

Academic Dispatch

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International Engagement

How many of you who are going to be doctors, are willing to spend your days in Ghana? Technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to do that, not merely to serve one year or two years in the service, but on your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country, I think will depend the answer whether a free society can compete.

—John F. Kennedy (Oct. 14, 1960)

I read these words this week as part of the launch of UNM's new [Peace Corps Prep Certificate program](#), one of the many [International Education Week](#) events here at UNM. Much to my surprise, and probably the embarrassment of the audience, I found myself quite emotional at the reading. I choked up, and stumbled through the rest of my remarks on the founding of the Peace Corps.

Ahjan Fah is telling us about local agricultural products in Thailand.

Although I was born in Washington DC, I lived for five years as a child in Thailand, arriving when I was four and departing when I was nine. Of course, as a young child, I thought nothing of it. From Bangkok, Thailand, we moved to rural Oklahoma, and I had no idea what was going on. Everyone acted so strangely!



Ahjan Fah is telling us about local agricultural products in Thailand.

Since then I've been able to study in England, teach in Ghana and Thailand, and work in Germany, India, China, and Ethiopia, and visit many other places as well. I've helped students and faculty launch development projects with partners across the globe. But since coming to UNM this summer I've found myself in a place that lives a spirit of service — service to our families, to our communities, to our state, to our world — that is unlike anything I've experienced. In reading Kennedy's words, I was struck by both their power and their perfect alignment with the ethos that UNM lives every day. The step from service at home to service abroad is as natural to UNM as appreciating red and green chile, whether in New Mexico or Thailand.

[International Education Week](#) is a time to reflect on the importance of the vast global multitude of milieus in which our great university engages in the discovery, creation, application, and transmission of ideas and cultural creations, and to consider the transnational tapestry on which we stitch our provision of professional support and service. I enjoyed meeting last week with Sanjeev Arora and the leadership of Project ECHO, a world-wide endeavor, originated and led by UNM, dedicated to ensuring that communities have “the right knowledge, at the right place, at the right time.” We wound up talking a bit about the anganwadi workers who run rural child care centers in India, and the potential for the ECHO model to provide these critical centers with peer-to-peer networks for the development of their staff. This cannot work by simply transferring methods and processes from even highly successful child care centers in the U.S., because the historical, cultural, economic, and political context is distinct; the work must be aligned to fit the local social environment. Yet such adaptation is not one-way, with one member of the partnership simply becoming the other; I also recently met UNM professor Manuel Montoya, who told the story of bringing his identity as a New Mexican to the staid marble halls of Oxford through a pair of biker boots!

In my work abroad, supporting students and faculty in projects in dozens of countries, I've learned the importance of humility and respect for the local and tacit knowledge of communities. But this in no way requires us to abandon our own culture or sense of place. None of us truly understands the opportunities or challenges of another from afar; we must strive to see the world through the eyes of those with whom we



Wat Buppharam at night.

would partner. And none of us should deny others the opportunity of glimpsing the world through our own lens in turn, for this is part of the value we bring.

Helping UNM's students and faculty to engage abroad, and indeed with other cultures here at home, not only helps them grow as individuals, it creates ambassadors of knowledge from our own home, and, returning, ambassadors from the communities around the globe in which they engage. Through this we enrich the tapestry of humanity, and weave our species together yet more tightly. Challenging our own assumptions and approaches while seeking to support the opportunities of our partners abroad has never been more important. The biggest questions we face are asked globally, albeit in local form. Our own [Grand Challenges](#) of Successful Aging, Substance Use Disorders, and Sustainable Water Resources have echoes in every nation in which I have traveled and worked. Across the planet, we are different, and we are one. Each of us does define all of us.

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