WMU INTERNATIONAL NEWS
The Diether H. Haenicke Institute for Global Education
FALL 2015

Focus on the College of Fine Arts
Dear Friends,

As we near the end of the calendar year, we are pleased to bring to you an issue of WMU International News focused on our nationally recognized College of Fine Arts.

The arts enable humans to communicate cross-culturally, often without language. In our encounters with good art—paintings, sculptures, musical scores, dance and theatre performances—we can understand emotions and thought across vast cultural, linguistic and geographic boundaries.

This issue of WMU International News tells you about the many ways our students, faculty and staff are collaborating and interacting with artists and institutions around the world to come to a shared understanding and appreciation of art. Learn about the talented student musicians we have attracted from China, Iraq, and the Dominican Republic. Read about Professor Patrick Wilson, a sculptor, whose work is influenced by the architecture in some of China’s largest cities, and about Professor Leon Sun, a Chinese graphic designer, who uses fluid abstraction design to juxtapose his eastern background against the beauty he observes living in Michigan. We also included stories on a faculty flutist focused on the music of the Americas and a dance student who taught the power of movement to orphaned children in Panama.

College of Fine Arts Dean Daniel Guyette talks about how the University’s commitment to global engagement was a major factor when he decided to come to WMU in 2013. He also discusses some of the international initiatives underway, as well as his own commitment to the internationalization of the college.

I hope you enjoy these accounts of WMU’s global impact and the pride we take in forging positive change in Kalamazoo and around the world, and wish you and yours a Happy New Year!

We appreciate your interest in Western Michigan University and the Haenicke Institute and we welcome your comments about WMU International News. Please write us at: wmu-international@wmich.edu.

Wolfgang Schlör
Associate Provost
Diether H. Haenicke Institute for Global Education

We would love to hear about noteworthy accomplishments from our talented WMU students, alumni and friends:

Share Your Story
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he opportunity to lead a nationally recognized arts college engaged in international initiatives and programs to benefit its students, faculty, and the wider community it served was a key factor when Daniel Guyette considered becoming dean of Western Michigan University’s College of Fine Arts in 2013.

Originally “cast” by his parents for a career as a doctor, substituting as an usher at a high school theatre performance gave Guyette a glimpse into a future very different than the one his parents imagined for him.

“I was already very active in sports and art, but I became interested in theatre when I was a sophomore and subbed as an usher,” Guyette said. “I noticed that the students in theatre enjoyed a stronger comradery and worked as a team, which was ironically something I wasn’t seeing with sports as much. I got more involved, first building scenery and eventually I got into acting. Singing, dancing, making art, being in theatre—my love of all things offered in WMU’s College of Fine Arts started very young.”

After he graduated from high school, Guyette enrolled in pre-med courses at Tufts University to please his parents, but he didn’t have as much passion for that pursuit. He decided to take a break from college, return home to Vermont, and work in community theatre until he was ready to go back to school.

“I applied to the best public and conservatory theatre schools and was offered nearly a free ride at Northwestern University,” he said. “I was a very good actor in my high school, but I quickly saw that wasn’t the case in the big city. Because of my art background, I decided the smartest thing to do was to move into stage design or architecture. I did a lot of model building and artwork as a kid that translated well into theatre design. After I graduated from Northwestern, I went to Penn State for a master’s of fine arts in scenery and lighting design. I initially thought I would have a career in professional theatre, but I ended up teaching a class and I decided that teaching design was what I was really passionate about. Designing professionally became an extension of my teaching.”

A progression of advancement followed for Guyette, beginning with a teaching position at Utah State University, and ending with a four-year stint as dean of the College of Fine and Performing Arts at Western Washington University, just prior to coming to WMU’s College of Fine Arts in July 2013. Several of the college’s programs are highly rated nationally, including: Jazz performance, Music Therapy, Vocal Jazz (Gold Company), Musical Theatre and Jazz dance.

“At Washington, one of the opportunities we had involved connecting with a Chinese opera singer so we could offer a joint program in China,” he said. “I saw resistance from some faculty to exploring other, international ways of creating art. When the opportunity opened at WMU, I visited the University website and noticed the large number of international students and faculty. Immediately I was attracted—here was a place that already understood the value global engagement could bring to the arts. And, it was obvious that people take pride in and greatly value the arts here.”

**Dominican Republic**

Even before he arrived at WMU, Guyette was aware of international activity and initiatives already underway in the college via faculty doing overseas research and scholarly work. One faculty member, Dr. Alexander Cannon (See story on page 5), was conducting research on a largely unknown genre of Vietnamese royal court music. He also learned that the University had a partnership with the Dominican Republic and the college already had a D.R. student enrolled in the string area. So, shortly after he came on board as dean, Guyette planned a May 2014 visit to the D.R. with music Professor Renata Knific, a violinist, and Director of the School of Music David Colson.
“I had heard about the international students in the college and I considered: Where are our good students coming from and how can we open up that connection to build upon that foundation?” he said. “It was apparent that if we are going to build sustainable pipelines between WMU and schools in the D.R. we needed to have program curriculum structures in place and signed articulation agreements to make an easy pathway for students to come from the D.R to WMU.”

The delegation visited the Conservatory of Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory of Music, where they held preliminary discussions with faculty and administrators about potential opportunities, including Mai Thanh Son, head of Foreign Affairs (a Dan Kim player); Le Thi Thanh Hoa, head of the Post Graduate Office (a famous flutist); Dr. Tran Thanh Ha, head of Composition; Dr. Dang Huy Hoang, head of Training and Education. Guyette said even though funding is a major issue, the people he met in Vietnam are committed to increasing opportunities for their students and scholars to study and work in the United States.

“The minister wanted to hear about all WMU could offer in the arts, so he set up a meeting for me to meet the heads of various arts commissions and governmental arts agencies—32 people showed up,” he said. “That was an exceptional opportunity to meet with a group of people from the highest level of a country’s government and to have an audience with a group that can really get things done. That led to our next visit, which resulted in a dance program and art exhibition coming to WMU. By the end of the year we had gone from an enrollment of two students from the D.R. to having 23 viable applicants. Once the D.R. restores its funding support for students we are well positioned for these students to start arriving. A college delegation plans to visit a private D.R. art school in early 2016 to set up an articulation agreement.”

Next, Guyette turned his attention to Vietnam and China to assist college music and dance faculty in advancing and establishing partnerships and exchange programs in that part of the world. In spring 2015, Guyette, Dr. Alexander Cannon, associate professor and an ethnologist researching a largely unknown genre of Vietnamese royal court music (See story page 5), Tom Marks, director of WMU’s intensive English program—CELCIS, Dr. Wendy Rose, music professor of bassoon, and Dr. Ying Zeng, senior coordinator on Asia for WMU’s Haenicke Institute for Global Education, traveled to Vietnam to lay some groundwork for faculty and student exchange.

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“It was very interesting to get to see the culture, hear some of the music, and to learn more about the country’s history and how that has impacted the arts,” he said. “They are particularly interested in studying U.S. music, especially jazz. WMU could lead the way in Vietnam, which is about 20-30 years behind China in regards to sending students abroad to study. We also met with an enthusiastic group of students who were already studying English. They exemplified the spirit and interest in education in Vietnam—they were excited to learn and to improve their future quality of life.”
China

By the time Guyette came on board as college dean, Dr. Rose had already established a solid relationship with the Wuhan Conservatory in China and a colleague there, Professor Te Xu, which resulted in WMU attracting one of their finest students—Mingyuan Yang. WMU hosted Xu and a delegation of students from the conservatory in fall 2014, which led to an invitation for a WMU delegation to travel to China.

The delegation for Guyette’s first visit to China in early May 2015 included Rose, Zeng, Cannon, art professor Patrick Wilson (see article link), dance professor Whitney Moncrief, music student Mingyuan Yang, adjunct music professor of oboe Gabriel Renteria, and music professor of flute Martha Councell-Vargas (see article link).

“Visiting Wuhan was the lynchpin of our visit,” Guyette said. “That led to Chengdu and even more visits. In all, we visited five universities and schools, including Central China Normal School, Sichuan University and Sichuan Conservatory. It was very exciting to visit Sichuan Conservatory because it is so large—20,000 arts students—studying film, theatre, dance, music and the visual arts. We have just 1,100 students in the College of Fine Arts here at Western.”

At the conservatory, Guyette and Zeng met with the director of international affairs and gave a presentation on what WMU’s College of Fine Arts had to offer to their students. The director was so impressed, he immediately arranged for Guyette and Zeng to meet with the president of the conservatory, Geer Lin—a conductor and composer who had just finished his first year as president.

“President Lin was very excited to meet us and wanted to know right away if we could collaborate on programs,” Guyette said. “Ying showed him the list of our 42 programs and we asked which ones would be of most interest to the conservatory’s students; he said all of them! I asked, ‘Which ones would be the most important for us to start with?’ He circled 39. I found it unusual that we were able from that meeting with the director to end up getting a nearly on-demand meeting with the president of one of the largest conservatories in China, which was an exciting and breakthrough moment for us. The president is expected to visit WMU in early spring 2016 to see what we have to offer and to meet with our students, faculty and staff.”

Study Abroad

The college is also branching out in study abroad development. Its multi-discipline Book Arts in Venice short-term, summer program headed up by Professor Jeffrey Abshear has been introducing WMU students to the history of bookmaking in Italy since 2002. Professor Joan Herrington, chair of the Department of Theatre, periodically takes student groups to London to attend live performances, and, the Department of Dance has sent two groups of students to China to attain an international experience.

Because students in the arts are usually working in ensembles, productions, companies and group exhibitions as part of their degree programs, Guyette said finding the right time to study abroad can be a bit tricky.

“For our students to have an experience we have to look at doing it differently,” he said. “Many of our programs are intensive, four-year degrees with few electives, so if a student goes abroad they may get out of sequence with their course work and find it extends their time to graduation or other issues. Some are able to study abroad during the summer or over a holiday break. We have to find ways to provide study abroad that complements what they are doing on campus. The Book Arts in Venice program that runs in the summer is a good opportunity for a small number of our students, but we need more like that. There is much work to do and my faculty and I are committed to making study abroad possible for all students who are interested in the arts.”

Stage set models created by Daniel Guyette.
Two musicians from Kurdistan who played in the National Youth Orchestra of Iraq found a route to Western Michigan University’s School of Music through a chance meeting a few years ago with WMU’s director of international admissions and services at their school—the Fine Arts Institute-Sulaimani.

Bashdar Sdiq, a cellist, and his best friend Ahmed Tofiq, a violinist, are both from Salaymaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan. They met in 1999 at the same time they first experienced orchestral music and their lives have followed parallel paths ever since. “We began playing at a fine arts workshop where we had a class together,” Sdiq said. “We then went on to study at the Fine Arts Institute of Sulaimani for five years. I earned a bachelor’s degree from Salahaddin University in 2008. Ahmed earned his degree in 2011.”

In summer 2010, Sdiq and Tofiq joined the National Youth Orchestra of Iraq, a project conceived and established by an Iraqi teenager, Zuhal Sultan, who hoped to unify a nation divided by war. With the orchestra, Sdiq and Tofiq travelled to Europe, playing with world renowned musicians, sharing their Kurdish culture and learning about other cultures. In 2011, they travelled to Bonn, Germany; in 2012, they visited the United Kingdom. “One of the benefits of being in the orchestra is that we now know other players from everywhere,” Tofiq said. “It was a good learning experience. We played new pieces all the time, we learned about other cultures, and some of the players we met gave us individual music lessons.”

At the age of 29, Sdiq and Tofiq left the orchestra to make room for other young, talented musicians seeking an opportunity to advance their skills and to play music on a national and international stage. Both musicians continued teaching and working with younger musicians in the Koya Fine Art School, but still felt unfulfilled. Then they heard about the Human Capacity Development (HCDP) scholarship—a Kurdistan regional award that provides funding for students prepared to study in a foreign university. The scholarship had one catch—the scholarship recipient would have to first find a university that offered an appropriate program.

Sdiq and Tofiq began furiously applying to every university they could think of, but they never found a school that seemed just right. “In the beginning, I wasn’t sure I wanted to come to the United States to study, but the more I thought about it, I decided that a U.S. school would be the right choice because many are famous all over the world,” Sdiq said. “When I compared master’s programs in the U.S. and the UK, I found that U.S. programs offer two years of instruction, but in the UK it’s only nine months, so I chose to study in the U.S.” Tofiq agreed, adding, “Everyone at home knows that if you finish a master’s degree in the U.S. it is easy to find work and easy to support yourself.”

They decided to apply to WMU on a whim after meeting Juan Tavares, director of International Admissions and Services at WMU. Tavares was in Iraq to recruit students at the American University in Sulaymaniya, where Tofiq and Sdiq were taking English classes. Tavares convinced them to enroll at WMU. “I feel very lucky and like I am in the right place,” said Sdiq. “My professors are exactly how I imagined them to be. Everyone is friendly and I love my apartment and living in Kalamazoo; I wish I could have come 10 years ago. I’ve found myself in music heaven because last year in the music school there were almost 100 concerts.”

Although Michigan weather is different than what they’re used to in Kurdistan, both Tofiq and Sdiq love Michigan’s beautiful summers. “My daughter was also born here, so that’s why I really like Michigan,” said Tofiq. The two men want to stay in Kalamazoo and form a bridge between Iraq and America, but they will eventually return to Kurdistan to work on advancing music education in Iraq. “We will be two of the first Kurdish musicians to earn a U.S. degree,” Sdiq said. “It is our responsibility to go back to our country and give back, but we also hope to be able to come back to the U.S.”

Both musicians are very grateful for the many people who helped make it possible for them to study at WMU, especially Professor Bradley Wong, director of WMU’s School of Music, Dr. David Code, professor of music theory and technology, and Professor Bruce Uchimura of the cello department. Once they complete master’s degrees at WMU, Sdiq plans to enroll in a doctoral program in music so he can eventually teach at the university level; Tofiq plans to return to Iraq to teach violin. “We both hope to create more jobs for musicians in Kurdistan and to inspire the youth to follow a career in music,” Tofiq said.
A chance introduction to a largely unknown genre of Vietnamese royal court music that Dr. Alexander Cannon experienced while majoring in economics and music as an undergraduate forged an interest that changed the trajectory of his intended career path from analyzing economic trends to becoming an ethnomusicologist and an expert on don ca tai tu.

In graduate school, Cannon quickly discovered that very little had been written about don ca tai tu and decided that it would be the focus of his work in ethnomusicology. It is a genre of folk music of the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam known as “music for diversion.” “I was interested in the profound complexity of it; I had found a niche,” said Cannon, an assistant professor of music history and ethnomusicology at Western Michigan University since 2012. “Music is deeply embedded in Vietnamese culture. Rather than sitting down with their friends after work and cracking open a beer while telling each other about the awful day they had, the Vietnamese pull out their instruments and begin to play music together. It is that setting that really drew me in—the idea that language is incomplete. Language doesn’t express what we must express as human beings.”

In 2008, Cannon was awarded a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Fellowship to study don ca tai tu in Ho Chi Minh City. While this music is played mostly by amateur musicians, Cannon points out that in this context, “amateur” simply means someone who does not play for money. Over the course of 10 trips to Vietnam, Cannon has studied with several advocates and musicians who work to...
ensure the continued viability of this tradition, two of whom have been integral to his research.

**Pham Thuy Hoan** is a nationally recognized Vietnamese composer and music teacher of *don ca tai tu*, whom Cannon was introduced to by a friend. Pham works to "simplify" the complexity of the traditional music and hopes that by doing so, she can engage a larger number of people and generate a "national theme" that will be inclusive of all Vietnamese citizens and easily identifiable on an international level. Not only is the music technically complex, Pham is concerned that it may be difficult for the younger generation to relate to. "Much of the traditional style draws from literature," Cannon said. "Unless they are familiar with the literary references used, younger students may be unable to relate to the message." Pham believes this disconnect could be a potential barrier to unifying the people through the music.

Cannon also studies with staunch music traditionalist **Nguyen Vinh Bao**, a ninety-eight-year-old master musician of *don ca tai tu*. Cannon says Nguyen is known in Vietnam as the best performer of this music and is recognized by the French government on a list of people who are especially adept in cultural preservation. Nguyen passionately disagrees with Pham’s initiative to simplify the teaching and playing of the traditional style because it is the complexity of the music that gives it its unique identity.

Despite having differing opinions on how the music should be played, Cannon said both Pham and Nguyen passionately work toward the common goal of connecting this music to their nation’s heritage, and both have been successful at attracting different audiences. “The efforts of people like Pham Thuy Hoan and Nguyen Vinh Bao are paying off,” Cannon said. “In 2013, UNESCO recognized *don ca tai tu* as an ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’.”

Based on his field experience and the relationships he has developed in Vietnam, Cannon is able to contribute a unique perspective on internationalization of the University to both his students in the classroom, and through his service as a member of the International Education Council of the WMU Faculty Senate. While Cannon recognizes that much of a music student’s focus is on the technical aspects of learning to play their instruments, he is concerned that something is potentially lacking in their engagement with music. He encourages his students to consider music as a path by which they can relate with people on a deeper social and communal level. “Vietnamese people do this all the time,” Cannon says. “I always tell students that music is not an international language. Music exists for different reasons for different cultures. We have to study it to identify what those reasons are.”

Cannon begins each semester with a challenge to his music students. He places them in the role of music teachers who must, in five minutes, convince the superintendent not to cut the music budget. Most of his students struggle to find the words to effectively persuade the superintendent. Cannon laughs and says, “You can’t just go to him or her and say ‘Well you just can’t cut it, and you’re a fool if you don’t understand’.”

Cannon then explains to his students that an understanding of a culture’s visual art, history, and music are excellent tools for communicating and connecting with people from around the world. “I would like my students and colleagues to appreciate the benefits of engaging with other cultures purely on that level, but if I need to make an economics argument, I do have a degree in economics,” he said. “If you can communicate with that person from a different culture effectively enough to have that person say, ‘Hey, this person gets me and I want to work with him or her,’ you can make those significant connections.”
Traveling to Central America in college is all it took to inspire Martha Councell-Vargas to begin a career of teaching, researching, and performing flute music of the Americas.

Councell-Vargas is an assistant professor of flute in the School of Music at Western Michigan University, a solo and chamber flutist and a music scholar. Her love of North, South and Central American and Caribbean music was prompted by a study abroad trip in Panama at a conservatory to teach at a music camp for two weeks when she was 19.

“In Panama I fell in love with the music, dancing, and culture,” said Councell-Vargas, who came to WMU in 2009. “I met people with so few resources but they showed me a generosity that I’ll never forget.”

Councell-Vargas finds it’s inspiring to stay connected to that special spirit she found in Panama because it is “irresistible.” Her musical styling is inspired by Panama and the many other countries she’s visited to teach, perform, and conduct research: Cuba, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, China, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, and Honduras. In France and Germany, she has taken top honors in international flute competitions, and she has been a featured guest artist at several festivals, conservatories, and conventions in these areas of the world.

“I am eternally grateful to WMU because this university supports international travel for research and creative activities,” Councell-Vargas said. “This place is truly globally engaged and provides tremendous support for international faculty creative and scholarly research. In 2011, I received a WMU grant to research the Cuban flute tradition in Havana. It was probably the biggest adventure of my career so far.”

Councell-Vargas traveled to Cuba expecting some initial resistance among the people she hoped to work with, but she said once they got to know each other “we shared our love of music and were able to learn a lot from each other.” She spent time with musicians who were living in relative poverty with few material resources. Most of their instruments were very old, some from the 1940s and 50s, which the musicians keep repairing “like cars,” Councell-Vargas said. She was surprised and impressed to discover that most of the musicians she met didn’t play music from sheet music, but from memory.

“They further strengthened my admiration for musicians that are truly dedicated,” Councell-Vargas said. “Despite not having practice facilities, sheet music, or good instruments, they were the most talented musicians I’ve ever heard.”

Councell-Vargas says her compositions fall under a genre she calls Universal Americanism. “The music of the Americas is a larger metaphor for the connections between these cultures,” Councell-Vargas said. “The music is irresistible. The music shows us we aren’t really that different at all.”

Conducting research and competing internationally has helped Councell-Vargas expand her flute repertoire beyond what is standard and connect these different musical styles. Her debut album includes Cuban, Peruvian, Mexican and North American music. Titled, Gran Danzón, the album, includes pieces that work together with a common folk or dance element.

“It wasn’t hard to choose the repertoire; most of those pieces were ones I’ve known and played for a long time,” Councell-Vargas said. “Every time I travel I’m introduced to different repertoire, which is a great benefit to my students at WMU because I’m introducing them to these new pieces.”

Councell-Vargas knew as a young girl that she wanted to be a performer. She participated in public school music programs from fifth grade through high school, after which she earned a bachelor’s of music degree in flute performance at Oberlin Conservatory. Throughout her college studies, she supported herself teaching beginner and intermediate students. “I had really knowledgeable teachers so I felt compelled to continue the tradition and give back what I had been given,” Councell-Vargas said.

After completing a master’s of music degree at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, Councell-Vargas freelanced, taught, travelled, and performed as a soloist and chamber musician. She initially had no inclination to pursue a doctoral degree, but six years after completing her master’s degree, she entered the doctor of musical arts program at the University of Iowa, and graduated in 2009.

“I recognized that a full-time professor job could offer the flexibility to continue developing as an artist, as well as the stability to have a family, too,” Councell-Vargas said.

Councell-Vargas has visited Central and South America multiple times and she says her most inspirational moments have occurred when teaching students in developing countries.

“All the countries I’ve visited are inspirational, but Honduras stands out for some reason,” said Councell-Vargas, who visited the nation’s capital, Tegucigalpa, in 2011. “The students have next to nothing in material resources, but they refuse to allow any obstacle to get into the way of learning more about making music.”
A recent Western Michigan University alumnus, Evan Clifton, was named a finalist in the 2015 Donald Yaxley Trombone Competition, an elite trombone festival held in Spain.

Originally from Howell, Mich., Clifton has been a trombone player for 12 years. He said his fascination with the instrument began much sooner, “When I was growing up, I watched the Lawrence Welk show a lot and there’s a video taken of me when I was two years old pointing at the TV and saying, ‘me play trombone.’”

Clifton was attracted to WMU for his undergraduate degree not only because of its music program, which is ranked one of the best in the United States, but also because his family includes a bunch of Broncos. “My mom, dad, and brother all have degrees from WMU in music education and performance,” explained Clifton.

He earned several national honors on his path to competing internationally: Clifton was a finalist in the George Roberts Base Trombone Competition, as well as in the Eastern National Trombone Solo Competition held in Washington, D.C. He has also performed with the Lansing Symphony Orchestra and the Battle Creek Symphony.

Being named a finalist in the Yaxley Competition was what Clifton described as a “notable accomplishment” to cap off his undergraduate education. “I was completely thrilled to find out I had been nominated,” he said. “My competition was the last one to be posted, so I was really anxious. My name was the first one on the list—I ran to my professor’s office to tell him and he already knew.”

In early July 2015, Clifton flew to Valencia, Spain to compete for a $2,000 euro grand prize to buy a new trombone. The competition was open to musicians 25 years and under from prestigious music schools around the world, so he found himself competing against older trombone players studying in some of the most famous music programs. But, Clifton says he was unfazed by the competition. “I didn’t really care about the age of the other musicians. It was a thought in my mind, but at the same time the qualifying round is anonymous; if I qualified there, I decided I wasn’t going to worry too much about it. I tried to treat the competition like any other performance and convey my message to the audience, not necessarily to win. It was very intense, and as much as I tried to treat it like a normal performance, it wasn’t.”

Clifton was not a winner in the competition, but he is grateful for the experience as a whole and for the chance it offered him to travel and compete on an international stage. “The people that go to these festivals are the top in the world,” he said. “I was playing for the best musicians around and they had really great things to say about my performance.

In fall 2015, Clifton began a master’s program at Northwestern University courtesy of a significant financial award. He hopes to graduate in two years and to eventually play full time in a major orchestra. He credits the major success he achieved as an undergraduate at WMU to a fellow trombonist, Professor Steve Wolfinbarger.

“Professor Wolfinbarger dedicates so much of his time to his students, especially for competitions,” Clifton said. “He has come in on a Sunday and put in twelve hours of time recording music for students. You can tell he really cares about all of his students succeeding.”
Can listening to and making music be effectively used in the treatment of people diagnosed with neurologic and psychiatric disorders?

This is the primary question Professor Ed Roth, director of WMU’s music therapy program, is attempting to answer in collaboration with colleagues from around the world to improve treatment for people experiencing post-traumatic stress and other acute anxiety disorders. He is a co-founder and director of WMU’s Laboratory for Brain Research and Interdisciplinary Neurosciences (BRAIN) (article) and a Fellow in the Academy of Neurologic Music Therapists, who specializes in the application of music in the treatment of neurologic disorders and diseases of the central nervous system in pediatric and adult populations.

Roth actively works with Dr. Daniel Levitin, McGill University in Montreal, Canada (author of This is Your Brain on Music) and Dr. Charles Limb, University of California-San Francisco (chief of the Division of Otology, Neurotology and Skull Base Surgery, and TED speaker: Your Brain on Improvisation). He was also instrumental in the establishment of music therapy programs in Spain at the University of Ramon Llull and Pompeu Fabra University, both in Barcelona, where he served as a scholar in residence.

A frequent national and international presenter, Roth has shared his methods and findings at the University of Queensland in Australia, Oxford University in England, and other prestigious institutions. His work is widely published in international journals of neuroscience, rehabilitation medicine, music therapy, counseling, and perceptual and motor skills.

A paper Roth wrote collaboratively during his graduate degree program on the Mozart Effect is what well-positioned him early on in his career to conduct research with an international perspective. He presented the paper at the Neurosciences and Music conference in Montreal and at the first International Congress of Clinical Neuromusicology in Salzburg, Austria. Those presentations garnered international attention for the topic and brought the general public into the conversation about the use of music to increase intelligence.

“When we wrote our paper, like us, another two or three groups theorized that the occasionally observed improved performance as a result of listening to a Mozart piano sonata was due to an arousal affect, instead of sitting in silence,” said Roth, who came to WMU in 2000. “Many believe that if you listen to any auditory stimulus that changes over time, such as music, that it would have a brief enhancing effect on whatever you were doing afterward. That made all of us who study music skeptical whether it could, quote, make you smarter, unquote, what was the actual mechanism of such an effect, and why would it only be due to the music of Mozart?”

When multiple studies were not able to replicate the Mozart Effect, researchers within the U.S. and Canada scientific community who were focused on cognition and perception became engaged in the discussion. Some labs did succeed in replicating the effect, but Roth said no one could explain what were the actual mechanisms of change.

“The Mozart Effect really caught on in the U.S. when the Governor of Georgia sent every newborn home with a Mozart CD and parents of young children latched onto the theory as a possible method for boosting their kids’ mental and intellectual advancement,” he said. “The science did not demonstrate that the Mozart Effect was correct as originally presented, but it captured the public’s imagination about how listening to music can enhance non-musical thinking.”

As a marimbist and drummer, Roth has had a lifelong interest in percussion and how the rhythm impacts humans. His
current research has branched out to better understand the neuroanatomical, neurophysiological and clinical application of music improvisation toward the emotional rehabilitation of children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

**The origins of music therapy at WMU**

The music therapy program at WMU was founded in 1958 by Professor Carol Collins, followed by its second director, Professor Brian Wilson in 1975. Roth, the program’s third director, assumed that role in May 2015. The discipline’s origins stem back to World War II, when affluent nurses from New York City who were taking care of soldiers discovered that the soldiers calmed down when they sang to them and that their vital signs synchronized to the singing. “This was the beginning of music therapy as a professional discipline,” Roth said. “WMU was amongst the earliest universities in the U.S. to offer a music therapy degree.”

Roth said early stages of research in the field laid out a mechanistic approach to examine music to understand its therapeutic effect on people. In the last 15 to 20 years, he said some in the discipline have contextualized their research within the neurosciences, which likely improved its credibility in science and medicine. “When music therapy started to anchor some of its interventions in neuroscience rather than in the humanities or social sciences, it began to be more widely known among the general public,” Roth said. “It is still a young discipline and there are several passionate, and seemingly incompatible, perspectives about it.”

In the U.S., the profession relies more heavily on scientific research and evidence based practice to inform the delivery of therapeutic music interventions for clinical purposes. In contrast, Roth noted that others in the U.S. and most European countries practice music therapy from a very non-medical scientific frame of reference.

“Many countries reject the scientific approach to understanding how music can be used as therapy,” he said. “Sometimes when I present internationally, the scientists and physicians in an audience seem to respond favorably to the information and the approach to obtaining it, which is in direct contrast to the response of some of the music therapists. Some Europeans have mentioned to me that, ‘it is so ‘American’ of you to attempt to reduce art and human expression to its elemental features.’ Those perspectives forced me to remain open to multiple hypotheses, theories, and methods of practice. As a researcher, the more research you do in a certain area, the more narrow and focused it becomes. It is so invigorating and motivating to have international colleagues whose work motivates me and causes me to remain open to alternative hypotheses.”

Recently, Roth chaired an institute in San Diego titled, *Clinical Neuromusicology: The Neuroscience of Music from Perception to Clinical Practice*, at the American Music Therapy Association’s annual national conference. He also chaired a symposium at WMU titled, *Music, Mind, and Medicine: Creativity and Consciousness in Clinical Care*. The institute and symposium both featured some of the world’s most prominent neuroscientists and music therapists and drew large audiences from a broad field of disciplines.

[wmich.edu/music/directory/roth](http://wmich.edu/music/directory/roth)

Professor Roth (front left) with final-year music therapy students at the University of Queensland in Australia, where he taught in 2005.
The exhibit’s collaborative piece is titled “DNA,” which was first exhibited at the XI Bienal de la Habana in 2012 and the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. It features four screens mounted inside a small room within the gallery. On each screen, a rotation of actors recited in Spanish one rule about chewing gum from a list of 200 real and fictitious rules, such as, “Never throw away a piece of gum from a moving airplane.” Visitors had the opportunity to interact with the exhibit by taking a piece of gum from a candy jar, chewing it up a bit, and then placing it on one of the screens to “stick it to the man,” as the artists say, eventually forming a mask of gum that obscures the actors rattling off the rules. Artist Pascal Meccariello said the piece represents social norms all over the world. “There are many rules in our cultures that don’t make sense, but many are mandatory,” he said.

Each artist had two individual pieces on display in addition to the collaborative piece, which also provided a visual interpretation of other aspects of societal life. For example, Belkis Ramirez’s, “Rebuilding Us” is a colorful archway made from building blocks with faces, numbers, and letters on them, which was mounted in the middle of the gallery. She said the piece represents the damage humans have done to Earth and serves as a reminder that we need to re-learn how to better take care of our planet for current and future generations.

Perspectives about contemporary art being made in the Dominican Republic were broadened at Western Michigan University through the exhibit, “Quintapata: Round Trip,” that was up September 10 through November 6, 2015 in the Albertine Monroe-Brown Gallery of the James W. and Lois I. Richmond Center for the Visual Arts.

Quintapata is a group of four internationally recognized artists from the D.R.—Pascal Meccariello, Raquel Paiewonsky, Jorge Pineda, and Belkis Ramirez. They formed a collaborative in 2008 with the desire to create art of social activism that opens dialogues within and between local and international communities.

Don Desmett, director of exhibitions in WMU’s Richmond Center for the Arts, connected with Quintapata’s artists on a discovery trip he and colleagues from the College of Fine Arts made to the D.R. in 2012. A former curator at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Desmett came to WMU in 2006 and was on board when the Richmond Center opened in 2007. The center’s mission is to feature contemporary art exhibitions, including those by artists from other countries.

“We want to work with artists who can bring a global perspective to the exhibition,” said Desmett, a curator since 1985. “For many people, there is a bias when thinking about arts from a Caribbean island—that it is naïve, exotic and limited to local stages. Quintapata is plugged into the contemporary art movement in an important way, and we wanted to reinforce the idea that contemporary art from the Caribbean is just as important and inventive as any other place.”
Meccariello’s “Best Kept Secrets,” is a series of wash basins on pedestals. Plastic figure/figures—a married couple, a politician, a priest, and others—stand on an acrylic covering over each basin in which there are hands illuminated by green light. He said the figures represent people trying to live up to their expected roles in the Catholic Church, all of whom have something to hide.

The artists have shared many experiences, initially through exhibition projects that involved community discussions, workshops, and conferences with international guests. In recent years, the artists have taken on collective projects that have been presented in international biennales in Havana, Cuba; Venice, Italy; and, Fin del Mundo, Argentina. “Quintapata has shown me how far we can go on a collaborative piece of art when there are many hands pushing in the same direction,” Ramirez said.

Jorge Pineda agrees with Ramirez and said the collaborative has helped each member mature as an artist and as a human being.

“First of all, we learn a lot from each other through the creative process,” Pineda said. “Secondly, sharing passion for art helps us see the best of the human condition, which makes us more humble and happy. From the first moment we got in contact with Don and WMU’s crew we knew we were in touch with professionals who work for a community they care about, and who do their work with a lot of kindness and enthusiasm. That feeling was so contagious. Participating in this exhibit will be in our memories for a long time.”

Like all of the artists in the collaborative, Meccariello’s work is multidisciplinary, including installation, drawing, ceramic, video art, photography and performance. “To give birth to an idea is an awesome experience; to conceive an idea between several people is extraordinary,” Meccariello said. “Then comes sharing with the public and talking about our work. Every time we speak as a collective our ideas are multiplied infinitely. That makes us happy.”

Desmett said the exhibit attracted hundreds of people, and a large group for a lecture and panel discussion the artists presented at WMU on September 10. He had read about their collaborative piece in the 2013 Venice Biennale before he traveled to the D.R., so he planned to meet Quintapata’s artists to explore the possibility of hosting an exhibit at WMU.

“There is a kind of enthusiasm that you can see in the production of their work,” Desmett said. “There is definitely this idea of community, wherever that is—Santo Domingo, Kalamazoo, or Venice—the art they chose reinforces that. There is this idea that because these artists live on an island that they are withdrawn from the rest of the world—that is completely false.”

For more information about Quintapata or the Richmond Center, contact Desmett at (269) 387-2455, or donald.desmett@wmich.edu
By Linda Hanes

Living and working in two countries provided a cultural contrast that has greatly inspired and influenced the art and design of Yuanliang (Leon) Sun, an associate professor of art at Western Michigan University.

Sun joined WMU’s Frostic School of Art in fall 2009. Originally from Tianjin, China, his work is deeply rooted in his personal living experience and observations in both Western and Eastern cultures. His main research areas are the hand-crafted experimentation in design methodologies, the exploration of dimensional and spatial design elements, and the use of digital technology as a creative tool and medium for visual communication.

After being trained in Western art and design and working as an interior designer in China for eight years, Sun discovered the beauty of West Michigan when he visited his wife in 2000, who was in the United States pursuing a master’s degree at Grand Valley State University. “I fell in love with Michigan’s autumn season and was so inspired by the fall color, I knew I had to stay and create art,” Sun said. The couple decided to make the United States their permanent home and Sun now says they are true “Michiganders.”

Blending his eastern background with the more recently acquired western influence, Sun creates his work by juxtaposing the two cultures through fluid abstract design. “The major portion of my work has been three-dimensional posters and artist’s books that promote appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures, ideas and ways of thinking,” he said. “In my creative process, the meaning of material, the hands-on experiments, and the exploration of dimensional and spatial design elements are always a major source of inspiration for me. The use of three dimensional elements and the handcrafted design approach in my work not only leads me to achieve my design intention through discovery and making, but also allows the viewer to become immersed in an interactive experience that implies the importance of cross-cultural awareness.”

His most recent project, *Wind and Moon*, explores meaning with Augmented Reality technology, a live view of a real world environment in which physical elements are augmented through computer-generated input. In this way, Sun has married two disparate forms of culture, East and West, as well as technology and art. “Conceptually, the project transforms the metaphorical nature of classical Chinese poetry into an immersive visual experience for the viewers,” said Sun, who also serves at WMU as the coordinator of the Graphic Design Area. “This unique creative approach and the use of modern technology have led to my work being included in the 12th Annual International Digital Media and Arts Association exhibition, discussed at the 2014 Hawaii University International Conferences on Education and STEM, and presented at Beijing Institute of Technology’s School of Art and Design in May 2015.”

Sun has been making art for as long as he can remember. When he was young, his grandmother taught him how to make traditional paper cuttings for the holidays, a method he still incorporates in his art today. Sun grew up in an analytical family made up of doctors but still found support from his parents to follow his creative dreams. He said he was, “always doodling,” and he began formal art training at the age of seven. “To me, art/design is not just for entertaining audiences, it is not even just for developing individual’s creativity and expressing their feelings,” he said. “Art and design can positively shape our culture, facilitate dialogue between groups of people, and stimulate innovations that can effectively solve our social, economic, and environmental challenges. Art education fosters critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and innovation; it is necessary for everyone, not just for art students.”

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Cross-cultural graphic designer and artist
New urban developments in the growing city of Chongqing, China have captured the imagination of Artist Patrick D. Wilson, a Western Michigan University assistant professor of sculpture and integrated media, whose art work is often influenced by architectural imagery.

Wilson combines his architectural interests with various sculpting materials and photography to portray current events in his work. Through a Fulbright fellowship grant he received in 2012, he traveled to China to seek inspiration from the construction of buildings in a densely populated city. Wilson was particularly interested in China due to the rapid rate of urban expansion the country is experiencing. He also wanted to work in a city in which a dense population lives in high-rise buildings. Wilson first became interested in China in 2008 when he went to Beijing to do work related to the Olympics.

“I was working in the interactive media industry and my company sent me to do some artwork for the Olympics,” Wilson said. “I was intrigued by the rapid construction of new buildings and centralized art centers. There was one place called ‘798’ that is an art center in the middle of an old Bauhaus-style factory that is really amazing.”

These types of centralized art centers were very appealing to Wilson. He said many of the buildings in Chongqing are from an era of architectural planning influenced by a very particular mix of capitalist and socialist influence, which makes it so different from most major cities in the world.

Wilson arrived in China with 15 years of sculpting and 10 years of photography. He remembers connecting quickly with sculpting materials during his undergraduate days at Gustavus Adolphus College, especially with metalworking. Sculpting offered a good enhancement of Wilson’s interest in architecture that stemmed back to his youth: “Personality tests said I was supposed to be an architect, but I like the personal freedom of sculpting.”

Before Wilson could embark on the Fulbright project, he spent four months in Beijing taking language-intensive courses, where he claims he studied Chinese 24/7. With improved language skills, he was ready to travel to Chongqing, located in the Sichuan Province of southwestern China, which would serve as a “home base.” The city has a population close to 32 million, including the farms that surround the municipality.
“I applied for a Fulbright to be in Chongqing because it is so large, growing quickly, and it is sheltered from the outside world,” Wilson said. “Because the city has experienced less direct exposure to the west, as compared with other cities of its size in China, it showed me how ‘real China’ operates. Being there also gave me an opportunity to see an area that hadn’t experienced the level of foreign influence that cities like Shanghai and Beijing have experienced.”

When he arrived in Chongqing, he immediately realized that everything from the construction of buildings to the way people interact was very different from what is common in the U.S. People need permission in order to do almost anything. For example, Wilson explains, the art schools he visited are run by one secretary and one chair affiliated with the central government. Students need to be connected with the secretary and chair to get things done at the school.

Wilson lived in two places while in Chongqing, the first of which was the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. The campus is 30 km from the city center and is surrounded by farmland and undeveloped mountainous areas. Wilson found the campus a beautiful, rather idyllic mix of nature, antique stonework, working farmers raising livestock, wooden walkways, and streams. Adjacent to campus was a huge commercial development offering low quality goods and cheap restaurants called, Sunny Village. “It was a stark contrast to home, to say the least,” Wilson said.

Three days a week, Wilson lived at a furniture factory in the Ba’Nan District of Chongqing. There, he made connections with the owner of the factory, Chen Li, and became friends with various professors from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. Li granted Wilson access to whatever wood he could find in the factory for his sculptures and other artwork. Wilson was also able to travel around the area with Li, who became a close friend; they are still in regular contact.

“I must reiterate the importance of relationships in China—you can’t take a step there without having good friends and by reaching out to people,” said Wilson, who also connected with many of Sichuan’s students and teachers who wished to work with western artists. “It was a very valuable educational experience. Chongqing was an amazing place, but the environment was challenging because the air is very polluted, it’s rugged with the construction going on all over, and it is so densely populated.” His research work on Chongqing was later displayed as part of a solo exhibition in the Sculpture Department at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute.

Before leaving China, Wilson visited Kashgar, a city located in the far west region of the country. “It was an extraor-
ordinary city, not very big, and close to the [Taklamakan] desert,” Wilson said. “Kashgar is in the far west of China and very close to the Kyrgyzstan border—a naturally confrontational/difficult place to live.” In Kashgar, Wilson was inspired to produce sculptures and photos that showed the construction site of a nomadic event or object.

“We tend to look at construction in the U.S. in a deterministic way and that there are phases in a building's development,” Wilson said. “In China, the construction feels like a mobile city that’s left these buildings behind because there are people constantly working on them.”

Wilson was also able to briefly travel to the Qinghai Province in Xining, where a major part of the city was being destroyed, as some areas were being remodeled. The city is a huge urban development project,” Wilson said. “The scale is massive and there were dozens of apartment buildings that were empty. It was a really weird scene.” Xining was experiencing what Wilson termed, “over development,” because China has made a huge effort in recent years to encourage rural citizens to move into the city.

Wilson’s time in Chongqing and Kashgar inspired him to continue his artistic research with China as his muse. He applied for and received an artist residency in Shanghai for summer 2015, which allowed him to work in a private studio while living in the city for three months. He was interested in photographing distinctive Chinese architecture and developing new sculptures to expand on his research topics.

“Shanghai looks more like New York since it has more money and was modernized earlier than Chongqing,” Wilson said. “Shanghai has more western style bars and clubs that are, like the local Bell’s Brewery in Kalamazoo, but the culture of friends and families in Chongqing is more focused on socializing over dinner, specifically hot pot.”

In Shanghai, Wilson explored nomadic structures to learn about Tibetan nomads and their hand-woven yak wool tents, which also served as artistic inspiration. “Most of the Tibetan herders in the Qinghai Province I talked to are semi-nomadic and live in two places—they live in tents in the summer months and in stone houses in colder months,” he said.

The art scene is also rapidly expanding in China. Many cities are building major museums; some of which Wilson said are the most beautiful art museums he’s ever seen. “Their contemporary art is expanding and it’s incredible, world-class art,” Wilson said. “We should expect a pretty large and continued influx of art from China.”

Wilson plans to return to China in summer 2016 to visit Yushu City, in Qinghai Province to conduct research during the city’s annual horse festival.

patrickdwilson.com
Summer program explores book arts in Italy

By Christine Lena

When visiting Italy, most people look at the country through a tourist lens, but students enrolled in Western Michigan University’s study abroad program, Book Arts in Venice, get to take a look at Italy through the history of typography, printing, and bookmaking.

“Books are the foundation of every discipline and they aren’t just about literature or art—books cover interests for everyone” said Jeff Abshear, the founding director of the program and an adjunct professor in WMU’s Frostic School of Art and Lee Honors College. “Some students are more concerned with the writing, others are more interested in setting the type or printing the pages, but book art doesn’t require years of practice; a beginner can do it.”

Hence, Abshear has encouraged students of any discipline to enroll in the program. He said bookmaking is the focal point because it provides students a thematic “home base” in the cities they will encounter and explore in the program: Venice, Verona, Florence, and Cornuda.

“In each city, the students have a nice place to stay, get the chance to observe and participate in the work going on in the various studios we visit, get to meet local people, and explore the city,” Abshear said. “Even if they don’t intend to continue studying bookmaking or art, the students make better connections with local people and are immersed in the culture.”

The students explore various cities in Italy, but the program is centered in Venice. After Gutenberg invented the printing press in Germany in the 15th century, Venice became the biggest center for European book publishing. “Venice was an early republic and had more freedom in what they could print,” Abshear said. “It was a wealthy center of trade and had materials and resources for printing and distributing books. These printers were also near two of the oldest universities in the world—in Padua and Bologna—so they had a ready clientele of students and scholars.”

Abshear, who is fluent in Italian, has been traveling to Italy for many years—well before he launched the book arts program—first as a foreign exchange student in college, then as a Fulbright Research Scholar in 2007 to study the history of Venetian printing. For the past decade he has taught book arts workshops to children and teachers on the island of Sardinia, and has also worked as a translator for art exhibit catalogs. “Italy is like my second home; it doesn’t feel like a foreign country to me anymore,” he said. “I’ve made many friends and colleagues, traveled all over the country, and learned a lot about the culture. I always look forward to spending time there.”

While conducting research there as a Fulbright scholar, Abshear made connections with the Scuola Internazionale di Grafica in Venice, the Florence School of...
was the last one we were going to be able to visit,” Wittington said. “If I had any complaints at all, it would be that we spent too little time in Cornuda. I would honestly take an entire trip just to be back in that city.”

The three-week program begins in Venice, where class meetings are held at the Scuola Internazionale di Grafica, a printmaking and graphic design school. Students visit many nearby historic sites, including St. Mark’s Square, the Rialto Bridge, and the library of the Cini Foundation to see ancient printed books. They also take a day trip to the city of Padua to see the podium of Galileo at the University of Padua and the Arena Chapel of Giotto.

“My favorite city was probably Florence,” said Andrea Hoffman, a graphic design major who graduated from WMU in spring 2015. “The Florence School of Fine Arts was a really fun work environment and I think we were able to immerse ourselves in the culture of the city the most while still being able to use our English.”

The group then moves on to Verona for a weekend to visit the Conte Museum, a small historic printing studio, and to see the Piazza delle Erbe and the Roman Arena. In week two, the students move to Florence to work at the Florence School of Fine Arts, where they make posters using large wooden type. Visits to the Uffizi Museum and the Academy to see Michelangelo’s David are also part of the itinerary. The last several days of the program are spent in Cornuda, which is located in a remote area at the foothills of the Dolomite Mountains. Classes in Cornuda are held at Tipoteca, one of the largest typography workshops in the world.

Nate Wittington, a fifth-year senior majoring in graphic design, found Cornuda to be his favorite city because it was quiet and had a beautiful landscape. “The people in my small group bonded even more closely in this city knowing it was the last one we were going to be able to visit,” Wittington said. “If I had any complaints at all, it would be that we spent too little time in Cornuda. I would honestly take an entire trip just to be back in that city.”

Before the students leave for Italy, they all hand-stitch a book at the Kalamazoo Book Arts Center, which was founded by Abshear; he also serves as the center’s executive director. The handmade books are used as journals on the trip. When the students arrive at Tipoteca, they choose passages from their journal to set in type and print the pages of a handmade book on a 19th century Albion Press. Additionally, the students come away with a copy of the collaborative book. “This was by far the best experience for me as a graphic designer, as it allowed us to use old typesetting machines and printing setups to create from scratch an entire book,” Wittington said. “The book consisted of poems or passages we wrote about our last days in Italy and what we learned there.”

Abshear said many students on the program will experience their first time traveling and living outside of
the United States, so he designed the program to help students learn to adapt to new methods and situations and to broaden their awareness of another country and culture. “Traveling with a group helps because students get a taste of travel and overcome their fears of going abroad to a very different culture,” Abshear said.

Hoffman found she gained a lot from her trip, but admits she experienced a bit of culture shock when she first arrived in Italy. She was pleasantly surprised to learn the locals would go out of their way to make the students feel comfortable and she said she quickly overcame her fears. “The pace of life in Italy seemed a lot healthier,” Hoffman said. “People seemed to be in less of a hurry and more at peace. It was also strange adjusting to so many small things that are different, like paying for public restrooms or no to-go coffees. I always learn something new when I work on a new project, especially with people I haven’t worked with before, so I gained a lot from this trip.”

Whittington found that being in a country he hadn’t visited before forced him and the other students to quickly learn basic Italian phrases and to fit in. “We were trying to work out the customs of the locals to try to look as un-American as possible in those first few days,” Whittington said. In the first program workshop, he was immediately faced with an interesting challenge; Whittington was surprised to learn that the letters on the printing press weren’t sorted A-Z or QWERTY (as on a keyboard). “Also, Italians very rarely use ‘k’, ‘y’, ‘x’, ‘j’, or ‘w’, which made the entire flow of working come to a grinding halt in the beginning,” he said.

Abshear says that the program gets richer every year as more workshops, museums, studios and other cultural experiences are added. “For the first time in 2015, I was able to take students on a tour of the Capitolare Library in Verona, the oldest library in the world, founded in 517,” he said.

In summer 2015, Abshear also had the opportunity to visit Northern Europe to conduct research for a new study abroad program called Book Arts in Europe, which will be offered in June 2016, following the Book Arts in Venice program. The new program will begin in Venice and then participants will travel by train through the Alps to work at the Basler Papiermühler, an historic paper mill, and Druckwerk, a printing studio in Basel, Switzerland. The group will then travel to Germany to work at the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz and the Klingspoor Museum. The final week will be spent in the historic Belgium city of Ghent, where students will work with a master printer at the Museum of Industry and Textiles to print a commemorative poster. The dates for the two 2016 programs are: Book Arts in Venice, May 19 – June 10, and Book Arts in Europe, June 14 – July 6.

www.wmich.edu/studyabroad
wmich.edu/art/people/directory/abshear.html
kalbookarts.org
When Vikram Hemanathan came to Western Michigan University in 2016, he initially planned for an engineer’s life of logic and analytics, but a lifelong love of the theater became his greater calling.

He is now the owner of a performance arts theater in India that is changing culture through art. “I pursued a science stream of education in high school and was keen on further exploring the subject,” Hemanathan said. “I came from a family invested in engineering lines of businesses and I saw it wise to become an engineer so I would be able to contribute to the business down the line. Considering the Indian culture, it seemed to be socially more acceptable to pursue a degree in the sciences to ensure I would have better job opportunities.”

Hemanathan’s interest in theater began as a child participating in school and youth theater groups, eventually achieving the stature to work in local amateur and professional companies. When he was just 18 years old, he launched his own theater company—Boulevard View.

“When I started Boulevard View I knew absolutely nothing about running a business, had no business plan whatsoever, and had less than a hundred dollars in hand to get this obsession of mine off the ground,” he said. “What I did have—maybe at times in excess—was tons of enthusiasm, a will to succeed, good friends, great parents, a local library with play scripts and a blurred vision as to what we could do with this little project of ours.”

Even though he had become a business-owner, Hemanathan wanted to continue his studies beyond high school, but he found it nearly impossible to study theater and engineering at the same time in India. He decided to look abroad to satisfy his passion to learn more about theater while also earning an engineering degree.

“At the risk of sounding dramatic, WMU chose me as much as I chose WMU,” he said. “Unfortunately, the Indian education system didn’t provide me with the opportunity to pursue two degrees in completely different fields of study simultaneously. I was forced to look for options outside of India to find that balance. While looking at possible options in America, I came across the engineering twinning program offered by WMU through their partner university in Chennai, India—Hindustan College of Engineering. The cherry on the cake was that the program I opted for—WMU’s engineering management technology program—was ranked No. 1 in the United States. It offered the flexibility I was looking for, was affordable, and it provided me with the perfect platform to earn a degree at WMU.”

Unfortunately, coming to the U.S. meant that Hemanathan had to give up his theater company; visa rules would not allow him to work in India while studying abroad.
had a vibrant theatre, cultural and performing arts space, this renewed energy in India opened up new possibilities.”

As Boulevard View began to gain momentum and become more successful, Hemanathan launched Barking Dog Productions. Today, Barking Dog has taken on a life of its own, becoming one of the largest English theater production companies, and setting itself apart by putting on shows that don’t shy away from socially sensitive topics.

Most recently, Barking Dog put on a production of the “Vagina Monologues,” shining a light on sensitive aspects of the female experience, a particularly controversial topic in India. “Like in any other country, theatre and art play a pivot role in shaping positive change and are the reflection of the mood of its society at large,” he said. “Issues about women’s safety, rape, and the LGBT community would have once been conversations that would have been taboo to discuss in public are now discussed through mediums of art coming to the conversation table. This has led to some visible change in attitudes and priorities. Through our own performance of plays like the “Vagina Monologues” we’ve seen conversations start on issues that would have otherwise been considered taboo to discuss in a closeted society like ours.”

Looking forward to the future, Hemanathan hopes to continue growing his company and changing public perceptions through art.

When he arrived at WMU, he hit the ground running, immediately becoming involved with the International Programs Council, French Hall Residents Association, and the Western Student Association. He fondly remembers experiencing his first snow, fall football games, and holiday events on campus, like the International Student Thanksgiving Celebration. With a background in theater and an outgoing personality, Hemanathan said it was easy to make friends at WMU. “If I had to describe my entire four-year experience in two words, I would say ‘life-altering,’” he said. “It was those friends that made me feel less homesick, those organizations that instilled leadership qualities and those professors who taught me responsibility and accountability. Coming to WMU was one of the better decisions I’d made in my life and for that I’m eternally grateful for the support and endless guidance of my parents, and Ms. Cathleen Fuller, former director of WMU’s transnational education programs.”

Hemanathan finished a bachelor’s degree in engineering in summer 2009 and returned to India; he had to forego picking up a second major in theater to complete his engineering degree on time. After traveling for a short while, he contemplated going into the family engineering business, but, instead chose to follow his passion for theater. “I realized that my heart was deeply entrenched with wanting to go back to the arts, and more so, to pick up the company I’d started before I’d left to study in the states,” he said. “There was a metamorphosis taking place around that time in India, and it seemed to offer a perfect ecosystem to invest in the arts.”

He set out to revive Boulevard View and discovered others were eager to help. “I came back to an India that was emerging to be a global player—at every corner there were new opportunities to be explored,” he said. “It was in this moment that I realized I would be doing justice to myself and to those who believed in Boulevard View to pursue our passion for the arts. Though India has always
Orphanages in Panama are overflowing with kids wishing they had homes and a loving family, and often there’s an unmet need for a creative outlet for these at-risk children. One WMU student spent her summer to help rectify that situation through teaching orphaned children about expression through movement.

Sarah Mills, a senior planning to graduate in the spring of 2016 with a major in dance and a minor in nonprofit leadership, recently returned from a volunteer trip abroad teaching dance at various orphanages across Panama. The trip originally started as an idea for a class project in which she was required to write a grant proposal for a project. She wrote a grant proposal based on the work of the nonprofit, Movement Exchange. The organization’s mission is to use dance as a vehicle for social change—locally and internationally—while fostering civic engagement, cross-cultural understanding, and creative expression.

Mill’s teacher in the dance management class, Megan Slayter, encouraged Mills to submit the grant proposal to the Kalamazoo Artistic Development Initiative—KADI—of the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo. Much to her surprise, Mills’ proposal was approved and she received full funding to teach dance abroad in Panama. She already had experienced teaching dance in her hometown of Warsaw, Ind., but Mills was eager to gain experience teaching on an international level.

Sarah arrived at WMU in the fall of 2012 with big dreams of seeing the world and making a difference. “Over the last few years, I’ve had an increasing urge to travel abroad to experience dance in another country, whether teaching a class or taking one,” Mills said. “Because dance is a universal language, I feel there is an automatic connection to each and every culture through movement.

Mills was not proficient in Spanish when she arrived in Panama, but despite the language barrier, she was able to engage with the students immediately. “I could communicate very effectively through movement and dance alone, but there were still times I wish I was able to speak Spanish so I could have explained movements or ideas better, or even so I could have been able to more fully understand what the kids and teens were saying to me,” explained Mills. “The most rewarding thing was just seeing their smiles, their joy, and their enjoyment as they danced. I loved seeing them improve day-to-day; even from the beginning of a day to the end. More than that, I loved watching how proud they would become after accomplishing a difficult movement sequence.”

After returning to the United States, Mills began her own chapter of Movement Exchange on Western’s campus to continue her outreach through dance to Kalamazoo area residents and students. She says anyone interested in dance or nonprofit work is welcome to join, even if they are not a student of dance. Contact Mills at:

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We welcome your inquiries!

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