

Robbie Fried: Outstanding Young Alumnus 2013

by Jean Elliott

At the age of four, Robbie Fried informed his grandmother that he would start his own business when he was 22. Perhaps a bit precocious for such a young lad, Fried nonetheless tapped into his entrepreneurial roots, along with his majors in communication and political science, to beat his prediction by a year.

Fried hammered out his business plan in a Chinese dorm room two months before his 2009 graduation from Virginia Tech. The Chinese Language Institute (CLI), which Fried co-founded with his brother, Brad, fills a void that Robbie had encountered from his own experience.

Fried first visited China after his sophomore year and was completely enthralled. He returned for a semester to fully engage, but found the local classes uninspiring. He also had trouble locating appropriate programs that provided a homestay. The problem, however, became a source of motivation. The spring of his senior year, on an independent study program that he coordinated with then-Associate Professor of Communication Edd Sewell, Fried expressed his vision on paper, borrowed \$10,000 from a group of businessmen whom his father knew, and started CLI.

Officially affiliated with Guangxi Normal University, CLI promises a total immersion experience in Chinese culture. Students receive intensive, one-on-one Chinese language instruction, participate in a variety of excursions around the country, and have the option of living in integrated housing with Chinese graduate students.

After operating out of an apartment for its first 18 months, CLI renovated a previously vacant five-story building in January 2011; the building also provides dorm and living space

for students and mentors. The institute serves students from more than 25 countries and offers highly personalized service—from help with admissions to visa assistance to customized study itineraries.

“CLI is a committed partner that can bridge the gap and make connections,” said Fried. “We offer a vast array of resources. We are a full-service provider.”

Since its inception, CLI has hosted hundreds of students from about 50 universities worldwide, including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Oxford. From Israeli diplomats to dozens of Peace Corps volunteers, from a multilingualist in his 70s to a five-year-old child, CLI has served a diversity of clients. It was recently recognized by *Forbes* as one of the top study-abroad companies in China.

Virginia Tech has entrusted Fried with more than 130 Hokie students and faculty. The College of Engineering has partnered with CLI the past three summers, and the Pamplin College of Business has booked two six-week China-study tours. In March, CLI coordinated its second annual 10-day Executive Master in Natural Resources residency, and a 12-day excursion is planned for the Virginia Tech Alumni Association this fall.

Sewell, who led the inaugural study-tour from Virginia Tech in 2010, praised Fried’s operation. “Our group learned about international communication, Chinese history, and sustainable tourism by visiting media companies and government bureaus,” said Sewell. “Students also engaged with Chinese students in five-minute ‘speed-dating’ conversations designed to do away with misconceptions. What a win-win opportunity for everyone.”



Cory Donovan

A third-generation entrepreneur, Robbie Fried founded the Chinese Language Institute while he was still an undergraduate at Virginia Tech.