

Empowering Women



Kathryn Jensen White

Gaylord's international workshops benefit South Asian journalists while bringing a global perspective to the OU college's faculty and students

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

of the Fourth Estate



Gaylord Dean Joe Foote, at left watching a newscast at Nepal's Kantipur TV, visited several broadcast, print and educational facilities with Assistant Professor Kathryn Jenson White and Professor Scott Hodgson during week-long workshops in Kathmanu.

Not often, admittedly, but sometimes in the game of life, everyone wins.

Evidence points to that being the case with Leadership for Women Journalists, a nearly six-year-old international outreach training program, and its two-year-old sister, Visual Storytelling. Both efforts by the University of Oklahoma's Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication focus on the empowerment of women as professional media practitioners and as potential leaders in a profession most agree is vital to a healthy, democratic society.

The winners in this scenario are the three key players: Gaylord College, whose faculty members and students organize and teach the workshops that make up the programs; the U.S. Department of State, which funds the effort through grants; and the journalists from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal who participate, the media industries in those countries and, ultimately, the societies in which those industries operate.

This story originated in 2004 when more than 100 women and 20 men from newspapers, magazines, radio and television in these three South Asian countries began passing through Gaylord's five-to-ten-day workshops.

That was the year current Gaylord College Dean Joe Foote came to OU from Arizona State University to take the Edward L. Gaylord Chair on the broadcast and electronic media faculty. He brought with him a three-year grant from the State Department's Citizen Exchanges Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Its focus was to train Bangladeshi women journalists in the strategies and skills necessary to advance into leadership positions in a traditionally male-dominated mediascape.

The first group of six women to come to Norman in April 2005 became known affectionately as the "First Batch." Ranging in age from early-30s to mid-50s, they represented the first and second waves of women in their country who had broken into print and broadcast media positions.

"It was a memorable time of my life," says journalist Bilkis Nahar, then in training at a daily newspaper and now a news editor at Ekushey Television in Dhaka, Bangladesh. "The class inspired me to go in my career faster with mammoth confidence. I learned to manage a difficult boss, do guerilla networking with other women and deal with other personalities in the workplace. It was the great experience for me."

In May 2005, two Gaylord professors traveled to Dhaka to teach the first in-country workshop to 20 more women, presenting sessions in the skill areas Nahar found so valuable. Additional subjects were leadership competencies, mentoring, male and female communication leadership and communication styles, time management and other topics.

In 2007, Foote and the college's founding dean, Charles Self, led a faculty group in developing a second proposal for a Citizen Exchanges Bureau grant opportunity. This grant expanded the Bangladesh program's reach to include women in Pakistan and Nepal and to address professional skill development for broadcast journalists of both genders in all three countries. While teaching in Dhaka five times and Nepal twice, security issues have prevented OU mentors from traveling into Pakistan, however Pakistani journalists have joined training sessions in Norman and in Nepal.

Most Americans know these three countries in only fragmented, often negative ways, from news reports of armed conflicts and acts of terrorism. But in Gaylord College, they are viewed as places populated by talented, hardworking people struggling to make their ways in media careers and to use the power of a vital, professional media to inform their citizens, work for social justice and call politicians to some sort of accounting. The challenges are

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Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum



The visiting South Asian broadcasters take a break from the 2009 campus workshop for a trip to Oklahoma City, where they toured the National Memorial and Museum.

daunting given harsh economic and political realities, but those who attend Gaylord workshops are eager to take them on.

Foote has had a long, fruitful relationship with media in South Asia, especially Bangladesh, where he taught on Fulbright grants in 1985 and again in 1992. As the first dean of the College of Mass Communication and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University, he applied for several Citizen Exchanges grants that brought media educators and professionals to the U.S. from Bangladesh and then from other points in South Asia. This culminated in a seven-nation conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka, bringing together the region’s journalism education community. That meeting was a forerunner of today’s World Journalism Education Council, of which Foote is co-chair. From his international perspective, Foote sees clearly the mutual benefits of the Gaylord College program.

“These programs have given our faculty an opportunity to become outstanding international trainers,” he says. “The participating faculty have developed enormously in many ways: leadership, knowledge and, most importantly, the ability to give back professionally. We have also involved our students, expanding their understanding of the truly global media and giving them experience in working with journalists from other cultures.

“Our work in these countries reinforces the idea that America can be a partner, a support in helping advance media in countries where they are in earlier stages of industry development. We are good ambassadors for the United States. Our ongoing dialogue with our partner organizations and former participants shows we are having an impact. That’s what matters most.”

Adam Meier, program officer in the State Department’s Citizen Exchanges Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, says both Gaylord College program proposals were a good fit with the department’s mission of conducting exchange programs with a public diplomacy goal, reaching out to foreign publics in the academic and professional spheres. That effort began with the Fulbright-Hays legislation officially known as the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961.

“Our exchange programs and, more broadly, our public diplo-



Robert Taylor

Workshop participants trying out equipment in the master control room found the studio of “OU Nightly” (back cover photo) superior to many of the professional studios in their countries.

macy programs are designed to reach out to a broad range of citizens, including youth from high school up to young professionals that are established in their careers,” Meier says. “Journalists have been and will continue to be a key group of professionals that we engage in South Asia, in particular, as they have an influential role to play, with their ability to reach out to wide audiences through their broadcasts and their publications.”

Meier says focusing on women’s issues and advancement always has been important to the State Department mission. The Office of Global Women’s Issues has far-reaching activity and, he adds, “With new Secretary [Hillary] Clinton, we see an increased emphasis on this.”



Photo provided

The 2006 group of women journalists from Bangladesh continue the tradition that began with the first group in 2004: horseback riding at Thunderbird Riding Stables. Experiencing Oklahoma culture has been a major aspect of all international workshops on campus.

In each country Gaylord College works with a partner organization, generally a non-governmental organization dedicated to advancing media and their practitioners. In Bangladesh, that organization is the Bangladesh Centre for Development, Journalism and Communication. President Nayeemul Islam Khan, who was Foote's student when Foote taught at Dhaka University during one of his Fulbrights, has had a long career as reporter, editor and publisher of newspapers in Bangladesh. He says he established BCDJC in 1991 to work with the country's newspapers to improve the quality of reporting and popularize the idea of in-depth and investigative journalism. As the organization grew, he began work in even more complicated areas like women in media, press freedom, ethics and responsibility.

"This [OU] program has a tremendous impact starting from the intercontinental travel and exposure that a participant is getting in her first-time tour to any western country and, for many, even a first time abroad at all," he says. "The level of resources, in terms of trainer and laboratory facilities at the University of Oklahoma, are state of the art, and excellent international professional standards taught have already impacted the quality of work participants do upon return. The CEOs or news chiefs of the participants' news organizations are expressing sincere satisfaction and requesting more training for more participants from each media outlet.

"I am convinced that if we can continue this leadership training project for one more period of three to four years, we would be able to create enough capable women so that, in the future, whoever attains a leadership position in the media from among women would be from the OU program's alumnae."

Khan easily can reel off names attached to success stories: Munni Shaha, now the chief of news operation in ATN Bangla; Sakila Jesmin, assistant assignment editor of Channel i; Nashrat

Arshiana Chowdhury, special correspondent for the *Daily Manabzamin*. The list is long.

While world peace may be a goal still often frustratingly out of reach, international friendship and sympathy are demonstrably attainable. In ongoing dialogue on a social networking site for participants, as well as through informal communication via e-mail, OU faculty talk with their South Asian sisters and brothers about their problems and their achievements. Many of the women who have attended the OU workshops subsequently serve as workshop mentors in their own countries.

They also are frank in saying that working with Americans—especially in the United States where the experience brings them into contact with many—


changes their perception of this country. Saadia Mahmood, a researcher at the Uks Research Center in Islamabad, Pakistan, was in Norman for a Visual Storytelling workshop with a women's leadership component in July.

"I want to say that my mind set has been totally changed about America," she says. "When we were coming over here, we were a little scared because we didn't know what we were going to face, the behavior of people and how they would react to us. But that has totally changed."

Another July participant, Pooja Manandhar, a director, manager and producer at Image Channel in Kathmandu, Nepal, agrees.

"It is wonderful here," she says. "Even in the shops, everybody is smiling and asking, 'Is everything okay?' I mean, in our country we don't get that. If we see somebody and give a smile, then they ask, 'Why are you smiling at me? Is there anything so funny?' Here, everyone smiles at everyone.

"When I came here I had a totally different perspective. America is a leading country in the world. They are ruling economically, technology, everything. So we think, 'These people when they meet people from other countries they look down on them.' I had that concept. When I came here, it was different: no discrimination, and willingness to help us. Best was saying to us, 'You people are professionals, and it's great opportunity for us to work with you and learn the culture across the border.'"

That, of course, is just what Gaylord College and the State Department want to hear. Sometimes there really is a win-win outcome. 

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