



LIFESTYLES ::

Well-traveled Rice senior aims to see the world

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BY CHERYL DANGEL CULLEN, Correspondent

He's only 17, yet Joseph Alfano already has traveled to more countries than many people who are well into their old age.

Alfano, a senior at Brother Rice High School in Chicago, spent five weeks this summer traveling through Thailand and Vietnam with Rustic Pathways, an organization that organizes world travel for high school students.



Brother Rice student Joseph Alfano, of Chicago's Beverly community, stands in front of a map at the high school. Alfano spent the summer in Vietnam and Thailand.
(Mary Compton/SouthtownStar)

"I did it to get an understanding of the culture," said Alfano, who toured both the industrial and rural areas of both countries. "I spent time in each country and my view of them changed. I hadn't been to Asia before, and I found that Thailand is very industrial.

"I knew about Vietnam and the war, so it was interesting to see their views toward America now versus 30 years ago. They really want us for tourism because their country is in a depression, but there is some resentment that still exists, but for the most part they like Americans."

Prior to this summer's travels abroad, Alfano did an extensive amount of volunteer work in Mexico and Australia. It all began with a trip in 2008 over spring break when Alfano went to Mexico and put in 18 hours volunteering at an orphanage, cleaning beaches, painting over graffiti and helping out in the small town. He repeated the experience again in spring 2009.

In summer 2008, Alfano, who lives in Chicago's Beverly community, packed his bags and traveled to Australia to help marine biologists in their studies. He had obtained his scuba diving license and dived at the Great Barrier Reef, spending 30 hours helping marine biologists doing research on the Minke whale by observing the whales from 60 feet under water.

His community service overseas and at home, where he logged 55 hours at Chicago's Smith Village Nursing Home, earned him the Cook County Sheriff's Youth Service Medal of Honor. →

The son of Michelle Alfano and Raul Zarco is also active at school as a member of the wrestling team. He is a member of student council, National Honor Society, Dance Committee and Spanish Club. This year he also joined the musical at Mother McAuley High School and will be performing as a lead dancer in the production of "Oklahoma."

After graduation, he is thinking of pursuing a career in marine biology or possibly engineering "because I'm good at math and physics and the sciences, but I'm still trying to figure out what I like," he added.

What he likes is travel.

"For me, it doesn't feel like a vacation unless I get out and see something new. Even if I go to another state, it feels like a whole another place, but when I travel to another country, it has a different feel. I like the new culture and mindset. It is interesting to see and meet new people and how they work," he said.

He said his mom has had a big influence on him.

"She's gotten me in the habit of traveling and being open with others and just trying to do new things."

Now home for the time being, Alfano is focusing on his classes.

"I like education. I like learning in school. I like Brother Rice and am looking forward to learning new things in college. It is kind of exciting thinking about finding the perfect college for me and keeping my grades up."