Connections in the Gap

Exonians take a break from academia for real-world exploration

By Sarah Zobel Illustration by Dan Page

While his former classmates were wrapping up their freshman year of college, Jan Shi '12 was stranded on Kakaban, an uninhabited island in the heart of Indonesia. He'd made careful arrangements to travel to the island and assumed a tourist boat would be in the area when he needed to leave. Shi had brought food and supplies to last four days, but an unexpected storm meant no boats and no tourists, so a week came and went. While he waited, Shi swam with non-stinging jellyfish, used a makeshift wooden spear to fish, foraged for vegetation and coconuts, and tasted his first land crabs. After 11 days, just when he couldn't stomach another crab, a sympathetic boat captain offered him a lift.

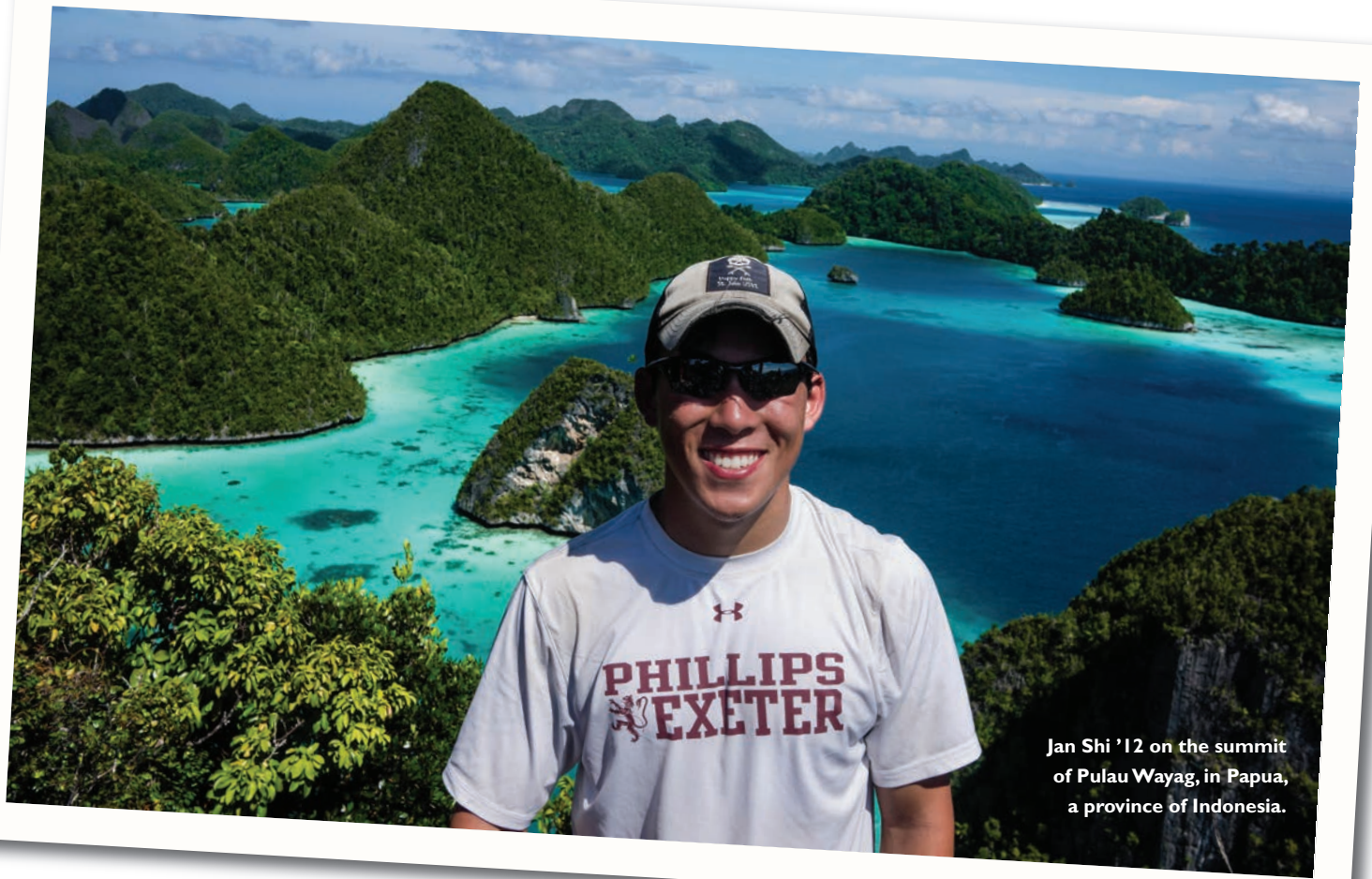
That was just one of many memorable episodes Shi experienced in the 14-month period between his Exeter graduation and his departure for the University of Virginia, where he's currently a freshman. That year between studies gave Shi, of Boston, a chance to see up close some of the things he'd only read about—the birds of paradise and other creatures endemic to Southeast Asia that he'd studied in his *Animal Behavior* class, for example—while learning firsthand through stays with local families what daily life is like in that part of the world.

The idea of academic downtime between high school and college has changed over the past 40 years. What was once a break from the classroom to be a ski bum or wait tables has evolved into living in other cultures within U.S. borders or, more often, outside of them. Students who take a "gap" or "bridge" year may travel, staying with local families and learning or polishing foreign language skills; they may test themselves by traveling solo, as Shi did, or journey with an organized group. The flavor is different from the traditional college junior year abroad program: Exonians who've taken gap years have gone on service trips, taught English, worked with disadvantaged youth and their families, and harvested crops. Inherent in the gap-year concept is time for reflection, a chance to look both behind and ahead before stepping onto the college stage. While some students have to convince their parents it's a good idea, others have been encouraged to take the time to catch their academic breath or save money.

The best candidates for a gap year are students who are open-minded, recognize the value of experiential learning, and are confident enough to know they are capable of getting off and then back on the academic treadmill, says Gretchen Bergill, PEA's associate director of college counseling. While not every student is like the Exonian whose gap year included spending time in a monastery in Nepal, "That student represents this other way of learning and seeking knowledge," says Bergill. "That's part of what's so remarkable about the [gap year]: It's an adventure, but it's also recognizing the power of various cultures and the connections that come from that, and how it moves the soul and the spirit."

Sometimes that sense can be stirred unexpectedly. Shi, who kept a blog with photos during his travels, was disturbed by the lack of refuse management in Indonesia, describing floating piles of garbage in the ocean and the routine sight of trash burning alongside roads. In Sulawesi, Indonesia, home to some of the most interesting scuba diving in the world, Shi says locals joke that it's cancerous tumors that make the sea life so distinctive in appearance. He was also struck by the poverty he encountered there and elsewhere. In parts of Indonesia, Shi was able to buy a meal for the equivalent of one U.S. dollar, but says, "It feels weird to walk around knowing you have more money than the locals."

That sentiment was shared by Evan Gastman '12, who covered an estimated 30,000 kilometers (18,600 miles) of ground travel around China, Tibet and India, as well as Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. In the latter



Jan Shi '12 on the summit of Pulau Wayag, in Papua, a province of Indonesia.

three countries in particular Gastman was aware that as a tall, white American, he was an obvious target for beggars, something the resident of Great Neck, NY, hadn't really experienced before. While he wanted to help, he wondered where to draw the line—in giving the equivalent of a U.S. dollar to a Cambodian, for example, in a country that was still feeling the effects of the Khmer Rouge, was he doing any real good?

"There was a natural feeling of guilt for having the privileges that I've had," says Gastman, "in the context of this country that so recently was almost broken." At the same time, he recognized the gift of what he calls an "active history lesson," the chance to be on the ground rather than just reading about a country in a textbook.

The decision to take a year away from academia came fairly late for Gastman, who was accepted at Harvard and opted to defer just three days before the May 1 final-decision cutoff. With a choice of "accept," "reject," or "defer" on the verification page of its website, Harvard requests that students who select the latter send a letter describing potential plans for the year. Harvard is one school that actively encourages students to take a year off, says Betsy Dolan, Exeter's director of college counseling; Princeton is another. Its five-year-old, tuition-free Bridge Year Program is open to incoming freshmen. Each year, Princeton selects seven students to go on service trips to Brazil, China, India, Peru or Senegal; over the past three years, three Exonians have been among them. Dolan says colleges want to know that students are going to use the gap year to do something productive. Given that U.S. society tends to encourage staying busy—"we do, do, do," says Dolan—some selective colleges encourage the time off, as does Exeter, because, she says, it "allows kids to be grounded in a way different than how they've lived for the past four years. It's a very healthy thing to do."

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Adds Mark Hoven, associate director of college counseling, "Students come out of a gap year saying, 'OK, now I know where my focus is,' and they can approach things with a more mature mind because they've had that time to think, versus being in the race. It gives them that moment to pause." For many, says Hoven, it helps them solidify the reasons why they're going to college, and what they'd like to focus on in their course work.

Exeter students are encouraged to apply for two generous gap-year resources: the Robert W. Kesler Schol-

arship, a $7,000 grant, and a $10,000 fellowship endowed by James Perrin '46.

Perrin, who takes a personal interest in his fellows, steers clear of the term "gap year." The purpose of his fellowship, he says, is to provide a bridge *over* the gap between high school and college; between adolescence and young adulthood. That transition is best achieved when a young person travels and lives independently, removed from the stress of academic life. "You get a clearer view of things when there is no pressure about grades or holding onto a scholarship," he says. "Personal growth happens when you are free to fail."

The opportunity for a bridge year might have been helpful in his own life, reflects Perrin, who graduated from Exeter at 16 and went straight to Harvard, where he struggled to keep up socially, given his age. "A year off, somewhere along the way, just might have given me time to find out a little more about myself and what I wanted to do with my life," Perrin wrote in his deed of gift. His career—which included stints singing on cruise ships and in nightclubs before he landed in the U.S. Information Agency's Foreign Service, where he spent 25 years—took him to what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Argentina, Chad, Indonesia, the Ivory Coast, France and Spain.

In outlining his eponymous fellowship, which, like the Kesler, goes to just one graduating senior annually, Perrin encouraged applicants to plan their activities as thoroughly as possible, although changes are allowed and encouraged.

"Valid projects should not be easy for the applicant to undertake," he wrote, "but should stretch his or her capabilities as much as possible. They should convey a sense of adventure, as well as the challenge of dealing with unfamiliar situations. Facing the risks of the unknown can be a heady experience!"

Given that, Perrin would no doubt be satisfied to hear about the travels taken by Shi, the 2012 fellowship recipient. In addition to being stranded on Kakaban Island, Shi went to Komodo National Park, where he helped identify manta rays before venturing out on a solo nine-day kayak tour. He flipped on Day 6, lost his bailing cup, and had to be rescued by a luxury dive boat. Upon returning to the main port, he was informed that no one had ever successfully kayaked around the island. Recognizing a challenge, two weeks later Shi set out again. This time, swells rough enough to cancel all other boat traffic set in, catching up to Shi just as he reached southern Komodo and creating a 20-plus-foot wall of water that at times obscured both land and sun. Shi paddled for eight hours, barely stopping for a sip of water; when he at last made it around the island's southernmost point and found safe harbor, he was initially unable to straighten his fingers.

"It was the happiest moment of my trip," Shi says of reaching the cove, "because right before it was the scariest part of my trip." It was also July 4, a month later than he'd expected to be abroad, so he made plans to spend two final weeks in a whaling village before heading home. He'd already been to Indonesia's Papua province where he acquired some fluency in the language—despite the fact that there are some 350 dialects of Bahasa Indonesia spoken on that island alone. He'd also been stranded by a mudslide; spent time working with an NGO for teenage street children in Manila, Philippines, where, he says, "It was great to live with them and see how different our lives are, but how similarly we behave"; done field research on insects in Borneo; counted turtle eggs on Derawan Island; and posed for photos, the sole American on a cargo ship serving as a ferry for native Indonesians who seemed to know only two phrases in English: *I don't know* and *I love you*.

(Top) Shi on his first solo dive off Raja Ampat, Papua. (Bottom) Shi sits with juvenile hornbill birds at a sea turtle hatchery in Indonesia.

Communication was not an issue for Amy Kao '11, who had spent three months in the autumn of her senior year in Grenoble, France. From the moment she'd returned to Exeter, Kao had longed to be back in France, in part to continue working on her language skills. With an interest in sustainability and food production—she was a member of both the Farm and Garden Club and the Environmental Proctor Board—Kao decided to travel as a WWOOFer. World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms is an international organization that allows volunteers to work for four to six hours a day on a farm, in exchange for food and lodging,

Amy Kao '11 (right) works at a French cidery with another farm volunteer. (Below) Kao meets up with Kara Lessin '11 in Lyon, France.

generally for two- or three-week stints. Kao hoped to learn more about sustainability while seeing a different side of French culture than she would in urban areas, and in October, after a brief internship with environmentalist Bill McKibben's 350.org, she headed to France. Working in four distinct regions, Kao helped out at cideries and on a wild chestnut farm, and at one location encountered another Exonian, Isabelle Newlin '08.

Kao also saw firsthand the effects of big agriculture: At the chestnut farm, a neighbor, a longtime farmer who was seeking organic certification, dropped by for a visit. He reported his land had been contaminated because another neighbor was spraying his own fields with pesticides. The farmer would have to wait several more years before reapplying for certification, during which time he'd lose money.

"These are a lot of issues that I was interested in during high school," says Kao, the 2011 recipient of the Kesler, "and I wanted to understand them from not just a sustainability point of view, but also to see what people do in the real world. We talk about pesticides and fighting Monsanto, but what happens when it really affects someone's livelihood?"

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Kao, who plans to major in Environmental and French Studies at Tufts, where she's a sophomore, also volunteered in Switzerland and Germany before accepting a four-month editorial internship in London at *Green Futures*, a publication of the nonprofit Forum for the Future. Though she'd written for *The Exonian*, she was hesitant to change her gap-year plans, until her Kesler scholarship adviser assured her that if she'd met her goals—to improve her French skills and learn about sustainability—she should not hesitate to move on.

"It was just so liberating when I realized, 'It's your year. Take what you want of it. Go do things,'" says Kao. "Just to be able to have those amazing experiences meant so much."

Minnesotan Winnie Zwick '08 came back from her gap-year experience with a profound interest in community development and social change. Her scholarly interlude began during an election year, and she spent the summer going door to door for Clean Water Action before taking a monthlong train trip to the West Coast. In February she left for Bolivia and Peru, supported by a Kesler scholarship and

one from Where There Be Dragons, a gap-year organization whose theme is "Be a traveler, not a tourist." Over the course of 13 weeks, Zwick and 11 other young people, ages 17 to 20, together with three group leaders, trekked through the Andes, with rural and urban homestays interspersed throughout the trail time. The program's focus on leadership and personal development allowed participants to learn regional culture, history and politics, but also group dynamics and facilitation and conflict skills. Zwick, a two-year Exonian who had been homeschooled and also attended public school, had long planned on a gap year, both for the break and to sate her adventurous spirit.

"I wanted to be in the world and be challenged by what I was learning," she says. "I wanted to connect what I was interested in during high school to real experiences before I went to college, to ground my education." At Carleton College she majored in American Studies, largely in response to the recognition that the actions of more-developed countries can have negative repercussions elsewhere—as evidenced by the melting glaciers she observed in the Andes—and today she's working for the Lutheran Volunteer Corps in north Minneapolis on transitional housing and community leadership development housing.

"There's so much change to be done in the United States," Zwick says. "I've inherited this culture, and I feel a responsibility to act in my home culture. But in South America I saw so much inspiration and so many innovations that you don't see in the United States because of different cultures and situations. There are so many possibilities—how do we access those?"

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Winnie Zwick '08 and her group camp during a trek through Bolivia's Apolobamba mountain region.

Evan Gastman finds himself asking similar questions. He'd headed into his gap year eager to tackle a spoken language, after having studied Latin and Greek at Exeter. Gastman spent part of his time with a Where There Be Dragons program on a scholarship in China. Initially, Gastman struggled to communicate, making do with gestures and body language. At the same time, all around him he observed many familiar sights, including kids wearing Kobe Bryant basketball jerseys and American fast food chains, things that signaled a shrinking world. The only child in one of his homestay families, a 15-year-old boy, wanted to be called "Bob," in homage to the source of his English-language skills: the Nickelodeon TV program "SpongeBob SquarePants." But Gastman felt "friction between this great traditional Chinese culture and all of what the development means, and the Westernization that comes with that development." Referring to his interactions with locals, he says, "There are linkages that make the connection between an American like myself and a Chinese person who has some knowledge of the West. It makes it much easier, but at the same time, there's a feeling that even though the worlds are coming together and coalescing in a way, there's obviously going to be things that are lost in the transaction."

A pivotal moment of awareness took place in India, where Gastman and classmate Nathaniel Haslett '12 taught at a school in West Bengal for three weeks. They recognized that having learned around the Harkness table meant they could best contribute to local communities as educators, albeit temporarily. Even so, Gastman confronted limitations. Running alongside a canal one morning, he observed one of his star students collecting returnable bottles in the leech-infested waters, and he recognized immediately that the child's future was confined to his environment—that despite being a standout in the classroom, he would likely end up a farmer like his classmates.

"Of course, that's completely respectable," says Gastman, "but the fact is that the room for choice is nonexistent. And realizing where I was in my life, and being told that I can do anything—it was tough to reconcile, and it still is."

Gastman plans to focus on computer science at Harvard, and will further his Chinese studies. He's now more aware of global energy and food constraints than before, and says of Southeast Asia, "Because I know people in these places, it doesn't feel like there are borders to global problems. Everyone has to deal with them.

"The world felt bigger than it ever had," Gastman says of his travels, "but at the same time, it felt more accessible than it ever had. That was one of the daunting but comforting takeaways."