

Hamel Center: Passport to Opportunity (continued)

Thursday, March 22, 2012

⋮



THE HARDEST THING I'VE EVER DONE

“IT WAS PROBABLY THE HARDEST THING I’VE EVER DONE,” UNH ALUMNA ERICA BERTOLOTTO ’06 SAYS OF HER IROP EXPERIENCE. A POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS DUAL MAJOR, SHE WENT TO TANZANIA DURING THE SUMMER OF 2005, WHERE SHE STUDIED CHILD LABOR IN THE COUNTRY’S IRINGA REGION WHILE LIVING WITH A LOCAL FAMILY. THOUGH SHE CONSIDERED HERSELF WELL TRAVELLED—SHE’D GROWN UP IN ITALY AND STUDIED ABROAD IN NICARAGUA—SHE WASN’T PREPARED FOR THE AMOUNT OF ATTENTION SHE ATTRACTED AS A WHITE PERSON IN TANZANIA. “I FOUND IT VERY ALIENATING.”

YET HER TANZANIA EXPERIENCE ALSO CONFIRMED THAT SHE WANTED TO ENTER INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. AT ONE PLANTATION, THE GREEK OWNER TOOK HER TO PACKAGING PLANTS WHERE CHILDREN HUNG TOBACCO TO DRY IN DARK, SMOKY ROOMS THAT MADE HER EYES BURN.

HER RESEARCH “HELPED ME UNDERSTAND THAT THESE ISSUES ARE REALLY COMPLEX,” SHE SAYS. “IT MADE ME REALIZE THAT ELIMINATING CHILD LABOR BY PREVENTING CHILDREN FROM WORKING WOULDN’T SOLVE UNDERLYING PROBLEMS THAT CAUSE CHILD LABOR.”

AFTER GETTING A MASTER’S DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FROM THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS, BERTOLOTTO WORKED FOR A LOCAL NGO IN PERU. NOW SHE’S AT TEACH A MAN TO FISH, A LONDON-BASED ORGANIZATION THAT HELPS SCHOOLS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES GENERATE NEW INCOME SOURCES THROUGH EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS.

HER WORK OFTEN TAKES HER TO EAST AFRICA, WHERE SHE TRAINS SCHOOL STAFF IN DEVELOPING BUSINESS PLANS. SHE OFTEN FINDS HERSELF USING THE CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE SHE ACQUIRED DURING HER STAY IN TANZANIA. “IT HELPS TO UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT WHEN TALKING ABOUT STARTING UP A BUSINESS,” SHE SAYS.

First of Its Kind

Begun with a U.S. Department of Education grant in 1997, IROP was the first program of its kind at a U.S. university. “We had students back in the early years who had never been out of the country, who had never ridden in an airplane, who had an international research experience paid for by the university,” says Professor of History Cathy Frierson, who co-founded IROP with Donna Brown, the center’s director from 1987 to 2010. “It’s enormous value-added to the degree.”

Indeed, many students find their IROP having an impact long after they return home. Inspired by her IROP experience, Keyes joined other UNH nursing students on a winter break trip to Ghana, where she trained workers at five health centers. Perhaps the most powerful moment came when she resuscitated a baby born via emergency caesarian section — and the baby lived. Now she hopes to return to Uganda this summer to follow up on the work she did last year.

Andrew McKernan '09, a Russian studies and linguistics major, received an IROP in 2008 to study echoes of Stalinist architecture in modern construction. The trip gave him an unvarnished view of the Russian research experience: He struggled to get access to some 20th century documents because of laws that kept them in the inheritor’s possession, even as he was impressed by the detailed materials in the archives open to him.

McKernan and Frierson, his faculty mentor, say the IROP contributed to his both winning a Fulbright to study in Russia in 2009-10 and receiving offers with full funding from two leading Ph.D. programs. Though he spent a year in graduate school at the University of Illinois, he decided he wanted to pursue his passion for creative writing and is back at UNH working toward an M.F.A. in fiction.

Yet his experience in Russia continues to resonate. He recalls attending performances at the Taganka Theatre, known for its association with dissident artists. “That’s still inspiring to me to think of,” he says. Ultimately, his IROP “opened up new avenues at the same time as it helped me with what I was trying to do.”

Editor’s Note: This is the second in a three-part series looking at the impact of the Hamel Center on student learning. Next week’s story will focus on the center’s opportunities for first-year and creative arts students. [Read the first story here.](#)

[<< BACK](#)

Originally published by:

UNH Today

WRITTEN BY SONIA SCHERR, '13 MFA.



University of New Hampshire

UNH Today is produced for the UNH community and for friends of UNH.
The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).
Email us: unhtoday.editor@unh.edu.

[MANAGE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION](#) [CONTACT US](#)

Like us on Facebook

Follow us on Twitter

Follow us on YouTube

Follow us on Instagram

Find us on LinkIn

UNH Today RSS feeds

UNH Today • UNH Main Directory: 603-862-1234
Copyright © 2021 • TTY Users: 7-1-1 or 800-735-2964 (Relay NH)
[USNH Privacy Policies](#) • [USNH Terms of Use](#) • [ADA Acknowledgement](#)