Perspectives
A Day in the Life of an ATU Student
by Lara Izlan, 1992-93 ATU Program graduate

I laughed at her when she said that she had never met a Malaysian before in her life, I couldn’t believe that before this semester, she never knew that such a country exists!

I believe it was on September 16, 1992 when we first met. I had moved in much earlier and was anxiously awaiting the arrival of my new roommate. Her eyes must have shot open with surprise when she opened the door and saw me praying. Can you imagine, seeing a body covered in white from head to toe, kneeling on the floor? After a few minutes, I turned to face her and introduced myself. I had just met my new roommate, Sarah.

Living with an American roommate has really opened my eyes to one of the most interesting cultures in the world. I am sure that Sarah, too, has had her own share of surprises, and that goes beyond her first experience of watching me pray. Never in her life has she been asked to refrain from wearing shoes in the room, nor, according to her, has she seen anyone cleanse herself five times a day, in preparation for prayer. Seeing me run in and out of the room, chasing my daily schedule, Sarah has affectionately labelled me a “super human.”

My average day begins at about six o’clock in the morning. Still half asleep, Sarah watches me as I quickly prepare myself for morning prayers and then high school. Every morning, she mumbles to me about how she hated having to go to high school and that she cannot imagine herself going to high school ever again. Yet to me, and forty-three other Malaysian students who came with me to the United States to participate in the “American Top Universities” program, this was a daily ritual. Despite the fact that we have already graduated from our respective high schools in Malaysia, we were enrolled in four high school classes here in the morning. At one o’clock, we would all catch the transit bus to return to Indiana University, our home for one long year.

At exactly 1:40 pm, our contingent of Malaysian students would burst into the dining hall with less than twenty minutes to spare for lunch. On Mondays, I usually take my tray over and sit with Sarah. Almost every time, I bore her with stories of all the assignments I have to complete for high school the next day. Sometimes, even I cannot believe the extent of my work load—one physics report to write, tons of calculus problems to solve, and a “Greek and Latin derivatives” test to study for! By 1:55, I bid Sarah farewell and rush off to my two o’clock class, a class on preparations for college entrance.

All forty-four of us, in addition to taking high school classes, are required to take credit courses at Indiana University, as well as some special classes and tutorials arranged for us by the program. We all hope to enter various colleges around the country in the fall of next year, and to succeed in this “mission,” we are all working harder than we ever have before.

Hours later, after Sarah has already returned from her afternoon classes, I walk through the door, drop my book bag, and fall on the bed, extremely tired. Sarah looks at me with pity—she knows how critical thinking classes can sap the most out of a person. Unfortunately, on certain days, my day is far from being over. Somehow, I pick myself off the bed and prepare myself for evening prayers. Then it’s dinner, followed by the next class, either History and Philosophy of Science or another university course.

By nine o’clock, I am really exhausted. I walk into the room, nodding my head ever so slightly—my tired version of saying “hello.” But it isn’t until the wee hours of the morning, when Sarah is snoring contentedly in her bed, when I can finally call it a day, with all my neatly completed assignments tucked away safely in my school me and the SAT practice book returned to its position on the shelf.

There are times when I just break down and cry—times when I feel that I just cannot bear all the pressure and stress I am under. Yet, I feel like I have the hopes of all of Malaysia riding on my shoulders, willing me to go on, and making me promise never to give up, no matter how tough it gets.

During her year as a member of Indiana University’s 1992-93 American Top Universities Program, Lara Izlan showed outstanding academic and leadership abilities. When Lara entered the ATU program, she was already an accomplished performer in classical ballet and modern dance. But she put her interest in dancing on hold and focused instead on her preparations for college entrance, with excellent results: an SAT score over 1300 and a nearly perfect TOEFL exam. Lara was offered admission to several top universities—MIT, Harvard, Stanford, and the Universities of Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Wisconsin. This year Lara is a freshman at Harvard studying mathematics—the second ATU graduate to attend this school.

For information about the program, contact the ATU Program Director, M. Jo Terkhorn at IU-Bloomington, tel. 855-8513.