

“Greek to Me”

by Carina Fung

It was hot. Every day a dry, sweltering, oppressive 90-100 degree heat. But that early morning, on top of the Philopappus Hill overlooking the peaceful city of Athens, Greece, the temperature was comfortable. Our month long study abroad program was coming to an end. This was the final day I could to take one last trek alone. There wasn't anything particularly special about this hill compared to other spots around Athens. With walking paths, trees and a large monument, it was just a nice place to wander. Its best feature was the hilltop panoramic view of the Acropolis, which was what I wanted to see. It was also a perfect place for me to reflect on the month that had quickly flown by.

August of 2005 was the inaugural month of the UW Honors Department Athens Leadership Seminar. We came to Athens to learn and discuss leadership and democracy, but in the end I think we learned much more. Unlike other study abroad programs, Greece was our classroom and our playground. We traveled to the small village of Vitalo where our professor was born, the islands of Santorini, Ios and Paros, the Peloponnese and all around Athens. One of my favorite class experiences involved leading a group discussion on Neal Gabler's *Life: The Movie* at a restaurant on the cliffs of Santorini with the sun setting in the distance. And Greece has some amazing sunsets!

A month's events are difficult to condense into one stream of thought. To note my experiences chronologically here would be like filling out an inventory on the checklist of life. Other factors intermingle, like feelings and responses of fear, excitement, sadness, awe and wonder. As our group's resident imagination extraordinaire Nathan Green eloquently says, "life is a lesson: mysterious, unknowable, and totally radical." This exemplifies our program really well. It's impossible for me to convey all the good and the bad, the big and the small – all the stuff that made up my incredible experience.

What I can say is that I learned a lot in Greece – a lot about myself. I became more independent, able to rely on my abilities to get from one place to another or have the foresight to ask for help. Did I fail or make mistakes? Yes, and often! I got lost, had to dodge

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crazy drivers, got ripped off, was ridiculed as an American, and much more. It was really different, being so far away from my family who I'm very close to. And being away from Seattle, the place I call home. I missed my family, friends, Seattle Mariners' baseball, Chinese food – but at the same time, I had a different kind of joy and freedom, completely unconventional from my life as a UW student. I also became friends with the people in my program. As simple as that may sound, our group was very diverse – from all different backgrounds, majors, future plans and opinions. I didn't know how much I would come to appreciate the qualities that make up each of them, even the ones that would often contradict my personal philosophy. Everyone didn't get along all the time; in fact we often stepped on each others' toes. But I learned that it's really important to have an open mind and always treat others with respect. By following that, we did alright in the end. I also learned to be daring and take risks. I've always been a cautious person, planning my life five years in advance. Did I know that Greece was in my future when I started college? No. I went way outside of my box – went on a banana boat, a pirate ship, drove an ATV, rode donkeys down a cliff, made friends with a half-Greek tour guide, explored the true meaning of democracy, and discovered what I truly want out of life. I'm so thankful and blessed for the opportunity.

As I left that hill, knowing I'd be leaving the next day, I took looked down on the sleeping city (Athenians like to sleep in) so I could remember how it felt to be a part of it. Then I took a long admiring glance at the Acropolis. "I hope to see you again real soon," I thought, as if to bid farewell to an old friend. Greece opened unimaginable doors me and showed me that the world has so many opportunities — will you take them?