



MALI, AFRICA

By Suzi Taylor

A chance meeting of two Montana State University faculty members some 20 years ago has led to an interdisciplinary project that crosses colleges, cultures and continents while improving life for rural communities in Mali.

Ada Giusti, a professor of French, and Florence Dunkel, a professor of entomology, met decades ago through a local French cultural organization, but didn't collaborate academically until the mid-2000s. Now, the instructors—along with many others within and beyond MSU—dedicate themselves to guiding students impassioned about international service learning.

Their work centers around rural villages in Mali, one of the world's poorest countries.

Dunkel has worked on integrated pest management in Mali since 1994. In 2000, she began traveling with students. Giusti heard about Dunkel's project and suggested that her French students—who study the language and culture of all French-speaking countries, including those in West Africa—could help Dunkel's students prepare for their trips to Mali. Giusti also believed her own research on economic poverty could be beneficial to the project.

The geography and philosophy were a perfect fit. More than 100 students, representing everything from business to agriculture to engineering have now traveled to Mali and worked with local people.

"My teaching is guided by the belief that our students can greatly benefit by learning to engage peoples from other cultures in their own language and on their own terms," said Giusti.

On Giusti's first trip to Mali in

2005, representatives from Sanambele and other villages told Giusti, Dunkel and four MSU students that malaria was a top concern, but that they wanted to fight it using local resources. The students returned to MSU and researched solutions: testing plant samples, studying protein deficiencies and brainstorming ways to communicate their findings. Their ideas—integrated over many visits—have made a difference.

"Malaria is barely a problem in Sanambele at the moment, because of all the work students and faculty have been doing the past few years," said Megan Haywood-Sullivan of Marshfield Hills, Mass., who traveled to Mali as an MSU student in 2010. "MSU's holistic way of approaching aid/teaching has been nothing but success in Sanambele and will continue to help these people end malaria, retain their cultural traditions and improve their living conditions."

Kelsey Meyer of Fargo, N.D. and Megan Matzick of Bozeman visited Sanambele in 2008 and used their business background to help village women develop an income source. They brought Malian handicrafts back to MSU and sold them at lectures and bazaars. Beautiful hand-made items, which took a week to make and sold for less than \$1 in Mali, fetched prices ten times higher. The students shared ideas with the village women for new products, colors and pricing.

"Our project was a way for them to have another income to provide for themselves. They had all the tools. We were there to provide more minds—more jumping points, if you will."



Dunkel and Giusti have developed interdisciplinary courses that prepare students before traveling to Mali, including "Health, Poverty, Agriculture: Concepts and Action Research" (PSPP 465R), and "Malian Culture and Literature" (MLF 450), taught entirely in French.

Ada Giusti.
Image courtesy of Ada Giusti.



MSU also collaborates with other institutions, including Virginia Tech, the U.S. Agency for International Development, St. Thomas University in St. Paul, Minn. and Chief Dull Knife College in Lame Deer. The project, officially dubbed the “Virtual Teaching and Learning Center for Alleviating Rural Poverty and Valuing Traditional Ecological Wealth,” is funded primarily through the USDA Higher Education Challenge Grant Program. MSU’s Undergraduate Scholars Program has contributed travel funds.

The project also works with K-12 schools, and supports Malians working and researching in the U.S. All participants share a vision of long-term intercultural exchange and the urgent need for sustainable use of local resources.

“This is a teaching-learning situation,” said Dunkel. “We try to work holistically. We have no agenda, we go without a plan. We go and sit and find out what’s happening, and the community shares what it needs. It requires no money to sit and listen to a village.”

Both Dunkel and Giusti have earned the MSU President’s Award for Excellence in Service Learning, a testament to their integration of classroom experience and larger civic responsibility. They connect with other MSU faculty who share similar holistic goals for cultural exchange, including LRES professor Cliff

Montagne, who works in Mongolia, and Lori Lawson, who traveled with students to the Dominican Republic.

“We want to help grow this kind of teaching all over the country,” said Dunkel. “We want to create a generation that is culturally competent. These classes can change our students’ lives.”

“On a personal and professional level, this project represents a dream come true,” said Giusti. “It is a joy to provide students with the knowledge necessary to travel to Mali and collaborate with villagers on their goals to fight malaria, preserve their culture and improve educational resources. When students participate in these projects, they inevitably become more informed and compassionate world citizens. It is so exciting for me to witness their transformation.”

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Megan Haywood-Sullivan with a friend. Image courtesy of Megan Haywood-Sullivan.