



Looking Back to Look Forward to Another 55 Years

This year marks VIA's 55th anniversary of providing life-changing experiences that have transformed lives because of our immersive, cross-cultural learning opportunities in the US and Asia. This summer, over 50 alumni and supporters gathered in Tokyo to mark this momentous occasion. Additionally, more than 100 program participants, alumni, and community partners came together in Indonesia where we also celebrate 50 years of civic engagement there. In the Bay Area, we had a great time with Gamelan entertainment and Indonesian food on October 27th with more than 120 alumni and friends in attendance.

Since its founding at Stanford University in 1963, VIA has initiated a journey for young people who are poised to lead their generation and explore new approaches to address social issues while developing friendships that transcend cultural differences. To date, VIA has connected more than 10,000 people between Asia and the US through programs promoting cross-cultural education, youth leadership, and community development.

The VIA program structure continues to build upon its foundation from the very



Via alumni and supporters in Tokyo

beginning. The year-long Global Community Fellowship (formerly known as the Volunteer program) extends to eleven posts around Asia. According to the sentiments of a recent Fellow who served in Indonesia, "learning, growing, enriching your character in the process of touching the lives of others: this is the core of what my VIA experience is offering me." Furthermore, we continue to see growth in the intensive experiential programs we offer in Asia for American university students and also in Silicon Valley for students and professionals from Asia. According to a recent Design-Thinking program alumnus, VIA taught him how to see the world differently and to understand how he could contribute to it.

In this increasingly interconnected world, building mutual understanding

and cross-cultural empathy remains as critical as ever. We need organizations like VIA to provide a launch pad for its participants to discover their potential and their passion for sustaining a lifetime of positive impact as global changemakers. As our Founder, Dwight Clark shared at the anniversary event, "VIA develops future leaders who possess a deep appreciation for other cultures and the skills to bridge divides."

As we look forward, we strive to remain as life-changing tomorrow as it has been for the past 55 years because of the immersive, cross-cultural learning experiences we provide in the US and Asia that transcend

boundaries, transform lives, and strengthen the communities we serve.



Medical Exchange & Discovery 2018

Over 40 students from 23 medical schools across Japan, mainland China, and Taiwan joined the three-week Medical Exchange & Discovery program this past summer. For some participants, this program was their first time to delve into topics such as LGBTQ issues, organ transplantation, and mental health, which are rarely explored in their medical schools. By creating multiple opportunities and spaces for talking about these topics, the program enabled participants to recognize the value of discussions and exchanging different perspectives. One of the participants noted, for example, that while she used to think that talking about sensitive problems is too difficult, she now thinks that this is possible if we create an open and inviting environment.



In addition, through lectures and panel discussions from a variety of health care professionals and visits to Bay Area organizations, participants learned about and witnessed the power of doctors actively listening to their patients and showing empathy. As one participant put it, “I used

to think that giving a correct diagnosis is most important but now I think communication is most important because doctors have to listen to the patients.”

While the topics explored during the program generated heavy discussions

about themes including death, stigma, and health disparities, the participants left the program with strong friendships; a greater motivation to become a doctor; and a desire to embrace an active, brave, curious, and open-minded mentality in all areas of their lives.

VIA returns to Rikuzen Takata



Now in its fifth year, the Rikuzen Takata Project this year brought students and staff from Rikkyo University, Hong Kong University, and various American universities to embark on a 4-day trip to the rural city of Rikuzen Takata (Iwate Prefecture in northern Japan) together. There, we worked with a local nonprofit organization Marugoto Rikuzen Takata to learn about how the city was recovering from the devastating earthquake and tsunami in March 2011. Through homestays, urban development tours, visits to local businesses, and community member presentations, our

group of about 30 students listened to the stories and views of Rikuzen Takata residents. We thought about urban resilience and recovery in the face of natural disasters. And all the while, we had so much fun and connected with each other despite the language and cultural barriers.

The goal of our immersive experience was to present observations and ideas of promoting Japanese and foreign tourism in Rikuzen Takata. By the end of the week, our delegation produced promotional videos, reviews of the various homestay programs, program

improvement proposals, news articles about our experience there, and photo essays. Our team also interviewed all members of the local community we met, took their photos, and published an album of the portraits with their respective quote excerpts. Local community members shared their concerns, hopes, fears, and life stories, and we documented them in an honest manner. A common theme lingers: that over the years, despite major physical and social obstacles, the spirit of Rikuzen Takata continues to thrive. It thrives in those who lived in the city before the tsunami and after, in all those involved in the slow but steady urban reconstruction, and in those who visit as tourists yet are lucky enough to be welcomed as family.

Looking back on this summer, I am grateful to have had these opportunities to learn and grow alongside students who are in a similar time in their lives as I, yet have such different backgrounds; I am thankful to have helped amplify some of the many voices in Rikuzen Takata. Thank you, VIA!

By Dana Zhao, ALC 2018 Coordinator & Rikuzen Takata Project Participant

Once VIA, Always VIA

While over 70 international students had the opportunity to study at Stanford this summer through VIA's American Language and Culture (ALC) program, I hope the participants know that the coordinators and staff have learned so much from them as well. They taught us their favorite foods, how to say "thank you" in their native tongues, their different perspectives on love, politics, and life. They reminded us to stay curious, be brave, and show respect, especially in times of discomfort or unfamiliarity.

During training week, we listened to stories about the role VIA played in its alumni finding their dream careers, forming lifelong relationships, from friendship to, yes, even marriage, and navigating leadership, service, and life in their home countries. Recently I was reminiscing on VIA's impact on my own life and how, only six months ago, the Design-thinking for Social Innovation (DSI) program sparked a personal journey I wouldn't trade for the world. I returned to VIA as a coordinator for ALC because participating in DSI helped me achieve professional goals, introduced me to new hobbies, and most importantly, welcomed me into a loving community of brilliant, talented, absolutely genuine people I am beyond grateful to know.

As coordinators, we choose an aspect of American culture that matters to us and plan activities to engage participants in that topic. Some program themes included access to higher education for minority students, art for social change, and media literacy. Coordinators took their students to a farm, tech companies, a food bank, and on many more adventures. The discussion panels, site visits, and everyday spontaneous outings incited curiosity in the participants, and their willingness to learn and think deeply about new information pleasantly surprised us coordinators. Even while treading unfamiliar territory, both mental and physical, the participants bravely and respectfully immersed themselves in exploration of new ideas and new places.

Once VIA, always VIA. For many of us, this organization has already opened doors to future opportunities. Sarah Goulart, a fellow coordinator, for example, has never traveled to another



country, but after ALC, she and I will be headed to Japan with VIA for a community revitalization project. We are lucky to have explored the worlds of design-thinking and international education through VIA, to have met people who will remain lifelong friends, to know that more happiness lies ahead because of this community. Every goodbye said here is a promise to remember that we are now part of something larger than ourselves, a global network of leaders, innovators, travelers, storytellers, and, of course, companions.

By Cristina Ammon, DSI 2018 Participant & ALC 2018 Coordinator

Global Community Fellow Continues Journey Through Vietnam

I heard of VIA by chance more than six years ago. I attended a gathering for progressive Vietnamese Americans in New York, and a VIA alumni mentioned that I should check out VIA because I was interested in spending some time in Vietnam. Later that year I applied to be a VIA fellow and I found myself at Trà Vinh University teaching English. My first year, I explored, learned, and made community with the people around me. It went so well, that after I decided to sign-up for a second year. When I finished my second year, I decided to stay even longer and try to open a community space in Vũng Tàu with some other VIA alumni.

When I first signed up for the fellowship, I assumed it would just be an interesting experience, but it's safe to say that it changed my life. It gave me an opportunity to figure out what Vietnam meant to me while also



providing a wonderful community and support. It opened up an alternative way of thinking not only about Vietnam, but my future. I was surrounded by thoughtful and critical people trying to understand how they could do work locally in Asia in a responsible way. Meeting up with other fellows and hearing about the work they were engaged with made me want to figure out a way that I too could do meaningful work in a sustainable way. Five years later, I still find myself in Vietnam, working locally with my own organization and now also as

the coordinator of VIA's Global Community Fellowship program.

I have worked with two fellowship cohorts so far and it's been incredible to be a part of their fellowship experience. I get to see how these new cultural contexts both challenge them and allow them space to grow. I see how they work with local partners and how they impact their community. And I get to see how this fellowship opens them up to new possibilities.

By Peter Thinh Nguyen

Exploring Innovation Within the System

This summer, I served as a coordinator for VIA's Exploring Social Innovation (ESI) program in the Bay Area. What I love about ESI is how it gathers people with diverse backgrounds and hosts a space for people coming with questions to explore and grow together. In ESI, we have design thinking workshops, visit social enterprises with transformative impact such as Delancey Street Foundation and BAYCAT, as well as reflect and design our own lives together. ESI is where we spread love and creativity; sparking new insights and inspirations are shared by everyone within the cohort.

The July program was special because we hosted an additional three-day program for a group of NGO young professionals addressing rural education issues in mainland China. By inviting these stakeholders working in the same field to share challenges together, we were able to see the big picture, prototype solutions for their common challenges such as impact measurement, funding, program management, and seek for systemic

change. What I was proud of most was when the two participants, Jin Yang from 21st Century Education Research Institute and Bei Huang from Lingqing Philanthropy Development Center, took the leadership role and hosted the stakeholder conversation through our 'Train The Trainer' prototype. We saw imagination flow and superhero ideas served as great inspirations to improve their practical plans.

Beyond all those exciting practices we did together, the most touching moment was when the group surprised the staff team with a live ukulele performance of a song they wrote themselves. Three months passed and I still feel the smile on my face when I think of this moment, and I hear the music play in my mind vividly as I am still with these sweet people here and now. It was beautiful to have this mutual giving and love within a cohort who have known each other only for two weeks. Magic.

by Wenyu Xi, ESI 2018 Coordinator



Bridging VIA's Networks

As part of a new initiative to build a sustainable, engaged, and interconnected alumni community, VIA launched its first-ever Alumni Summit in June in Chiang Mai, Thailand,



followed quickly by a second summit in September in Tokyo, Japan. Attendees from the US, mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Tajikistan represented a wide cross-section of VIA experiences, spanning nearly a decade of programs in both the US and Asia.

Each three-day event focused on community-building, networking, brainstorming, and planning for future activities. Attendees actively participated in co-creating the summits with VIA staff, assisting with documentation and leading energizers and reflection activities.

Alumni also had the chance to learn more about innovation and social impact in the local communities they visited during the summits. In Chiang Mai, attendees visited the Thai Freedom House and Freebird Café, a social enterprise supporting access to education for migrant children and job training. In Tokyo, the summit included a panel discussion. Speakers included VIA alumnus Kazuharu Omata, whose VIA experience led him to focus on projects addressing

disability issues and elderly care in Japan, and Kiki Yoshida, a social entrepreneur who launched Your School, which trains medical students to provide learning support to hospitalized children. Connecting with others creating positive impact inspired and encouraged alumni who hope to be changemakers in their own communities.

Reflecting on attending the Chiang Mai Summit, Muhammad Hasan A., alumnus and current intern at the VIA Indonesia office, said, "I feel like I entered a positive bubble, a place where everyone is putting aside their defensiveness and genuinely sharing and listening to one another. I wonder how could everyone carry the same character, but then I realized they are alumni of VIA's programs and that means they are all exposed by the positive value of this organization."

Many great ideas for new resources, activities, and tools for collaboration came out of the summit. We are excited to continue developing and introducing these new initiatives to the wider VIA alumni community in the coming year.



From the Executive Director

As I reflect on my VIA journey on our 55th anniversary year, one word that describes my feelings best is "arigato," a Japanese word that is commonly known for "expressing gratitude" but also has its roots in describing something being "rare and precious." I am extremely thankful and honored to not only be part of a community of extraordinary people, but also have the rare and precious opportunity to lead VIA as its executive director and carry on the legacy started by pioneer volunteers over five decades ago.

Our current program offerings, as you see in this issue of the VIAlogue, are different and more diverse from the time we started in the 1960s. However, what I believe has not changed since our founding is our commitment to serving people and communities by listening to their voices and constantly innovating our programs to meet their needs. As I look forward and envision our future, while we will continue to listen to the people we serve and innovate our programs, I see a great opportunity to lay a path for emerging leaders that will go beyond a one-time program experience and lead to lifelong engagement with VIA to create positive social change. The key to accomplish-

ing this will be to develop deeper partnerships with our alumni and institutions we work with. The Alumni Summits and the Rikuzen Takata Project introduced in this issue are excellent examples of taking a step in building such pathways.

Seeing the tremendous potential of bringing deeper social impact through our work, I feel great excitement in designing the future VIA roadmap together with our staff, board, alumni, and partners. If you have ideas of how VIA can work with you to build paths for future leaders, please feel free to reach out to me at kazutoh@viaprograms.org.

Sincerely,
Kazutoh Ishida PhD