In 1964, an Indonesian citizen named Alex Tilaar came to Bloomington from Jakarta with his wife, Martha, to pursue his doctorate in education. For the next two years, until he received his degree in 1966, Martha occupied herself with giving haircuts at the Indiana Memorial Union. She enjoyed her work so much she decided to attend beauty school to develop her skills for a career in a salon.

Little did anyone know when she made that decision, the seeds of one of the most successful businesses in Indonesia were planted, halfway around the world in Bloomington. Martha's beauty-school program culminated in a final project that was to focus on the beauty traditions of each student’s home culture. For Martha, these would come from Java, the most populous of the over 17,500 islands that make up the nation of Indonesia. However, Martha’s knowledge of Javanese culture was limited at the time, so she did her final project on the Japanese practice of geisha. When Martha’s instructor learned of this choice, she responded, “Shame on you! You should know about your own heritage.” This moment was an epiphany for Martha, and she decided then and there to focus her salon practice on the beauty traditions of Java.

Forty-six years later, Martha Tilaar is one of the wealthiest women in Indonesia. She owns a string of highly regarded salons and spas across the country and has her own line of beauty products. In 2011, she was awarded the country’s highest honor, the Presidential Award for Entrepreneurship.

In Bangkok, Singapore, Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and beyond, the name Martha Tilaar is synonymous with beauty and success. Her story is a testament to the power of following your passion and never losing sight of your own heritage.
products based on traditional herbs native to Java. She operates a farming collective where the herbs are grown organically, which now also serves as an educational center devoted to sustainable agriculture and traditional therapies.

This is certainly impressive enough, but Martha’s entrepreneurial vision goes further, extending into the realm of philanthropy. Deeply concerned about the problem of sex trafficking, she created a scholarship program for young women in the rural provinces, where poverty and lack of opportunity create the conditions for sex trafficking to flourish. The scholarships support a select number of 18- to 19-year-olds to train for a beauty career, followed by five years of work experience in one of Martha’s salons, thus giving them marketable skills, a chance to help their families, and a shot at economic independence.

Over the past decade, Martha’s scholarship program has educated 4,200 young women, helping them escape potentially grim fates. In her successful efforts to focus her philanthropy on such a huge and intractable problem, she has demonstrated what can happen when the desire to give back is joined with passion for a cause.

I met Martha, Alex, and three of their children in May, when my husband, IU President Michael McRobbie, and I traveled to Indonesia as part of a four-country visit to Southeast Asia. There, as in the U.S., women are finding ways to make change happen in their communities, their businesses, and the history of their nations.

The journey begins

Our trip to Southeast Asia began in Bangkok. Our first official event was to renew a historic connection between the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) and Indiana University. One of the key areas of NIDA with which IU has been particularly involved is the Center for Philanthropy and Civic Education, led by Dr. Juree Vichitr-Yadakan, who received an honorary doctorate from IU in 2007. Her center provides crucial training for Thailand’s NGO (non-governmental organization) sector and for its civil workforce. Juree pointed out that while there is a strong tradition of charitable giving in Thai society, it has not extended to higher education to any significant degree — “something we’re working to change!” she added with a glint in her eye.

IU’s partnership with Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, to whom the university gave an honorary doctorate in 2010, has further reinforced IU’s bond with NIDA and the nation of Thailand. The Crown Princess is deeply dedicated to education and to scientific and technical investments in Thailand and is visibly engaged in Thai public life. She leads five philanthropic organizations and foundations that IU alumni actively support. A year before our visit, she joined other IU alumni at a luncheon in Bangkok, and many of them made charitable gifts to support her work in education and development in remote border regions.

Again this year, the alumni event in Bangkok drew many who have established themselves in business, government, the arts, and education. One of these was Nathika Wattanavekin Angubolkul, a Kelley School of Business alumna from 1977 and an extremely accomplished businesswoman. She is chair and CEO of the Eastern Sugar Group and has interests in various hotels, including the Grand Hyatt Erawan, where the alumni event was held. She also serves as president of the National Council of Women of Thailand under the Royal Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen, as well as president of Kiatruammitr Foundation for Education.

When I commented on how impressive these achievements were, Nathika noted that culturally it is acceptable, even expected, for women to take on significant roles in the Thai business and civic worlds. But there, as here, the presence of role models who are able to successfully navigate in these worlds is critically important to those seeking to follow in their footsteps.

The next stop on our itinerary was Singapore, where we visited the National University of Singapore to formalize a partnership between the IU Center on Philanthropy and the NUS School of Business’s Asia Center for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy, which is led by University of Texas-Austin-trained economist Audrey Chia. Knowing the focus of our meeting, I wore my Women’s Philanthropy Council founding member pin. Much to my delight, it caught Audrey’s eye. She was intrigued by the work we’re doing in women’s philanthropy at the IU Foundation and commented on the need that still exists in Singapore to promote more women in business and in philanthropy. The IU-NUS partnership may provide an opening for us to learn more about women’s philanthropy in Southeast Asia and to assist with their efforts.

Passion as philanthropy

From Singapore, we flew to Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the heart of Javanese culture and history. There, we met a woman who is making a difference through another kind of philanthropy. Toni Tack, an art historian who has devoted her life to Indonesia, served as our guide to the incredible Buddhist monument of Borobudur and the Hindu temple compound at Prambanan. She shared deep knowledge of the past, wide-ranging insights into contemporary Indonesia, and sheer passion for the cultural heritage of her adopted country. She loves Borobudur and has been instrumental in securing crucial support from UNESCO and other sources to ensure its survival for future generations. She is equally passionate about teaching those future generations to appreciate it.

During our tour of the basal relief describing the life of the Buddha that rings the base of the monument, we encountered a boisterous bunch of Muslim teenagers who clearly saw their field trip to Borobudur as a day off from school and a chance to show off for each other, including climbing on the ancient walls to have their pictures taken. Toni waded into the scrum of school kids with her jaw set and proceeded to deliver a short lecture in Indonesian on just what it was they were scrambling upon.

“You would not sit on the walls of a mosque,” she chided. “This is sacred space for Buddhists. We must respect their religion as we would want them to respect ours.”

The teenagers listened obediently, then moved just a little more slowly and quietly for the rest of their visit (or as far as we could see them). The world is full of monuments that exist because someone, another Toni, cared enough to devote the time and attention needed to help preserve them — itself an act of charitable giving.

I returned from our trip ennobled by many wonderful aspects of Southeast Asia, but I was particularly inspired by these remarkable women I had the great good fortune to meet. The world is full of monuments that exist because someone, another Toni, cared enough to devote the time and attention needed to help preserve them — itself an act of charitable giving.

PhD graduate Tyagam Miller, an art historian and director of the Women’s Philanthropy Council at the IU Foundation, reflected on the extraordinary and extraordinarily philanthropic women in a variety of settings and contexts. But there, as here, the presence of role models who are able to successfully navigate in these worlds is critically important to those seeking to follow in their footsteps.
Bangkok, Thailand
At our first official event, we renewed a connection between the National Institute of Development Administration and Indiana University. NIDA's founding arose from its close collaboration with IU, starting with Herman B Wells’s visit in 1955. The university was created with IU support in 1965, and the IU–NIDA relationship was actively nurtured for the next 30 years. Our visit reinvigorated this long-standing connection.

On our last night in Bangkok, Crown Princess Sirindhorn hosted a dinner for us at her palace. Both she and Dr. Juree Vichit-Vadakan, who leads NIDA’s Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society, expressed interest in helping to grow IU’s programs in South-east Asian languages and cultures. Their interest reflected the importance of our alumni — and notably in this case, our alumnae — in fostering support for areas of academic strength at Indiana University, regardless of nationality.

Singapore
From Bangkok, we flew to Singapore, where we found a booming economy and two institutions with far-reaching plans for the future. At the National University of Singapore, we signed a primary agreement with the university and a sub-agreement between the IU Center on Philanthropy and the NUS School of Business’s Asia Center for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy, which is led by UT–Austin-trained economist Audrey Chia. Professor Emeritus Wolfgang Bielefeld was there to represent the Center on Philanthropy.

Jakarta and Yogyakarta, Indonesia
In Jakarta, Michael presented the Hart Benton medal to Alex Tilaar, one of Indonesia’s foremost educational scholars. Alex’s wife, Martha, is a highly successful entrepreneur and active philanthropist.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
We ended our trip with a quick visit to Kuala Lumpur, where we enjoyed the company of more than 200 alumni at an extremely successful event for the Malaysian chapter. There are more than 3,600 IU alumni in Malaysia, the highest total of any chapter outside the USA in pure numbers. The event was planned for 150 attendees, but within the first half hour, stacks of chairs were being carted into the ballroom to accommodate everyone who showed up.

Dr. Hayati Mohd Dahan, a 1984 Kelley School of Business alumna who now directs the Office of International Affairs at Universiti Teknologi MARA, was elected the new chapter president that evening. She and her colleague Aina Othman are bringing tremendous energy and organizational skill to a group of alumni with a deep sense of connection to IU. The spirit of Hoosier warmth and openness to world cultures, along with our willingness to bridge the distance and bring IU to them, made the evening especially meaningful and bodes well for the future of the chapter.

IU GOES MOBILE
This summer, IU President Michael A. McRobbie and first lady Laurie Burns McRobbie completed a four-country visit to Southeast Asia on behalf of the university. Over the course of 11 days, they established or renewed formal agreements with three universities and connected with more than 600 IU alumni at events throughout the region. Below, Laurie McRobbie shares an insider’s view of these travels.

Stop 1: BANGKOK, THAILAND
Stop 2: SINGAPORE
Stop 3 & 4: JAKARTA AND YOGYAKARTA, INDONESIA
Stop 5: KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

“In Southeast Asia, as here in the U.S., women are finding ways to make change happen in their communities, their businesses, and the history of their nations.” — Tyagan Miller, Laurie McRobbie