

Globally aware citizens know their geography

Spelling and geography have been newsworthy topics of late, with the National Spelling Bee and the National Geographic Bee having taken place within a week of each other. Unfortunately, only one of these events merited a spot on national television.

When a 13-year-old girl from New Jersey was crowned winner of the National Spelling Bee on June 1 on ABC, I found myself reminded of a recent editorial in the Arizona Daily Star in which the editors suggested that "geography needs to go pop."

Indeed. As our world hurtles ever closer together, it's incumbent on Americans to know about and to understand a larger world. Although I'm a lover of books and language and am all for knowing how to spell, that skill is hardly more vital than knowledge of the planet on which we live. Today, issues ranging from business to the environment exist in a world without borders.

If more students saw geography as a trendy subject, it would be one step on the way to making them more globally aware citizens. Students who enjoy geography may even become adults who enjoy travel, for there is no better way to understand the world than to experience it personally. My wife, Lisa, and I have been incredibly lucky in that we've had some opportunities to travel and these experiences have taught us so much more than we could have ever imagined.

When we visited Mary's House in the hills above Selcuk, Turkey, for example, which is believed by many to be the home of the Virgin Mary during the final years of her life, we saw both Christians and Muslims making offerings at the site, and it reminded us of the common, but often forgotten, roots of Christianity and Islam.

When Masai tribespeople living in mud huts in southern Kenya asked us about the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and then a Buddhist monk in northern Thailand quizzed us about the foreign policy of George W. Bush, we recognized that the United States has an outsized role in the world and that the entire planet follows our country's every move.

And when a charming 20-year-old woman in Hoi An, Vietnam, told us she worked 14 hours a day, seven days a week, for a monthly salary of \$30, part of which she sent home to support her family, it helped us to appreciate even more the opportunities we've been afforded in this country.

Recently, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof suggested that universities should grant credit to undergraduates who take a year off to travel abroad. He proposed that students should ideally split that year between Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe so as to gain a more complete understanding of the world.

Think of the possibilities. A pop culture fascination with geography, combined with college students receiving credit for experiencing the world firsthand.

Perhaps someday we might all not just know geography, but also appreciate the wonders and responsibilities of living in a global community.

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