Elon professors bring educational interaction to Sri Lanka

By Andrea Griffith
Staff Writer

As professors at Elon University, where engaged learning has been nationally recognized, Crista Arangala and Martin Kamela decided to bring that kind of educational interaction to Sri Lanka.

Their idea was born last year when Arangala visited the Durham Museum of Life and Science with her husband, who is Sri Lankan, and their young sons. They asked themselves what it would take to bring similar exhibits to the island nation located just south of India.

Arangala, a mathematics professor, brought Kamela, a physics professor, on board and the pair applied for, and received, an internal grant from the university.

Before long, students in the university’s physics club and Arangala’s global studies course were designing five exhibits, which teach about light spectrums, the human skeleton in motion, the chemistry of smell, phosphorescence and visual perception.

Earlier this month, the professors traveled to Sri Lanka, taking their exhibits to an urban girls school, an orphanage with 25 boys and a rural school in the southwest part of Sri Lanka.

“We wanted this to be a museum experience, not a teaching lesson,” said Kamela.

Because they have never been in a museum-like environment, many of the students were hesitant to touch the plastic skeleton and other components of the exhibits, but they eventually came around.

“They seemed to have a lot of fun,” said Kamela.

Sri Lankan undergraduate students helped their younger counterparts to understand the science behind the exhibits by answering questions.

“It’s much better for the kids to talk to somebody closer to their own age than to us,” said Kamela. “I think in all places, students get something out of it.”

Kamela said that the project perfectly matched a need in Sri Lanka, as the country does not use engaged learning methods.

“Their education system, in general, is quite strong,” he said, “but in a literal way.”

He added that the science room at the rural school was “quite sad,” with no exhibits, only posters.

“It’s a highly literate country,” said Arangala. “The science teachers that we met were really excited to be a part of (our project).”

While they were there, the pair formed a strong connection with personnel at Sri Lanka’s National Science Foundation, where the five exhibits will be displayed.

It was Kamela’s first journey to Sri Lanka, and though he had taken students to Brazil before as part of Elon’s study abroad program, he was shocked by what he saw in the developing country, especially since it is still recovering from the 2004 tsunami.

Kamela said the infrastructure was quite poor, and many roads are still being rebuilt. Many people had moved inland after losing loved ones in the tsunami.

As a result of their trip, a new course will be offered at Elon beginning this fall. About a dozen students have signed up to take “Interactive Science Museum Exhibits,” where they will build more exhibits, present them at Alamance County middle schools and eventually ship them to Sri Lanka.

The professors are also working to create a study abroad program in Sri Lanka for winter term—a three-week session in January.

If it is approved, the first class of students would travel to the country in 2008. If they secure enough funding, eventually, exhibits could be taken to other developing countries.

“I could go back to Brazil and do this,” Kamela said.