Since its beginning in 1974, the Luce Scholars Program has provided an opportunity for young Americans with strong leadership potential to live and work in Asia. The program is designed to provide cultural immersion through professional placements, with the goal of enhancing understanding of the region. Each year, fifteen to eighteen Scholars under the age of thirty are sent to different Asian countries to work in local organizations that match their professional interests.

Among the program’s unusual features is the requirement that candidates have limited prior exposure to Asia. Another is the belief that discomfort and frustrations, along with new discoveries and connections, are all key ingredients of a meaningful Luce year. In fact, the experience is meant to be challenging. Judging from the comments of former Luce Scholars, one of the most rewarding aspects of their year in Asia was facing and overcoming those challenges. In the process, they developed a deeper understanding of another culture and gained a new way to see themselves, the United States and the world.

“It’s hard to capture what is so special about this program, the audaciousness of what it is trying to do by sending people on these personal and professional journeys, exposing us to Asia and Asia to us,” says Helen O’Reilly, who spent 2006–2007 as a Luce Scholar in the Philippines. “Even if you don’t end up doing something related to Asia afterwards, you are indelibly marked by this experience. It shrinks the world and expands your horizons in a way that is unique.”
While Asia is much better known and more globally important today than it was in 1974, and recent Luce Scholars are more likely to have traveled overseas than their earlier counterparts, the intensity of the experience is remarkably similar for different cohorts. Reflecting on their Luce year, participants from each decade of the program’s existence describe its impact as personally and professionally transformative.

ANDREW GRUEN was pursuing graduate studies in sociology, with a focus on journalism in the digital age, when he became a 2009–2010 Luce Scholar. A self-described “technology nerd,” he welcomed an opportunity to spend time in South Korea. “I wanted to know what life was like in the country that has the fastest Internet service in the world,” he says. He was also eager to work at OhmyNews, an online citizen-journalism enterprise based in Seoul that is a well-known progressive voice in the country.

The first few months were difficult. Despite taking the required summer classes in Korean, Gruen struggled with the language. It also took a while to adjust to the workplace culture. “I was clueless about office politics there,” he says. He soon discovered that the position of desks signaled the importance of the employee. The more senior you were, the closer you sat to the windows and the boss’s office. Gruen’s desk was in a distant corner, far away from both.

At the start, Gruen was given minor office tasks and had limited interactions with his coworkers. But when OhmyNews decided to do a series on European social-welfare benefits, he was invited to join a team-reporting trip to Paris. Gruen prepared a briefing packet for his colleagues, and they relied on him to schedule and help facilitate meetings with key officials. He wrote numerous stories in English that were translated into Korean and posted on the news service. “The Paris trip was the first time I was able to work to my full potential and could show my value to the journalists. It was the major turning point.”

Gruen’s role and responsibilities at OhmyNews changed dramatically. By the end of his stay, he had helped revamp the organization’s English-language service and developed an enduring friendship with his boss. Gruen is now preparing a PhD dissertation that examines how digital news organizations dedicated to quality journalism remain viable. OhmyNews will be one of three case studies. “The Luce year radically altered my professional focus,” says Gruen. “And it has become a big part of who I am, what I do, the attention I pay to the world.”

SUZANNE SISKEL had just graduated from college when she joined the first class of Luce Scholars in 1974. As an anthropology major with a focus on Mayan culture, Siskel knew very little about Asia. She was placed at Airlangga University in Surabaya, in East Java, and spent a year working with medical students who were conducting research
in villages to evaluate the social impact of public-health services. Communication options were more limited for Siskel’s cohort than those available to recent Luce Scholars, who are now accustomed to email and cell phones. “The world was a very different place then,” she says. “I remember how amazing it was when the first photocopy machine came to Surabaya.” The Luce Scholars kept in touch by writing letters. If Siskel wanted to speak to her parents in Los Angeles, she would have to book a phone call several months in advance. Her main connection with the world outside Indonesia was through her short-wave radio. “When I felt homesick I would listen to the BBC. That was my lifeline.”

Through her work in rural villages, her daily interactions with people from different walks of life and her extensive travels around Indonesia, Siskel came to know the country and language well. She credits the experience with setting her on a new path. “I got hooked on Indonesia,” she says. “By the end of the year I couldn’t imagine not spending more time there.”

Siskel returned to the country in 1983 as a Fulbright scholar while completing her graduate studies in social anthropology. She later moved to Jakarta, where she worked on international development projects and then served for fifteen years as the Ford Foundation’s representative in Indonesia and the Philippines. Siskel recently became executive vice president of the Asia Foundation, which administers the Luce Scholars Program in the field, thus completing the circle begun with that first trip more than three decades ago.

Richard Read’s year as a 1986–1987 Luce Scholar with The Nation, an English-language daily in Bangkok, Thailand, had a profound impact. “It opened up a whole new world for me and changed who I am as a person, as a journalist and as a parent,” he says.

Read had spent several years after college as a junior reporter for The Oregonian newspaper in Portland. His dream was to become a foreign correspondent, a goal that seemed a long way off at the time. He recalls the culture shock he and his wife felt when they arrived in Bangkok. “For all the rigorous orientation the program gives you in advance, it really hits you when you get off the plane and can’t read the signs or understand the language. It was a huge challenge.”

Read gradually came to know Thailand well through reporting trips with his Thai colleagues that took him across the country to cover economic and social issues. “To be able to immerse yourself in another culture at a young age is such a privilege. It broadens your whole outlook,” he says.

The experience accelerated Read’s rise to foreign correspondent. After the Luce year he became a freelance journalist in Tokyo and opened a bureau there for The Oregonian, which he ran until he returned to Portland in 1994. Read went on to win two Pulitzer prizes for The Oregonian. One was for a series that illustrated the impact of the Asian economic crisis on the United States by following a container of frozen french fries from the Washington-state farm where the potatoes were grown to a processing plant in Oregon, ending up at a McDonald’s in Singapore. The second Pulitzer was
shared with three other reporters for a team investigation that exposed systematic problems within the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, including the harsh treatment of some Asians on business trips to this country. Read attributes these successes to his deep connection with Asia that began with his Luce year. “None of this would have been possible without that experience.”

**Kate Otto** had volunteered on HIV/AIDS initiatives in Africa before becoming a 2009–2010 Luce Scholar in Indonesia. She had never been to Asia, and was interested to learn how the pandemic was affecting the region. With a recent master’s degree in international health policy and management, Otto was planning for a policy career. But when she was given a choice to work either at a national policy commission or at a grassroots nonprofit, she chose the latter. “It would have been natural for me to take the high-level placement, but I decided I should make the choice I would not normally expect myself to make,” she says. Otto spent the year at a community-based HIV/AIDS and drug rehabilitation center in the city of Bandung. Most of her coworkers were recovering drug addicts and many were HIV positive.

Over several months of observing the program and accompanying staff on outreach visits to homes, hospitals and prisons, Otto gradually developed friendships with her colleagues, and together they identified how she could best contribute to their work. The experience gave Otto a new understanding of the impact of HIV/AIDS and public-health policies on the most marginalized communities. She also gained a deeper appreciation for grassroots advocacy. “What changed me during that year had a lot to do with the organization I worked with. It was very humbling to realize that sometimes the people who really make a difference don’t even have a high-school diploma. I saw how people who might lack resources, and perhaps are also afflicted with illness, can be huge change makers.”

As a public-health consultant, Otto is now committed to bringing “the grassroots spirit and know-how to the institutional level.” Since her Luce year, she has worked on a range of international projects and she contributes regularly to *The Huffington Post*. Otto also keeps a blog called *Everyday Ambassador*, which uses her own story to explore how a foreigner can do public service in another country.

**Helen O’Reilly**’s experience as a Luce Scholar in the Philippines led her to a career in law. O’Reilly had previously worked in New York as an advocate for children with disabilities involved in the juvenile-justice system. She spent her 2006–2007 Luce year with an organization in Manila that sought greater protections for exploited domestic workers, mostly girls and women from rural areas.

“I knew I wanted to be an advocate, but at that time I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do it as a social worker or through the law. My work in Manila made it clear to me that advocacy has its limits if the law isn’t there or it’s not being enforced,” she says. “I saw the enormous
disconnect between what the law promised and what poor and vulnerable people actually got. I didn’t go to the Philippines thinking I wanted to be a lawyer, but I left convinced that this was what I should pursue.”

O’Reilly also learned valuable lessons about adapting to another culture. “You’re dropped into a society where people are acting in a certain way you might not understand. The program prepares us to expect some frustrations. You’re there to work, but you’re also an ambassador of your country. My coworkers had never interacted in a sustained way with an American before. I came to appreciate the importance of not forcing things, of taking time to connect on a deeper level.”

O’Reilly decided that a good way to integrate herself into Philippine life would be to take public transportation, which most foreigners avoid. Early on, she found herself waiting with several coworkers as many buses that seemed to be going in the right direction passed them by. “I couldn’t understand why they weren’t flagging any of them down. But in the Philippines it’s not polite to openly question someone’s actions. So I just waited with them.” Eventually her colleagues stopped a bus, and when she boarded O’Reilly realized they had been waiting for one without air conditioning, which cost less. “It seemed like such a small difference in price, but for my coworkers it was significant. That’s when I understood the value of just observing, holding back, and letting things reveal themselves.”

**DAVID VIOTTI** considers his 1994-1995 Luce year at the Hong Kong Legislative Council a turning point in his life. “Everything I had done before — college and graduate school — had been very structured and safe,” he says. “I can see now that it was a big step for me to face the uncertainty of going to an unfamiliar country, not knowing what to expect from my work placement or the society I’d be living in. I came out of that experience with a new perspective on myself, on Asia and on how my own country is viewed by others.”

In Hong Kong, Viotti wrote policy speeches for a legislative councilor and assisted an effort to generate public support for human rights laws. Since then, he has applied the cultural insights he gained from his Luce year to his work in both nonprofit and corporate settings. A graduate of Georgetown Law, Viotti has spent much of his professional life helping other young people expand their horizons. While CEO of the Junior Statesmen Foundation, which prepares high-school students for civic leadership, he created a program that takes twenty “young diplomats” from U.S. schools to China every summer. Currently executive director of the Westly Foundation, which invests in K-12 education in California, and a consultant on innovative business practices, Viotti is a selector for the Luce Scholars Program. “Asia is much less foreign today and many candidates for the program already have some international experience,” he says. “But for young people who will be working in a global society it is just as important to develop the skills and relationships and broader perspective that this cultural immersion provides.”

The 2010-2011 Luce Scholars concluded their year at a meeting held in New Zealand, joined by former Luce Scholar David Huebner, U.S. Ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa. **Photo by John Indalecio**