A GLOBAL EDUCATION

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— Professor Renford Reese

Study Abroad Programs Provide Cultural Exchange, Career Opportunities

By Melanie Johnson

For students studying political science and international relations, it's one thing to read about headline-making global entities and organizations such as the **United Nations**, the **World Health Organization** and **Geneva Call** in a textbook or talk about them in class.

It's a whole other experience to visit them in person and see the work they do up close.

A group of 42 Cal Poly Pomona students had the opportunity to do just that as part of the Geneva Study Abroad program, a 10-day trip to the Switzerland capital and Paris.

Political Science Professor **Renford Reese**, who guided students on the trip from March 22 to April 2, says he's proudest of this year's Switzerland trip because of the depth and breadth of the site visits and future opportunities that it provides for his students.

"There are more headquarters of international organizations in Geneva than any other place in the world," says Reese, who has led 18 student groups to 12 countries over the years. "Not only do I want students to be exposed to the strategies these organizations use in grappling with some of the most salient issues of our times, but I also want to provide them with opportunities for internships, connections for jobs and opportunities to go to graduate school in Geneva."

He has two new programs planned for spring semester tied to his non-governmental organizations (NGOs) course. One is a 10-day study away trip in Honolulu where students will teach "Introduction to College" workshops to incarcerated male and female youth for the Hawaii Department of Education. The other is 10-day trip to Great Britain: two days in London visiting NGOs and the British Parliament and eight days in the Edinburgh, Scotland area teaching an "Introduction to Soft Skills" course at the HMP Addiewell prison.
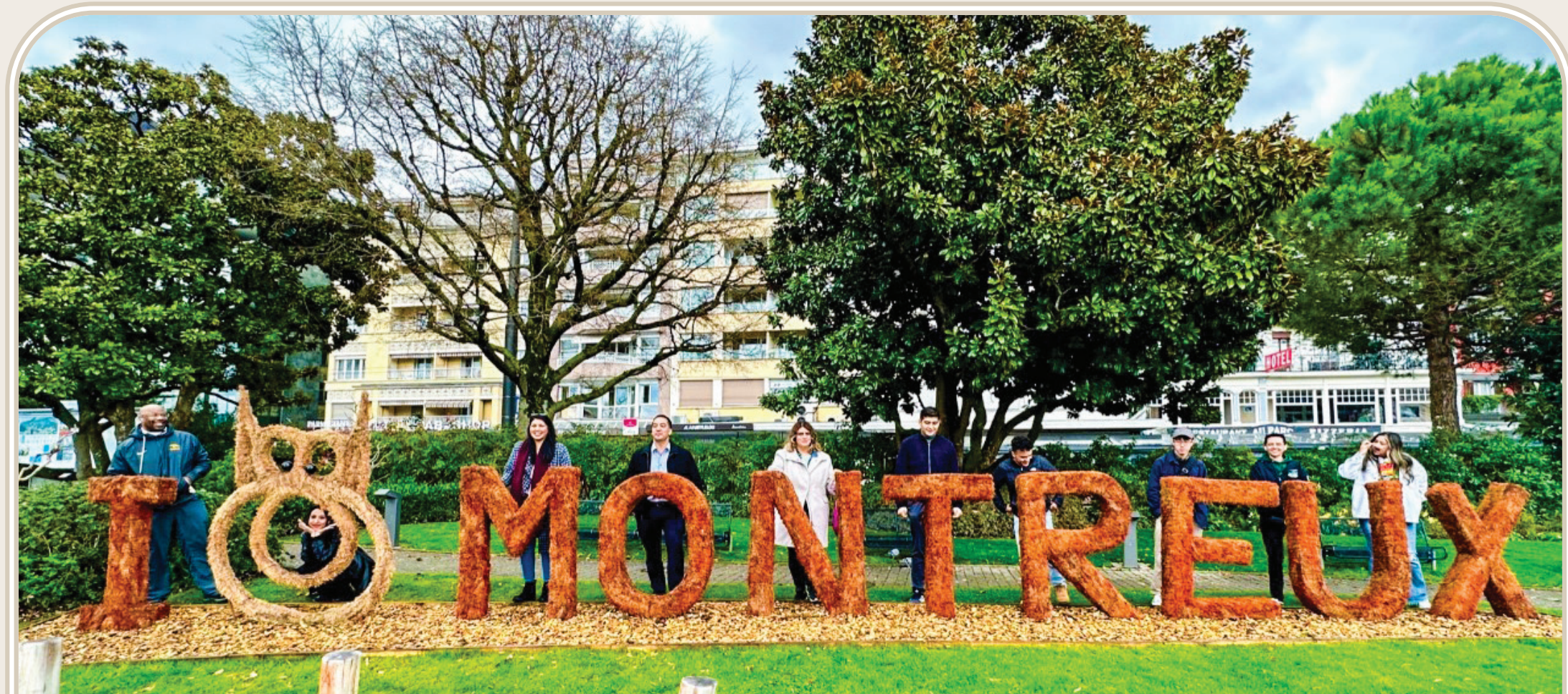
Philanthropic Impact

The Geneva trip marked the first group to benefit from a $100,000 donation Reese made in 2022 to fund study abroad opportunities, as well as the $500,000 Sean Yu Travel Fund endowment, established in 2022 by alumnus and finance entrepreneur **Sean Yu** ('99, political science; management and human resources). The cost of the trip, which was open to all majors and did not require students to be enrolled in Reese's study abroad course, totaled $3,000, but the average student cost was $1,500 because of the scholarships.

Donors who contribute to study abroad or study away programs are important because they are contributing to the university's experiential learning initiatives, Reese says.

"At Cal Poly Pomona, the lack of funds is the only reason that 90 percent of our students do not participate in study abroad," he says. "My goal as a Study Abroad Dean's Fellow is to make sure that every freshman that is entering this university in fall 2023 has a study abroad or study away experience before they graduate, and it's only through the financial contributions of donors that we can make this goal a reality.

"You have a lot of students at Cal Poly Pomona who have never traveled out of the country and a few who have never been on an airplane," Reese says.

Thanks to the generous support of donors like Sean Yu and Renford Reese, CPP students can travel abroad and see challenges and opportunities on a global scale.

Photos courtesy of Renford Reese

> **"The world is so large, and we have to give back to where help is needed."**
>
> — Maricela Duran-Wright, political science

Colum de Sales Murphy, president and founder of the Geneva Graduate School of Diplomacy and International Relations, meets with students and signs copies of his book after his lecture.

"It was transformative, a life-changing experience for all of them."

That was true for **Kenny Butler**, a public administration master's student who grew up in Watts close to the notorious Jordan Downs housing projects. Until a few months ago, the furthest he had traveled was to Las Vegas.

Butler, a formerly incarcerated student, took his first global trip in late 2022 as the recipient of a U.S. Student Fulbright grant through Pitzer College, where he earned his bachelor's degree in organizational studies. He was conducting research in Uganda on prison rehabilitation and recidivism but had to cut his trip to Africa short after being severely injured as a passenger in a motorcycle accident.

Months after healing, Butler, who knew Reese through Reese's Prison Education Project and Reintegration Academy prior to coming to CPP, opted to take the professor's study abroad course and make the trip to Paris and Geneva.

"Seeing Europe was never in my imagination," Butler says. "I got off the bus to go walking in Paris and there were some African guys there who came up and greeted me with, 'My American brother.' They knew I was American just by looking at me. It was an experience."

While in Paris, the students visited the Eiffel Tower, Louvre Museum and Palace of Versailles. They took a train to Geneva to visit several international non-governmental organizations and sat in on committee hearings at the United Nations.

Exploring Future Career Paths

The students participated in a student-led symposium with peers from Webster University in Geneva, featuring panel discussions on topics such as the impact of the war in Ukraine on Europe and violence in America.

Butler, who served as one of the panel's moderators, lauded the benefits of the Geneva study abroad trip for students.

"It lives up to what we have in our mission statement about experiential learning," says Butler, who plans to pursue a career in education. "It's seeing things live rather than just reading about them in a book. You actually get a chance to meet the people and see the work they are doing firsthand. For those interested in going into international law or politics, this is good for them."

Maricela Duran-Wright, who recently graduated in political science, says the trip was a dream come true. She plans to intern at some law firms in the next year, including possibly one in Geneva, before applying to law school.

She had previously participated in Reese's local study away trip to Palm Desert a couple of times, an experiential learning opportunity to meet and volunteer with nonprofits and non-governmental organizations. But traveling abroad, visiting the United Nations and participating in the symposium gave her a new perspective on international law.

"The world is so large, and we have to give back to where help is needed," Duran-Wright says. "Here you have Geneva, in a country that has so much wealth but is focused on humanitarian efforts. I have always been interested in international human rights and I want to give my time to help solve problems in the places where it is needed so much."

Fellow recent political science graduate **Cindy Campos** says the study abroad trip helped her zero in on her career aspirations. She had considered going to law school soon after graduation, but after taking the trip to Geneva, she is thinking of first doing some field work abroad with a non-governmental organization.

Campos' passion is personal. Her father came to America as a refugee from El Salvador more than 30 years ago. Campos, who grew up in Anaheim, recently helped him get residency.

Campos also had joined the local study abroad trip to Palm Desert, but the international trip gave her an opportunity to talk to students and professors from universities in Geneva where so many graduates go on to work for the United Nations or internationally known charitable organizations such as Geneva Call. She also served as a panelist at the symposium with Webster University.

"It was kind of surreal for me to see all of these organizations we had talked about for years – the U.N., the World Health Organization, the Red Cross," Campos says. "All of the NGOs that are hands on and on point with every issue are there in Geneva. It is truly inspirational."