of like Seattle where you just have to bundle up and GO. The cool thing about being here is that we are right next to the Strait of Magellan - that's in English. I can walkup the block and look right at it!

Here, in a really small area, one can see very rich and very poor almost right next to each other. It really is very mind-boggling. Also in this city that I find amazing is that there is little drainage for the streets. Seattle-lites grumble that the drainage in the city after a rain isn't doing very well, but try driving through a huge pothole that is FILLED with water that is so high that the water hits the bottom of your car and you have to slow down to pray that you won't hydroplane out of control. Amazing sight to see.

The title of my project is called "The risk factors of speech delays in Chilean children". I am working with a speech therapist and pediatrician. I really like that I'm working with a pediatrician since I'm thinking about going into the field. Currently, I'm working to finalize my questionnaire that I'm hoping to send out to area kindergartens by early next week. My mentor was very impressed that I was able to translate our ideas into Spanish. That was SO great!!! My Spanish is getting better everyday – especially the comprehension!

I'm working really hard on my project. I only have 3 weeks and 3 days before I leave Punta Arenas. Hopefully, by the time I leave, I will have 100 children in the database, but it's slow moving because we have to test them for a speech pathology, send questionnaires home and then we pick them up later. Okay, so last cool thing and I will let you go. We were walking along the strait of Magellan and we saw DOLPHINS!! It was GREAT!
Hi, everyone! I just wanted to take some time and do a little writing and share some of my experiences in Ethiopia. First of all, I can't believe how quickly the time is going! At times it seems like I just got here.

Initially, I was really excited but still a little nervous to come to Ethiopia. Some of my friends and family were very concerned about my safety, and slowly their concerns became mine. But I am happy to say that after the first 2 days I felt very comfortable. My biggest safety concerns are crossing the street without being hit by a car (there are no traffic rules) and not catching the attention of the dogs on my street (My roommate did that one night and he was surrounded by growling dogs- scary at the time but we joke about it now). But even more than feeling safe, I feel at home. Most of the people that I have met have been so warm and welcoming.

Before this trip I wondered what Africans thought of African-Americans from the US. I figured that there might be some anti-American sentiment. I thought that there might be a sense of dislike coupled with pity because of slavery in the US and the general inability of most African-American to know where in Africa their ancestors are from. But I couldn’t have been more wrong! In fact, I think the only time that it matters is when I’m trying to bargain: there’s habesha price and foreigner price; I usually end up somewhere in the middle. Lol.

“I’m learning Amharic, an interesting, expressive, and beautiful language. It sounds like so many things to me: Spanish, Italian, and something all together different. I love to watch my friends talk. I think watch is an appropriate description. When I listen to them, I watch their faces carefully to try to see the emotion and intent of their words. The other day, I got a wonderful compliment. There is a lady who lives in the same compound where I live. She is always talking to me in Amharic and I usually don’t understand so we had been communicating through gestures and the few words I did know. Well last week during our cultural trip I improved quite a bit. So much that I talked with her the other morning. I knew what she was saying (she talks fast) and she knew what I was saying. She smiled and told me that my Amharic was much better. Her comment really made me feel good. A few days later, I was talking to my friend on the phone. He was really impressed and excited when I greeted him in Amharic and asked him how he was and how was his day. Well…he answered me completely in Amharic. I had to stop him and tell him I didn’t learn all of that yet. He laughed and started over in English. I really am trying but sometimes I don’t feel like I’m picking up as much as I should. The good thing is I can get around. I can order food, take taxi, bargain (most of the time!), and a few other everyday things. But I don’t understand enough to speak in sentences. This means that I’m limited in what I can say even if I have an idea about what is being said around me. I know it will get better in time with practice and study.

“American-American” is something that I think about a lot. It seems that any form or application has an “American-American/Black” box. But what does it mean? Previously, I preferred “Black” I always felt that African-American was at best a politically correct term, and at worst a term that people used to make themselves feel better/diminish the truth of how Africans were enslaved in America. I also thought “American-American” was inaccurate to describe me; after all I was born in the US just like my parents. To me, African-American described my friends who were born in Nigeria, moved to the US and now have citizenship.

Shortly before I came to Ethiopia I read the Willie Lynch letter. Once I was here, I began thinking that these terms “American-American” and “Black” really don’t serve much purpose other than to cause division among the group/diaspora. Isn’t that what it was always really about - disagreement in the group? As long as we call ourselves different things, as long as we think skin color matters, as long as we think hair texture matters, we will not believe nor act as if we are the same.
Ethiopia is so rich in culture, language, history, and people. I feel ashamed that I was ignorant of so much of it before I came here. I knew it was an important place, but I didn’t have any concept of the depth of history here. But what’s important is that now that I do know, I should continue to learn as much as I can.

I’ve had a chance to see a lot of different aspects of life here. On the way to Awassa to do data collection we passed a house that had a tent filled with chairs out front. When I asked about it, I was told that someone had died and it was tradition to have a tent in front of the house and family, friends would come to the tent over a period of 3 days to express their condolences. In Axum, I saw some men carrying the body of someone who had died and was being buried in a near by cemetery. I also experienced the very last moments of a wedding in Bahir Dar. One aspect that I’ve been missing is couples. I’ve been wondering how couples express affection here but I really haven’t picked up on it. I think I might be missing it because of culture. So in the US, you see a little bit of everything kissing in public etc. In Brasil, couples were completely into each other kissing, touching, the works. But I’m missing what’s going on in Ethiopia. In general, people here touch a lot: holding hands, arms around each other that type of thing. Men and women, men and men, women and women it doesn’t matter. So when I see a man and a woman, can’t tell if they’re together or if they just know each other. I’ll ask someone next week, I want a few more days to try to figure this one out on my own.

I don’t have time to really think about what’s happened. One of the things that are so striking to me is the poverty. I mean I had heard about it. I remember my dad asking me if I was ready for the things I would see. I told him it didn’t matter if I was ready, I needed to see. The thing is it’s one thing to think about such profound poverty in an intellectual or moral way and it’s another to have people come up to you and beg. It’s different than in the US. I think in the US there is a general worry that some people who beg aren’t really in need. I remember there was a news story about beggars in the US; a guy was begging for money to buy food. The undercover reporter didn’t give him money, but bought the guy a meal. When the undercover reporter left, the guy threw the food in the trash! I make this point to say that here when people here ask for things you KNOW they need it. But then the problem comes that you can’t help everyone. I remember the first time I was in a taxi and we came to a stop. People came up to the window begging; it was overwhelming. Everyone begs: mothers nursing children, elderly people, and disabled people. They beg at taxi windows, on buses at check points, on the street. It was necessary and horrible to learn to say “Egger Yistilign” (“may God provide”) and learn to look away or walk away. Normally I only have large bills, now I try to keep singles on me. But no matter what I never have enough singles.

A good word to describe the situation is disparity. A single, summative word. There is everything here in Ethiopia that there is in the US. But where? In Addis Ababa; the resources are all concentrated here, but 70-75% of the people live in the rural areas. Even in Addis the rich are very rich and the poor are very poor. A friend of mine grew up in a rural area near Gondar. He said that there was a time that he couldn’t imagine living in a big city like Addis. But eventually he came to Addis for work and now says he can’t imagine going back because of the opportunities here.
The housing situation here is interesting. For example: there are no mortgages here (not that that would fix the problem) but this means you have to buy your land and build you home with cold hard cash. Who do you know that can do that? Houses are built out of cement and there’s a cement shortage so cement cost 200 Birr/bag. Who can afford a home? On the other end of things, at every church I’ve seen (except the churches in Lalibella) people have constructed lean-to homes of plastic and scraps on the fence surrounding the church. No one would choose to live like this; it’s a matter of not having choices. I am so grateful to God that I have choices! What can we do to make sure people have choices?

I don’t mean to paint a horrible picture of Ethiopia. People here have been warm and welcoming and I have seen and done some truly beautiful and amazing things. But things that are unpleasant are the things that make you think, rethink, and shape who you are. When you see beautiful things you just admire and take in the beauty. But when you look at the unpleasant things, you have to wonder why, and you think about change and giving instead of taking.

I really enjoy the work I’m doing and I feel like it’s important and it will make a difference and things will change, in time, for the better. There are so many research gaps here. There so much to be said for looking into things yourself and talking to the right people. I’ve heard so many professor’s in the US state that biggest problem in the developing world is from infectious disease not chronic disease. Not true, there are no vital records (births and deaths) in Ethiopia, so how do you expect to quantify deaths due to cancer, cardiovascular disease, etc? I think what the professors really meant (knowingly or unknowingly) is that biggest problem the developing world posses to the developed world is infectious disease.

I feel blessed to be where I am at this very moment. It’s helping me define where I want to be professionally and personally. Field work is new for me and I am enjoying it. In most of the other jobs or internships I’ve had, I’ve felt like the people I work with are just people that I work with, strictly professional. But the field research team that I am with here feels more like family. I can imagine that not all teams are like this, but I’ve been blessed with the one I have.

--- Dodie

“I feel blessed to be where I am at this very moment. It’s helping me define where I want to be professionally and personally.”
The evening was even more impressive. We were invited to a Tej-bet ([tej] is a national alcoholic beverage made of honey wine and [bet] is literally house). While drinking tej, we watched a dancer move to the tune of live music played on a traditional instrument. The act was entertaining and fun. The musician and dancer engaged the audience by making fun of us and encouraging us to join them in their traditional dance.

While very different, Bahir Dar was also beautiful and had more of a resort appeal that neither Axum nor Lalibela can rival. A well planned city on the edge of the source of the Blue Nile, Lake Tana, Bahir Dar has a lot of appeal. More of a quiet get-away, this city was very relaxing, well-planned and clean. We visited ancient monasteries on a peninsula and islands in the lake and visited the Blue Nile falls in Tis Aba. The mighty Nile and fall were not as grand as they used to be due to a hydroelectric dam built there almost 10 years ago. Still a sight to see, the Falls were impressive by most American standards.

My project has been going well. Dodie, Miruts (MPH student in Addis Ababa University), and I are working on attitudes and perception of gender based violence among college students in Awassa, Ethiopia. So far we have finished data collection, entry, and cleaning and now, we are in final stages of write up and analysis. My portion of the study will analyze the male perspectives.

Everywhere we've traveled in the country people have been amazingly gracious. I've made friends in cities in the north and south. In Addis Ababa, the capital, I often feel at home. Many people from the University of Washington community are either studying, working or living abroad here. Surprisingly, you can live much like you do in the states if you're willing to pay. Although no matter how much you have, you can't escape the overall poverty that plagues the country's infrastructure and social services. Safe drinking water, waste management, and good city planning, are sorely lacking. Because of this, there are many opportunities for growth and development. Western governments have realized this and I've come across many Europeans working in various areas throughout the country. I've also met a few Americans but not nearly as many as I expected. Next to Europeans I've met many Chinese! They seem to be in every growing city working in some capacity on a variety of projects. In Addis, there are at least five or six authentic Chinese restaurants.

All in all, this has been an incredible experience which words cannot accurately explain. I've been taking tons of pictures and hope to share them with you when I return.
It’s been an intense three weeks settling down in Bangkok, but I’m starting to feel at home. The days are just flying by. We have an amazing group dynamic, and have learned so much from each other and from being in a foreign land with little language capabilities. During trying times, like the day we got lost at Pratunam Market, I was so thankful for the support of my roommates. Overall the experience has been unforgettable.

Prior to my trip I had many questions. Thanks to ample horror stories from well-wishers I went from excited to anxious. I visualized a guy grabbing my purse, how I’d miraculously execute a kung fu chop and leap into a getaway taxi. As I packed my bags I thought, “Will this be the last time I see this luggage and its contents?” Would I die of diarrhea? Avian flu? I wondered what Thai people thought of U.S. citizens. Were we spoiled, ignorant, war-mongers in their eyes? Culturally I didn’t know what to expect, aside from classes on rural-urban migration, bird flu, and sex tourism.

But the past weeks have put my worries at ease (except for intense work on our research papers!) One visit I will never forget was our trip to the Grand Palace and Emerald Buddha Temple—a museum and temple covered in intricate gold and ceramic designs. Possibly the hottest day I can remember...baking in that oven of a tour van. Tourists from all over the world come to see this heavenly tribute to Buddha. I could barely keep my eyes open in the glimmering reflection from the sun. Outside the temple we removed our shoes and brushed holy water on our heads with lilies. As we entered, I could sense my spirit lifting up to the top of the high ceilings. A giant gold Buddha looked down at us. We sat in awe of the beauty around us, solemn beings, legs crossed to the side, heads bowed, souls rising, hearts filled with humanity. It is no doubt a holy place.

Since being here, I’ve come to appreciate the power of language. When I didn’t know any Thai I felt lost, disempowered. There was so much I wanted to say, but couldn’t. People talked to me candidly in Thai, but all I could do was stare with mouth open and nothing coming out. Kho-toht-ka! That is also why Thai language class has been so helpful. My jaw dropped the first time I thumbed through my Thai phrase book.

Thai wasn’t like anything I had ever seen before. The curly loops laced across the page resembled spaghetti to me—I knew I was in for something. On the first day of Thai class Khru told us there would be little English spoken and absolutely no translations. Treat it as a guessing game, she said. My eyes widened, I took a deep breath and plunged into the elaborate charades game that ensued. We’ve now been in Thai class for three weeks and we’ve learned so much. Some words we learned pretty quickly included:

Farang = Foreigner. Also conveniently means “Guava”, a kick for the locals when Rydhwana and I bought 2 guavas on the first day. Farangs buying farangs! Sawatdee-ka = Hello/good morning/ evening, goodbye… Im (ma). Khopkun-ka! = I’m (very) full. Thank you! Essential for being with our generous host family. Tow-ray-ka?...Pheng-ma! = How much?…that’s expensive! The first time I said this, I had no idea what the vendor said back to me. Just smiled and nodded! Kho-toht-ka. Mai Kow Jai-ka. = Sorry/excuse my farang-ness. I don’t understand.

Thai is a tonal language like Chinese, but not. That means one thing for sure—get the tones right or it’ll mean something else. One day I went around saying what I thought was, “I’m tired.” My host sister burst out laughing. I was actually saying “I’m beef!” Most Thai people are understanding of our limited Thai. In fact I believe they find it quite amusing, a good effort. Last week we even haggled in Thai though not very successfully. I’m still trying to strike a balance—something between ripped off and a good living wage. The problem is defining either boundary.

One last thing, our host family is incredible. They are such loving, generous and warm-hearted people. After several outings I truly feel like I have a new family here. They’ve shared so much with us that I hardly know what we can do to give back. I am in awe of how much one can share with limited verbal communication. People certainly are humans through and through. Family, food, music, jokes/laughter are all universal things. Our family is a constant source of comfort and happiness, yet there is a great deal we have to learn about one another. We have been truly blessed to know and be a part of this family. When I first arrived here, I was missing home badly. Though I still do, I know that when I leave Thailand I will miss them too.

Til next time, Sawatee-ka.

Stephanie
Living, learning and working in Thailand has been the best experience of my life thus far. I have learned a tremendous amount about Thai culture, its people, and their values. Before arriving in Bangkok I had all these preconceived notions of Thai society and its infrastructure. Though I expected to be confronted by images of poverty, I did not expect to also see so many indicators of considerable economic activity and development in Bangkok. I suppose my impressions might change as I venture out into poorer, rural communities in north east Thailand over the next few weeks.

Although at first all I knew to say in Thai was sa-wat-de-kah (hello), everyone made an effort to start a conversation. It’s amazing how close we have become with our Thai family despite the HUGE language barrier. I think the best times I have had on this trip were with our Thai family. The kindness and hospitality that we have received from them is incomparable to anything I have seen before. They took us in as if we are equal members of their family, showering us with presents and feeding us until we can’t breathe anymore (believe me, I am still carrying the weight of our dinner last weekend!). I have no complaints about the food- although at times a little spicy but definitely very tasty!!

To follow the tradition of past MIRT fellows in Thailand, we managed to get lost during our first week. We were all somewhat worried but we managed to get back home and learned a very important life lesson… don’t let shoes distract you from following the rest of our host family!

Learning Thai language has been a challenging experience, especially since there are 5 different tones. To an untrained ear, these 5 tones can really all sound alike. Failure to correctly articulate Thai word, however, can lead to some awkward, though often comical situations. For example, once we were in a taxi and Tenecia tried to say Seri Center in 5 different tones before he finally understood what we were talking about!

I personally have never been adept with learning foreign languages. Before this MIRT experience I would’ve picked doing organic chemistry problems any day over learning a language, but our Khru (teacher) definitely makes it a lot more fun. Khru Nareboon has contributed greatly to my academic experience in Thailand. Despite having to begin class a 8am every day, Khru always greets us with great stories about her past and her children, …she reminds me a lot of my mom.

It’s a special privilege to be here in Thailand this year. You see, this is the year that Thais are celebrating King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s 60th anniversary on the thrown. While waiting in the immigration line at the airport, I was struck by seeing signs that read “we love our King”, this made me wonder if ever such a sign might be posted for leaders in the US?! The amount of respect and gratitude the people have for their King is indescribable- every mall, store, restaurant, taxi, home has a picture of the King. During our first 2 weeks in Thailand the King had back surgery, on that day, people of all different faiths including Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindus all over the country prayed for his well being and speedy recovery. It still amazes me how much love they have for an individual that most have never seen in person.

While in Thailand, we discovered my partner Tenecia and I are American Idol’s in the making (Dr. Williams would definitely agree). We have gone to karaoke with our Thai family twice already, and I think (hope?) we’re providing some sort of entertainment. I am sooooo blessed to be working with three other MIRT fellows, I think we have learned a tremendous amount from each other. I don’t think I would be having this great of an experience if not for the people around me. I am sad to think that in less than a month this will all be over, but I am definitely thankful for this opportunity and am looking forward to what next month will bring.
We are in our third full week here in Bangkok, and I am amazed at how fast time has flown by. Academically, our days consist of Thai language class with Khru Nareboon in the morning and epidemiology and biostatistics with Drs. Williams and Lohsoonthorn in the afternoon. As Thai is a tonal language, I initially had a difficult time learning the five different tones. However, the struggle has been well worth it since I have learned how to order food, ask for the time, and most importantly, bargain in stores. For our research project, Stephanie and I are examining if maternal low birth weight is a risk factor for preterm delivery among Seattle area women with singleton pregnancies. Both the Thai and epidemiology classes have improved my level of communication, with the former helping me converse with locals and the latter assisting in my verbal and written expression of our data. I have truly enjoyed my time in Thailand, a feeling that I attribute to both the Thai people that I have meet thus far as well as the three other girls on the trip. Dr. Lohsoonthorn and his family have been consummate hosts. During our three weeks, we have been to watch Superman on IMAX, gone elephant riding in Ayuthaya, and performed karaoke. In our first weekend here, we went shopping with Dr. Lohsoonthorn’s family in Pratunam and got ourselves lost from the rest of our group. Had I been alone, I am fairly certain a panic attack would have ensued; but thankfully, we managed to find our way back to the hotel.

One of my favorite things about Thailand (or Muang-thai as it is called) is definitely the food. To say the least, the food here is unlike any other. Having frequented all of the Thai restaurants on the Ave multiple times, I had previously considered myself somewhat of a connoisseur of Thai food in Seattle. This trip to Thailand, however, has shown me otherwise.

On a personal level, my time in Thailand has reaffirmed that I am not (to put it mildly) a very domesticated individual. The other girls here are continuously amused at my lack of basic culinary skills, but to my relief, they are more than willing to share their cooking skills with me. One of the highlights of this trip for me has been learning how to cook pad thai from our host family.

I am very grateful for the opportunities and experiences we have had so far in Thailand. Every day it seems as if I learn something new not only about the Thai people and their culture but also myself and the way I perceive my surroundings. For the remaining weeks in Thailand, I am looking forward to visiting Dr. Cynthia Maung’s clinic in Mae Sot and then going to Chiang Mai.
Hey everyone it's Tenecia,

The site that I was assigned to was Thailand. It's amazing here; I can't believe how fast time is flying by, initially I didn't know what to expect from the experience. When my partners and I first arrived at the airport in Bangkok the first thing that I noticed how tall I really am, and that English wasn't the primary language (go figure). At that moment I knew that this was going to be an interesting two months.

I got a chance to meet my roommates during a two day orientation which was held in Seattle, but I still didn't know much about them. After having been with them a while I must admit, they are all pretty awesome. It's just us four girls in a new and exciting country and we are making the most of this opportunity.

As a part of our training we are required to attend a Thai language class four hours a day, five days a weeks. Whew!! Thai is by no means an easy language to learn but I'm thankful for it and although being attentive at 8am in a class room of four students every morning isn't the easiest thing to do lol, our professor “Khruu” motivates us to hang in there. So far we have learned basic survival phrases such as “Sawadee ka” (Hello), Thawray (how much), “Yeek bin” (separate check) and my personal favorite “May Peet” (no spice)!! The food is way spicier than I can handle. Some days in class we are given homework; it is here that we get the chance to exercise our progression. Our assignments consist of going around and asking people how to say certain English words in Thai. The taxi drivers (whom also speak very little English) get a real kick out of hearing us try to speak and for the most part are pretty friendly.

On the weekends the girls and I go out into the city and explore!! (that means bargain shop.) It's crazy how flexible store owners are when it comes to selling merchandise. A lot of the things don't have price tags that way they can look at you and then decide how much something cost. When they see me, African American, 5'7", English speaking, foreigner, you can only imagine how high the price gets. On the weekends when we are not rubbing elbows with other shoppers (literally), or walking through shopping malls taking full advantage of the free air conditioning, we are hanging out with our extended international family.

When we are with Dr. Vitool and his family we see the real Thailand, not the tourist areas. We've had some wonderful opportunities to just relax and have fun with our extended Thai family. Knowing them is truly a blessing. The one thing that I noticed not only in them but in a large number of Thai people that we have come in contact with is that they are a very gentle, humble, and caring people. That is one thing that I really admire. Vitool and his family are always extending all they have to us in order to make us feel welcome, especially when it comes to food lol!! Another thing that is not uncommon to see here (particularly every Monday) is for people to be wearing yellow shirts. A while ago the King of Thailand injured himself, in support of his recovery the people collectively decided to wear their yellow shirts, which say (in thai) “we love the king”. This type of unity, love and loyalty for one whom most of these people have never seen or even come in physical contact with amazes me. It is one more expression of the caring heart of Thai people. Right now it is just about the half way point of all of our travels. I don't know what to expect in these next few weeks but I have no doubts that I will learn, see, and grow in many ways because there is always an opportunity to experience new things.

Take care, until next time!

Tenecia

“We've had some wonderful opportunities to just relax and have fun with our extended Thai family. Knowing them is truly a blessing”
A bustling city in the Andes Mountains, Quito’s proximity to the equator is tempered by cool winds and its high altitude. Quito is one of the most diverse and multicultural places I have been. I am constantly surprised with its never-ending juxtapositions of the traditional and the modern. I love walking through the crowded streets of the city center and seeing handmade blankets being sold next to bootleg DVDs, indigenous women with strand upon strand of brightly colored beads talking on cell phones or blue eyed Afro-Ecuadorian teenagers frying bananas on street corners. A never-ending soundtrack of Latin pop or reggaeton, a blasting booming bass, accompanies everything at all hours of the day and night.

With the help of my host family I quickly settled in and started to get to know different parts of the city and its transportation systems. On my second day I navigated the crowded Metro on my own, pushing my way on with all my might despite the fact it seemed nearly impossible for another person to fit and exerted twice the effort to get off. I made it to Fundacion CIMAS feeling like a metro riding pro.

Fundacion CIMAS, nestled near the center of Quito’s matrix of streets, is a center of environmental and health research and education. In the summer CIMAS hosts a variety of programs ranging from alternative economic development and medical internships to Spanish language courses with a focus on globaliza- tion. Outside of these programs CIMAS is also a research center working closely with the communities of Pedro Moncay, a county one hour north of Quito.

About 30 years ago the first rose plantation set root in Pedro Moncayo. With the regions favorable growing conditions, such as 12 hours of sunlight year round, the flower industry quickly thrived and grew bringing with it much needed employment and the technology of chemical pesticides. These pesticides have since become incorporated into nearly every sector agriculture with the payoff of increased production and an as of yet uncalculated health and environmental cost. Determining the impact of pesticide use in Pedro Moncayo is CIMAS main project, integrating public health research with social, economic and political analysis. This interdisciplinary approach incorporates many of the aspects of research I have pursued thus far in my education, making it an ideal opportunity for me.

So far I have been attending town meetings in Pedro Moncay and working with other members of the research team to identify key issues and actors as well as create research instruments such interview and focus groups guides. We are currently using these instruments to collect data and develop a preliminary analysis for subsequent phases of the study.

Employing a Participative Action Research model, CIMAS’ current project is unique from past research I have been a part of. In addition to incorporating what is traditionally the “subject of research” as necessary co-researchers, the project is informed by members of the community at every step to create a collective analysis of the problems faced in the county. The ultimate goal of the research is to intervene in the negative impacts of pesticide use through community education and the development of a health and environmental toxicology information center that will be linked with 5 other Latin American countries dealing with similar issues.

Being a part of Participative Action Research puts into practice theory I have only studied. How does one actually go about collectively defining a problem when all actors are involved including the heads of flower corporations as well as workers that have become sick from pesticide exposure? In part the community participates in democratic processes of discussion and decision making. This means meeting for sometimes 5 or 6 hours at a time with various sectors such as the board of health or the smaller town councils and members of the community and not necessarily coming to any conclusions. It also means participating in the community events, going to the children’s parades, and getting decked out to dance and sing in the street during the region’s Inti Raymi festival. Being a part of this festival, where the head of CIMAS, DR. Suarez, danced for more than 10 blocks with a chicken, which he later presented to the mayor, has been one of the greatest parts of my trip so far.

While the work has been challenging it is also an invaluable learning experience. Luckily I have also had the opportunity to see different parts of Ecuador on the weekends, take Salsa dancing classes, ride horses up steep mountain pathways past waterfalls, visit colorful artisan markets, soak in natural mineral baths at the base of a volcano and meet wonderful people. I am having an amazing experience on so many levels. I delight in being here and participating in this program, something I can’t imagine ever having been able to do without MIRT.

Ines Gardilcic
Undergraduate, Humboldt State Univ.
MIRT site: ECUADOR

Ines’s Mid Trip Reflection
My experience in Georgia has been, up-to-now, extremely stimulating, both academically and culturally. Working in the Emergency Cardiology Center has allowed me to experience first-hand the struggles and strife faced by average Georgians in their efforts to access healthcare. MIRT has afforded me the unique opportunity to be able to learn about the Georgian healthcare system's transition from one which is centralized to one which is market-based right where the action is taking place. Furthermore, this month here has forced me to take off my social science hat and wear one of a medical doctor. I am learning about another aspect of the health professions about which I knew nothing before coming to Tbilisi. I am, quite frankly, impressed at how the team here at the Emergency Cardiology Center is able to provide quality care to Georgian cardiology patients. The only "downside" is that what I observe here is usually atypical for the Georgian healthcare system.

I have also been able to experience much that Georgia has to offer. The hospitality of my co-worker's here at the Emergency Cardiology Center has impressed and humbled me. So far, I have been able to go fishing on a large reservoir with a doctor and one of his friends, climbed a mountain to see an 11th Century church, gone to the old capital of Georgia to visit another old church on a holy day, sampled exotically appetizing food while sitting in outdoor restaurants overlooking mountain gorges and old churches and wandered aimlessly in charmingly run-down old Tbilisi to visit old churches (notice a theme?) Georgia has so much to offer and I am glad that I am able to get away from work to experience this country.

I am consistently impressed by Georgian hospitality and friendliness. Strangers greet one another and start conversations in the most unexpected places. For example, we met a Shepard at the top of a mountain and he opened up immediately to us and told us about the history of the area. We then invited him to eat a picnic with us, during which he toasted the beautiful landscape. Speaking some Russian has allowed me to build relationships with people, but I have a strong suspicion that Georgian hospitality applies to even those who can't be understood. I am having a great time!

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A very wise man once told me that in order to learn and grow when traveling abroad one must remember that nothing is better or worse than something else, just different. This is something that I have had to remind myself of daily while working with the Ministry of Health in Lima Peru. The Ministry of Health is attacking the problem of Enfermedades No Transmissibles (Non Infectious Diseases), a problem that is difficult to focus on when the main goals of developing countries have been to prevent infectious diseases. My experience thus far has proven to be an unexpected challenge, an educational experience and an overall wonderful life experience.

The project FRENT, “The Prevalence and Risk Factors of Non Infectious Diseases in Lima and Callao”, is a project that the Ministry of Health, the National Institute of Health and the Epidemiology Departments of the five districts within Lima and Callao are all invested in, as well as the University of Washington and Swedish Medical Center. I knew that this was a big project but I was not aware of the kind of challenge it would be for me. I arrived and immediately started working with the field work coordinator of the project. I started learning what had been done for the project and what still was pending. The ground work had been set for the project but there were still so many things to plan and organize so that the project would be able to start well and be a success. I was excited by the prospect of helping organize such a great project. I was certain that my ability to organize, plan and work well in a team would prove to be beneficial to the project.

These kinds of realizations are what have made this a wonderful life experience. After all of the roadblocks that I saw against this project, the field work started with a wonderful team and a great reception from the public. It’s very inspirational to see these health professionals (doctors, nurses, and medical technicians) take on the project and do what they can to make it a success.

“I have already gained one of the most valuable lessons that I had hoped to gain from the MIRT program, but in complete depth that I had not expected. “
Yasmin’s contd

It is going to be a difficult two months for them because they will be convincing the public to participate in an hour long interview and blood drawing, walking with heavy equipment through dangerous neighborhoods, and working 7 days a week. They are the ones who will ensure that this study is a success and I am very proud to know them all. It has been a wonderful experience to work with them. I have already gained one of the most valuable lessons that I had hoped to gain from the MIRT program, but in complete depth that I had not expected. I wanted to be exposed to public health professionals in different phases of their careers and that is what I have seen here in Lima, I have had the honor of working with professionals from the main government health agencies, public health professionals who volunteer their time to provide free consultations over the phone, and these interviewers who were unemployed health professionals up until they started working with FRENT.

All of these different people I have met have added a unique perspective of what the health of the population means to them. Today I had the honor of speaking with the president of a small community of the Uros people. They live on the floating islands of Lake Titikaka and he shared with me that they have not changed their way of life for thousands of years and they live to be about 85 years old with their biggest ailment being the common cold for the little children. They are exposed to more direct sunlight than most people and yet they don’t suffer from skin cancer, this he says, is due to the fact that they eat the roots of the reeds that their floating islands are made from and that he understands that if his natural medicine can’t cure what he has then there is a health center that he will visit and if that fails then he will resort to going into the city. As he is telling me about this I reaffirm that there is great value in having quality health care for people but even greater value in having quality health care for people that takes into account their culture.

Alumni Update

Let US Know How You’re Doing

Do you have an update or new photo to share with us?

We would love to hear from you!

NAME:_______________________________________________________________

UPDATE:_______________________________________________________________________

E-mail Address:___________________________________________________________

NB: We have made it easier for our alumni to send updates directly online. Please go to the MIRT Web Page: www.depts.washington.edu/mirt/ and click on the Alumni Update.
MIRT is a national program designed to encourage students to pursue careers in biomedical and behavioral research. This program provides support for undergraduates and graduate students to receive research training in an international setting. MIRT is conceived by the Fogarty International Center and currently funded by the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NCMHD) of the National Institutes for Health, the UW MIRT Program has been developed in collaboration with Dillard University, Xavier University and Western Washington University. The program focuses on population-based health research in developing countries and builds on established linkages with academic institutions in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Thailand, Republic of Georgia, Australia, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina.