

TO: Theodore Pagano
FROM: Daniel J. Cohn
RE: Mountain Communities Ladakh 2023 Initiative Update
DATE: July 31, 2023

BACKGROUND

Thank you to the Center for Education Abroad (and to you, personally) for supporting the Health in Mountain Communities Ladakh 2023 Initiative. In under two weeks, I have already borne witness to the transformative power of authentic, community-engaged learning and research. I am proud, as an alumnus, that the University is investing in global research programs like this one that prepare students—our future leaders—to address emerging issues that impact us all.

This document contains photographs from our trip so far along with captions describing our experiences thus far. Understand that these images are just the beginning; there is plenty more to share, and we look forward to keeping you abreast on our progress.

Please consider sharing this with Dean Jeffrey Runner and Assistant Dean Tynelle Stewart. If there's any additional information I can provide, do not hesitate to reach out!

Respectfully,
Dan

—

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community-engaged learning and research is centered on authentic relationship-building. This takes time and practice.

University of Rochester Professor Nancy Chin, PhD, MPH, has maintained relationships throughout Ladakh for more than a decade, and UR students are learning the critical role that interpersonal relationships play in identifying and tackling emerging issues that will affect society. When students authentically engage with communities they aim to benefit with their academic work, they are better prepared to face uncertain challenges with curiosity, creativity, openness, and empathy.

These images show how quickly students were able to make connections with their Ladakhi counterparts.



UR students, faculty, and alumni meet with Ladakhi students and faculty from Eliezer Joldan Memorial (EJM) College, Leh over lunch to get to know one another. Ice breakers ranged from, “What’s your favorite color?” and “What animal best represents your personality?” to “What does *sustainable tourism* mean?” and “How has tourism impacted the Ladakhi people?”

After lunch, the group posed for a photo at nearby Thiksey Monastery. Pictured (L-R): UR student Smit Kothari ('25), EJM College students Sonam, Abidah, and Padma; Ladakhi resident and UR collaborator Puntsok Namgail, EJM Professor Disket Angmo, EJM student Tamphal, UR Professor Nancy Chin, Ladakhi native and UR alumna, Kauser Haider ('19), UR students Grace Snyder ('25), Priya Mandava ('24), and Julia Kirsch ('24).



The youngsters snuck away for a photo of their own. Picture (L-R): Ladakhi resident and UR collaborator Puntsok; EJM College students Padma, Sonam, and Abidah; UR student Grace Snyder ('25), EJM student Tamphal; and UR students Priya Mandava ('24), Julia Kirsch ('24), and Smit Kothari ('25).



(Left) The University of Rochester and EJM College teams visited Thiksey Monastery together to learn about local Buddhist culture and to observe local tourist practices. While there, the teams interviewed a Geshe at the monastery (an advanced scholar in Buddhist philosophy) to understand his perspectives on the impact of tourism on the local environment, economy, and cultural traditions.



(Right) University of Rochester and EJM College teams take a group photo at the Thiksey Monastery.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT + CAPACITY-BUILDING

Key to community-engaged learning and research is mutual benefit. University of Rochester students gain skills in qualitative methods; critical thinking; ethical reasoning; inquiry and analysis; problem solving; and intercultural competence. EJM students and colleagues learn alongside Rochester students and build the capacity to develop and execute research projects that support their own community well-being. These photographs illustrate pairs of UR and EJM College students practicing ethnographic interviewing after completing a seminar on research methods, ethics and consent, and interviewing techniques.



UR student Julia Kirsch ('24) practices ethnographic interviewing with EJM College student Abidah.



(Left) UR student and REMS participant Priya Mandava, ('24) practices ethnographic interviewing with EJM College student Sonam.



(Right) UR student Smit Kothari ('25) practices ethnographic interviewing with EJM College student Padma.



(Left) UR student Grace Snyder ('25) practices ethnographic interviewing with EJM College student Tamphal.

ENVIRONMENT IN LADAKH

The Ladakhi landscape is breathtaking, but it is threatened by global climate change. In 2010, Leh, Ladakh experienced a massive cloudburst, an extreme and sudden precipitation event that unleashed 14 inches of rain in just two hours. As UR Professor Nancy Chin and colleagues wrote in 2019: “The sound of the thunder shook the ground. Lightning cracked open the dark skies making it momentarily seem like daylight. Rain struck dry hills and sent torrents of water, mud, debris, and boulders careening down the mountains, sweeping away buildings, cars, livestock, trees, crops, and people.” Hundreds of people were killed and many more were injured and displaced.

More than a decade later, UR students, alumni, and faculty participating in the Health in Mountain Communities Ladakh 2023 Initiative bore witness to a mini-cloudburst. Luckily, there were no reports of death or injury, but the increased frequency of severe weather events resulting from global climate change have real and lasting effects for the Ladakhi people.



(Above, left) De-planing upon arrival in Leh, Ladakh | (Above, right) Landscape of Leh, Ladakh
(Below) Flooding throughout the main market in Leh the morning after a mini-cloudburst



TEAM BUILDING + MENTORSHIP

A powerful element of the Health in Mountain Communities Ladakh 2023 Initiative is the team-building among UR students and the connection between students and alumni.

For the past several years, Professor Nancy Chin (PhD '98) has coordinated community-engaged learning and research in the region with Ladakhi native and UR alumna, Kauser Haider ('19). New this year is the addition of an alumnus-mentor, Daniel Cohn ('12), who graduated with the first class of Public Health-related majors. Together, Kauser and Dan provide logistical support to Prof. Chin, technical assistance to Ladakhi faculty and students, and mentorship to UR undergraduates.

Mentorship offers an especially unique feature to a program in which students are pushed outside of their personal and academic 'comfort zones'. In just the first few days of the trip, for example, Dan and the students discussed topics ranging from personal fulfillment to giving and receiving critical feedback in professional settings. The mentorship bonds have begun to crystalize and will no doubt extend well beyond the team's time together in Ladakh.



Professor Nancy Chin meets with students for a meal upon arrival in New Delhi. Students pictured (L-R): Grace Snyder ('25), Priya Mandava ('24), Julia Kirsch ('24), and Smit Kothari ('25)



UR students took a daylong tour of New Delhi. Here, the team is pictured in front of the famous Lotus Temple, a Bahá'í House of Worship that was dedicated in 1986



Students and alumnus-mentor, Daniel Cohn ('12), meet for writing practice and reflection. UR students meet every day for writing practice, which centers on personal reflection and integrating academic learning and real-world problem solving.

Part of the UR research team is featured here at a newly built guest house located in Thiksey, Ladakh. Pictured (L-R): alumnus-mentor Daniel Cohn ('12), UR Professor Nancy Chin, UR students Grace Snyder ('25) and Priya Mandava ('24), and Ladakhi resident and UR collaborator Puntsok Namgail.

