

World's Youth Connect Through Global Nomads Group and Polycom

Four Americans in Paris Hatch a Plan That Makes the World a Much Smaller Place

David Macquart

I have seen evidence of what one series can do in the lives of teenagers who believe nothing can change them. I have seen, firsthand, the results of what such an experience can do. One of our students, Paul, announced in an interview with a local newspaper that "this was the most important thing I have ever done."



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It can change ideologies and foster open communication across cultures, languages and borders. Through youth-centered videoconferencing endeavors like Rwanda Alive, we can do away with negative cultural bias, dispel myths about The Other, and leave the world a much better place than we found it. (Robin Gibbs, Teacher, Galloway School)

Global Nomads Group (GNG) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1998 dedicated to heightening children's understanding and appreciation for the world and its people. Using videoconferencing technology provided by Polycom, Inc., we bring young people together to meet across cultural and national boundaries to discuss their differences and similarities, and the world issues that affect them.

Never before has the world been so interconnected. Cultural exchange and exposure at an early age is, and will be, crucial to enabling young people to live and compete in such an increasingly "globalized" world. However, as recent reports have shown, young Americans, in particular, lack basic knowledge of foreign countries, cultures, and international matters.

GNG aims to be a part of the solution by offering programs that deepen young peoples' understanding of foreign cultures, and spark their interest in the world and its people. GNG programs offer students a tangible taste of foreign places that they might never have the opportunity to visit on their own, bringing them that much closer to becoming informed and culturally-aware citizens of the world.

HOW IT STARTED

We met for the first time as college students at the American University of Paris in the mid-'90s. At this time, we had no way of knowing the impact our budding friendships would have on our future professional lives.

We were a group of young, ambitious, and idealistic students gravitating toward one another because of shared experience of traveling the globe at relatively young ages. During our time in Paris, we were all becoming cognizant of the changing state of the world, culturally, politically, and from a business perspective. Global markets were expanding in unprecedented ways, meaning that before long a truly international skill set would be required to compete effectively in the global work force. And, with technology shrinking the world seemingly every day, tolerance and respect for all cultures was growing ever more important.

Jonathan Giesen, Mark von Sponek, Chris Plutte, and I were extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to travel the world and learn about other cultures and



GNG program on HIV/AIDS prevention linking American students with their Brazilian counterparts.



David Macquart (right) with Brazilian participants during CURRENTS, a program exploring HIV/AIDS around the world.

ways of life. We felt we'd been given a tremendous gift that provided us with an international mindset to help us succeed in an increasingly global economy and relate with people who were different from us.

At this point, we knew that the opportunity to travel was not available to many young American students, so we set out to find a way to impart the benefits of travel without racking up frequent flyer miles.

TURNING VISION INTO REALITY

We truly believe that traveling the world provides the kind of perspective no student can ever learn from a book, and we think this perspective is especially critical for students in the United States. Because the United States is such a large, isolated landmass, and because many parts of our

country are so homogeneous, kids need to gain an understanding and respect for the different ways of thinking and doing things that exist throughout the world. That's why we founded Global Nomads Group.

The GNG mission has been the same from the beginning: connect youth throughout the world virtually to open up dialogue and cultural exchange, but the medium for doing so wasn't always clear. We thought we would base our model on Internet technology, but the quality just wasn't there. That's when we met a reseller of videoconferencing equipment who introduced us to the technology.

Using Polycom video conferencing solutions, we moderate conferences between K-12 classes in different countries, organize



Christopher Plutte filming in a Sudanese refugee camp in Chad.

virtual lectures, and conduct remote broadcasts from the world's historical and cultural sites.

Not only does videoconferencing provide the high-quality voice and video the Internet can't, the technology doesn't inhibit the process. Participants don't have to worry about the technology; they can interact naturally and concentrate on what they're getting out of the program.

BUILDING A PROGRAM

The first educational program GNG put together is a testament to the organization's indomitable spirit. With no money for the project, we seized an opportunity to partner with a doctor who was going to Honduras on a telemedicine assignment. In return for the cost of two round-trip tickets to Honduras and access to a video conferencing system, we, the GNG team,

took video footage for the doctor of his work in Honduras and facilitated a video telemedicine conference 10 days later between the doctor, who had returned to the United States, and the patients he'd seen in Honduras for postoperative follow-up. This gave GNG the video equipment to use for educational programming for 10 days.

Our first project was a resounding success, broadcasting the first-ever video conference from the Mayan ruins of Copan.

Following this, we were invited by Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan to visit the country and produce programs. For this project, GNG was able to secure the loan of a video system from another videoconferencing reseller, which it used to broadcast from the Dead Sea and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Petra. Upon returning to the United States, we were greeted with good news: our reseller



David Macquart among young Brazilians during a live broadcast from a community center in Salvador, Brazil.

contact was now employed by the largest manufacturer of videoconferencing technologies, and the video equipment was donated to the group.

GNG has connected thousands of youths in more than 25 countries and hundreds of thousands more through the Webcasts it offers with every cultural exchange. But perhaps the most powerful project we have ever orchestrated was "Project Voice," which connected U.S. students with students in Baghdad both before the war and following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime.

"Project Voice" was unique in that it allowed U.S. and Iraqi teenagers the chance to talk before and after the U.S. invasion. During the later conversation, the Iraqi students were able to be much

more candid with their responses because they weren't under the rule of a dictator, and there was a lot of empathy on the part of the U.S. students.

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS HAPPEN

GNG uses the ViewSation® FX and VSX 7000 videoconferencing systems donated by Polycom to facilitate its cross-cultural exchanges. When we are operating outside of the United States, we use ISDN, IP, or satellites to broadcast; domestically, it uses ISDN or IP connections depending on availability.

GNG uses the embedded multipoint capability of the FX to connect multiple sites during a video call without having to

pay a service provider. An example is *The Pulse*, a new program hosted by von Sponeck that connects high schools for current events discussions. The latest discussion centered on Michael Douglas's experience in Sierra Leone and the integration of child soldiers back into society. Past *Pulse* programs also include the time von Sponeck spent in Baghdad before and after the Saddam regime, and included two U.S. high schools.

When GNG puts an educational video-conference program together that involves locations outside of the United States, we work closely with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to check out the existing infrastructure of the country and arrange the conference. The UNDP helps determine what type of communications infrastructure and video equipment exists, and helps identify the most appropriate schools and classes for participation. If there is no video conferencing equipment available in a country, we simply take the Polycom video systems with us.

EXPANDING GLOBAL COLLABORATION

Our vision is for Global Nomads programming to be less of a special event and more

of an everyday part of the learning process, and we're confident we can achieve that goal on the strength of our programs and with the help of generous supporters like Polycom.

What started as a small endeavor operating on a shoestring budget has grown into a respected nonprofit powerhouse funded by some of the most highly regarded foundations in the United States.

In the fall of 2005, Global Nomads launched the CURRENTS program, visiting nine countries in 100 days. The CURRENTS program was an international education program uniting American youth with their peers around the world via videoconferencing and the Internet to discuss the most pressing global issues of our time, and work together to help solve them. In the fall of 2005, the topic focused on the HIV/AIDS epidemic as it is unfolding in countries around the world. This 3-month journey across the planet visited La Guaira, Venezuela; Salvador, Brazil; Cape Town, South Africa; Mombasa, Kenya; Chennai, India; Yangon, Myanmar (Burma); Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; Hong Kong, China; and Kobe, Japan. The CURRENTS program wrapped up on December 1, 2005, World AIDS Day.

"THE CURRENTS PROGRAM WAS AN INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM UNITING AMERICAN YOUTH WITH THEIR PEERS AROUND THE WORLD VIA VIDEOCONFERENCING."