For a week in early summer, 14 Saudi Arabian ELI students packed their notebooks and their swimsuits—not to mention their work boots—and held class in Puerto Rico.

The trip was a service-learning component of the students’ SABIC Foundation Year (FY) program. (See “Special programs” on Page 16.) As members of the English Through Producing and Viewing Films class taught by ELI Assistant Professor Scott Duarte, the young men aided in construction of houses in a low-income Puerto Rican community and documented their efforts on film.

The idea for this travel with a purpose materialized in a short six weeks. In mid-April, as ELI Assistant Director Karen Asenavage and SABIC FY program coordinator Maria José Riera helped Scott plan the special, all-SABIC film class, Karen suggested merging the course’s objectives with a service-learning opportunity, using the film documentation as the vehicle for the students’ reflection on their experience.

Scott researched possible locations within the continental United States, knowing visa limitations would be an issue. The idea emerged that Puerto Rico, an American territory, offered the ideal opportunity: an “international” location that students would only need their regular U.S. visa to enter.

Upon their arrival, the SABIC scholars, accompanied by Scott and Maria, started their Puerto Rican journey in Old San Juan, the capital, where they had their first taste of the local culture. They were also prepped in what to expect and how to adequately represent the ELI and SABIC.

On the first full day, the students traveled to Villa Del Rio, the small community in which they would perform their service-learning. The scholars viewed the work site of another group and toured the community, learning the local history and gaining an understanding of the lives of the current residents. Over the next three days, the students assisted locals in mixing and hauling concrete to build the permanent roof of a house.

Lunch was prepared by residents, offering the ELI students insight into the Puerto Rican diet. All food served was produced on the island. During work breaks, the scholars were treated to fresh coconuts cut from a tree on the property where they were working.

Through daily dialogues with work supervisor Jonathon Hernandez, travel guide Tyrone Moore and other members of the community, students gained an understanding of the socio-economic and living conditions of much of Puerto Rico’s population.

SABIC scholar Meshari Alhumayyd noted, “I have learned in this experience of doing community service how to acknowledge other cultures and not just have a superficial understanding of them and how some things can contribute to engineering, my field.”

Moore stated, “I thought (handling 14 Saudi students) was going to be a disaster. … There are just some things that society makes you think a certain way. … (The SABIC scholars) exceeded what I could have thought. … They helped me educate myself to be a better person and have better views.”

Evenings allowed for a respite from the hard work. The group traveled to several geographically and culturally distinct beaches. They witnessed ancient petroglyphs etched by the Taino Indians, rock formations that created beautiful lagoons, and reefs that housed colorful fish and lobsters.

Part of the week was set aside for discovering the diverse natural beauty of Puerto Rico. The group hiked in the only tropical rainforest in the United States, El Yunque. At night they kayaked into a bioluminescent lagoon. And they cannoned through the natural stone water slides of a mountain river.

Throughout the trip, the students documented their journey via video cameras. They returned to Newark with countless hours of footage that they then edited into a feature-length documentary film. The film can be seen via the English Language Institute’s homepage at http://sites.udel.edu/eli/2016/06/18/sabic-scholars-present-their-feature-film-length-documentary-about-their-service-learning-journey-in-puerto-rico/.

The success of this project may just pave the way for future trips to Villa Del Rio and Puerto Rico, building on the ELI’s tradition of community service, cross-cultural awareness and self-learning. SD