

Students stroll through Asia Officials seek to regain trust of young voters

Alumni's gift prompts 7-week trip

BY LINDA SHEN
ASSISTANT FEATURES EDITOR

Sophomore Julia Marden spent the night before the Fourth of July in Melaka, Malaysia's night market.

Instead of fireworks, she was surrounded by vendors shouting from every stall along the brightly lit street. On her way, Marden and her friends were caught in a sudden, furious downpour — and began dancing in the rain.

"We were all laughing so hard and dripping wet," she said. "They wouldn't let us back into the hotel."

Through a gift from the University, 1977 UNC graduate Alston Gardner provides 25 first-year students the opportunity to spend seven weeks exploring and learning about Southeast Asia through the Singapore Summer Immersion Program.

The opportunity is unique because it is only open to first-year students and is all expenses paid. Brochures are mailed to all incoming freshmen before fall semester, and the application process yields decisions in mid-March.

"I found out (I was accepted) the day we left for spring break," said Marden, a public policy major. The group left for Singapore at the end of May.

"It's not only for Asian studies students," said Dan Gold, assistant director for Asia in the Study Abroad Office.

The responsibilities of developing the program and managing its logistics fall on his shoulders — but he also gets to spend a week with the students in Singapore, overseeing their progress. "That's the fun part," he said.

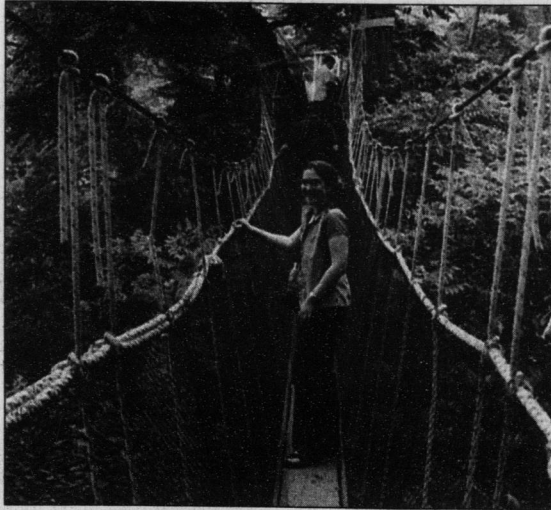
Students involved with the Singapore Summer Immersion Program take in classes as well as culture. This summer's participants took courses on the history of and contemporary issues in Southeast Asia.

The aim of the program is to expose students to life and culture in Asia. "This is something we find impacts all students' lives," Gold said. "Maybe having this experience will impact the rest of their experience (at UNC)."

Although the program is only in its third year, it left an impression with this year's participants.

"I loved just walking around downtown Singapore at night," said Meredith Gilliam, a sophomore majoring in chemistry and Asian studies.

Students lived in apartments near the National University of Singapore and spent time interacting with students there. "We kind



COURTESY OF MEREDITH GILLIAM

Sophomore Julia Marden visits the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia as part of the Singapore Summer Immersion Program, a 7-week trip to Asia.

of did their freshman orientation in one day," Marden explained.

Marden said the students were so interested in fostering understanding between their cultures that team-building exercises such as painting a picture while standing on someone else's shoulders seemed less like something to laugh about.

"We kind of fell into (their sin-

cerity), too," Marden explained.

It's a thought that Gilliam echoes. "You just felt like you're part of the community," she said.

The Singapore Summer Immersion Program is well-named, if slightly misleading. While students become intimately aware of life in Singapore, they are by no means limited to it.

The seven-week trip included six weeks in Singapore and weekend visits to the neighboring island of Malaysia. The last week was spent in Thailand, where Marden and Gilliam saw an elephant farm.

On Pulau Ubin, an undeveloped island near the urban jungle of Singapore, visiting students were offered herbs from residents' gardens and were informed of their healing qualities.

The similarities between Asia and the United States, however, were what Gilliam found most surprising. "We're both moving in the same direction," she said. "It was so exciting to be in that kind of environment."

Contact the Features Editor at features@unc.edu.

BY ERIN GIBSON
ASSISTANT STATE & NATIONAL EDITOR

On the edge of the 2004 election, politicians are striving to gain the trust of young constituents and rack up the necessary votes that will land them in office.

"Young voters are looking for honesty, integrity and ethics in the elected officials," said N.C. Democratic Party Chair Barbara Allen.

But some elected officials' recent actions have fueled some voters' arguments that politicians are not to be trusted.

Republican Gov. John Rowland, of Connecticut, was forced to resign in June when people discovered he was accepting illegal gifts from state contractors and aids.

Even before Rowland's resignation, North Carolina voters were discouraged, following October news of misappropriated federal funds in a non-profit organization started by U.S. Rep. Frank Ballance, D-N.C.

"I don't think I'd ever fully trust (politicians)," said Colby Day, a junior linguistics major. "There is a lot of power (in their positions), and people will do a lot for that."

UNC-Chapel Hill Young Democrats President Justin Guillory said he thinks that, for skeptical voters, the distrust stems from a lack of knowledge.

Allen advises young voters to know what is going on and to do some reading on their own. UNC freshman Julia Billotte said she would trust the officials if she knew more about them.

She said she plans to visit candidates' Web sites before election time.

"I think the majority of young voters are interested and want to learn about the issues," Allen said. "There are plenty of politicians who are honest."

Young voters, when abreast of

the candidates and issues, often will focus on candidates' platforms and personalities, Guillory said.

And officials and candidates are striving to appeal to the young voters to gain their support because some think the presidential election is close enough that the youth vote could determine the outcome.

"The biggest thing an official could do to gain (youth) trust once in office is to do exactly as they said they would while campaigning," said Bill Peaslee, N.C. Republican Party Chair.

All young voters can be attracted to an official who is willing to meet and talk to them, Guillory said. "I think many young voters don't know the elected officials," he said. "If you don't know the officials you are less likely to trust them."

Allen said she is proud of young voters because she thinks they have more integrity than other groups. But trust is a two-way street.

"They need to remember that you can't only trust yourself," she said. "You have to try some trust in other people."

Officials can try to gain young voters' trust, Guillory said, but the voters need to make an effort, too. "There is not enough interaction. Students should be more forceful in meeting (politicians)."

He and Peaslee both said getting involved in a political party or campaign is a good way to learn about the candidates and the issues.

Both parties are working this fall with groups such as Young Democrats and College Republicans across the country to inform students and solicit votes.

"We need to remember the importance of a person's vote," Allen said. "We want to get people out to vote and get confidence back in the system."

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