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Teacher uses experience from travel in classroom

By Elizabeth Camacho Wiley
Staff Writer

NORMAN - With images of poverty-stricken Asia still fresh in her mind, teacher Stacy Shaneyfelt said she was saddened early in the school year by her students' preconceived notions -- and often racist attitudes -- toward other countries.

The middle school teacher spent one month last summer traveling through Thailand and Vietnam with 15 educators from other states. The group was part of the Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad grant program, sponsored by the U.S. Education Department.

The program's goal -- as described by former U.S. Sen. William Fulbright who founded the program more than 50 years ago -- is "to bring a little more knowledge, a little more reason and a little more compassion into world affairs," the program's Web site says.

Shaneyfelt is striving to fulfill that goal -- at least within the walls of Longfellow Middle School in Norman.

"We've been doing a lot about tolerance here," she said while standing in the middle of a class of about 20 seventh-graders.

The students were preparing to do presentations about their "imaginary class trip" to Thailand and Vietnam. Some wore authentic clothing that Shaneyfelt provided. Others munched on Thai cookies.

Hunter Dougherty was the first to read his essay.

"My heart was broken when I saw children walking down the streets barefoot," he read.

Ariel Lippincott, wearing a Vietnamese dress, next approached the center of the classroom.

"I'd like to get a taste of a different lifestyle, where nothing is taken for granted and staying alive is like a daily struggle. Nothing is wasted or thrown away," she read from her essay.

"It was the trip of a lifetime," she said. "It really changed my life."

Besides eating rich food and riding elephants bareback, the experiences Shaneyfelt said she will remember most are the interactions with the Thai and Vietnamese people.

"They are very, very rich in humanity and spiritualism. Even when they had nothing, they gave me things," she said.

The daughter of a Vietnam War veteran, Shaneyfelt said meeting Vietnamese war veterans was a humbling experience.

"They don't hold any bitterness" toward Americans, she said.

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