Aggie journalists spend spring break reporting in Cambodia

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Three Utah State University journalism students have returned from Cambodia, where they spent their spring break “committing acts of journalism” alongside one of their professors.

To be selected for the 10-day journey, which ended Monday, the students had to propose a project that could only be reported with “boots on the ground,” said assistant professor of journalism Matthew D. LaPlante.

“My promise to them was that if I told them that I thought it was possible, I would do whatever it took to make sure they’d be successful once we arrived in country,” said LaPlante, a veteran reporter who has reported from abroad for CNN.com, The Washington Post, The Salt Lake Tribune and Christianity Today, among other publications.

“The truth is, though, that once we got there they just needed a little light help around the edges,” LaPlante said. “They dove right in and got to work — it was exciting to see and made me very proud.”

Student Jeffrey Dahdah reported on an emerging newspaper war in a nation not generally known for liberal press freedoms. Breana Bonner studied Cambodian street art. Sarah Winder looked into the impact of the closure of a dump where a village of desperately impoverished scavengers had taken refuge.

Along the way, the students conducted interviews, sought out experts and officials, made photographs and took videos.

“This trip re-charged my excitement about journalism,” said Dahdah, who is considering a return to Cambodia or another developing nation after he graduates. “I realized how possible it actually is to report overseas.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever been out of the country and I just jumped all in by going to Cambodia,” Bonner said. “Going overseas to report was equally more exciting and terrifying than reporting at home in the United States. With that said, this opportunity couldn’t have been more perfect for hands-on learning, real life experience and watching an established journalist do what he does best.”

“I am so grateful for the opportunity I had to go to Cambodia,” Winder said. “I love how it took my learning in the classroom and made me apply it to a real-world situation.”

LaPlante is now in the process of helping them get their work into publishable shape for submission to various news organizations around the world. A similar trip LaPlante facilitated in Ethiopia in 2012 resulted in a piece by USU student Mackinzie Hamilton which ran in The Oregonian newspaper — and won the Society of Professional Journalists’ highest national award for journalistic feature writing by a college student.

“That was incredibly satisfying to see,” LaPlante said. “But of course we don’t do this for awards. We do it to help connect people and their stories across cultural, political and economic divides — and for me, there’s really nothing more satisfying than that.”

Photo: Utah State University student Sarah Winder interviews a woman from Phnom Penh’s Smokey Mountain Dump with the assistance of translator Sareth Sareth.