

GROUP STUDY EXCHANGE experience helps change lives...

In 2005 I went to South Korea to teach English and, quite frankly, because I was unsure of what to do with my life. I had previously studied anthropology at the University of Toronto and I wanted to experience more of Korean culture than by just simply being there. I volunteered with a museum and visited other museums and galleries. I explored several historical centers and made friends with a few Koreans. I came home after one year feeling that I had given myself an in-depth cultural experience and that I understood Korean culture. While I wasn't wrong, I wasn't nearly as accurate as I thought.

This past year, seven years after my teaching experience, I was accepted into the Rotary Group Study Exchange to South Korea. The first night in Korea with the GSE we slept in a Pension on solid wood beds with a thin mattress; it was little more than what we would use as a thick comforter. Although I knew that Korean's traditionally slept on the floor, I had never ventured to sleep this way myself and this first night set the tone for the entire exchange. I found a number of situations familiar but became acutely aware throughout the exchange that my "in-depth" year abroad had still been an arms-length experience. The GSE allowed a much more personal insight into Korean culture. My ex-pat friends always talked about how rare it was to be invited into a Korean home and, in my entire year there, I only visited a Korean friend's home once. During the GSE, we visited many Korean families and had time to talk to them about their lives. For me this was not a culture to be studied, rather the focus became getting to know people and through them learning about their culture.

With GSE I lost count of the temples, small specialty museums and cultural centers we visited. We were allowed in a reconstructed palace even though it



COLIN EASTON, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Walkerton, ON travelled to South Korea as a member of the 2012-13 D6330 Group Study Exchange team.

was closed for the day; we were given a tour of two preserved cultural villages, one time being allowed on the grounds of a private residence. At two temples we were able to talk to monks and learn more about the Buddhist traditions and daily lives. We were invited into a professor's house for a tea ceremony and given a cooking lesson at a Rotary school.

Simply and honestly, I learned more about Korean culture and history in one month with GSE than I did in my entire year teaching English.

A few months after returning from Korea my son was born. While I have not yet had the opportunity to use my GSE experience to forward my own life goals, my time in Korea has reinforced my desire to teach him about the world's cultures and communities through books, museums and first hand, personal experience. Rotary has emphasized my own values of understanding and empathizing with another culture and it's these values I wish to promote in the world and my own family. Returning to my job as a mixologist, it was difficult for me to think about how I would use my experience from Korea. But there are a number of little ways that the GSE has influenced me. Our Korean hosts took us to a number of different restaurants and I was exposed to a lot of different foods and tastes. While it would be hard to find some of those foods over here, I am encouraged to find new tastes for my cocktail creations and beverage experiments. The entrepreneurial spirit I saw time and again in our Korean hosts and visits has reignited my passion for trying my own techniques and showing other people different ways of doing the same. I think the real inspiration will come down the road, however, as my previous ideas of starting my own business have found new inspiration after my time in Korea. When I applied to the GSE, I thought it would be an amazing experience and a good way to "cap off" my year teaching in Korea. What I learned through GSE is that there are so many different ways to experience a culture and, in turn, the world. I gained a new perspective on my teaching year, and a new focus for my future traveling experiences. I wish to gratefully thank the Rotary Club of Walkerton, all the clubs in District 6330 and 3620, and Rotary International for this amazing opportunity.