

Great Expectations

SERVICE LEARNING TRIPS TO INDIA AND THAILAND CHANGE THE WAY VERA BELAZELKOSKA '09 AND LAURA GROGGEL '08 VIEW THE WORLD AND THEIR PLACE IN IT.

By J. Trout Lowen PHOTOGRAPHED BY BILL KELLEY

CULTURE SHOCK: THAT FIRST STOMACH-CHURNING feeling of disorientation that comes with being a stranger in a strange land, often gets a bad rap. It carries with it a whiff of blame, unpreparedness or naïveté. But some scientists think that culture shock has benefits, too. It can open up new insights into both the home culture and the new culture and inspire us to learn new things.

That's especially true for two St. Olaf students whose experiences both abroad and at home galvanized their desire to work for peace and justice.

Vera Belazelkoska '09 and Laura Groggel '08 were recognized this academic year for their commitment to peace and justice with scholarships from the Vincent L. Hawkinson Foundation, named for the late reverend who served as pastor of Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis for 30 years.

No stranger to culture shock, Belazelkoska was 14 years old when her parents, concerned about increasing terrorism and violence, left behind their comfortable home in the Macedonian capital city of Skopje in the Balkans for a new life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"It was a very big change," Belazelkoska admits.

One of the hardest things to get used to was the loss of family connection. "My whole extended family lived within a couple of blocks of each other," she says. "It was hard not having them around any more. American families seem to live all over the place."

Belazelkoska's decision to attend St. Olaf brought with it another kind of culture shock. In high school, she craved the excitement of a big city and wanted a big urban campus. So when her high school economics teacher, St. Olaf alumnus Dave Johnson '95, began talking to her about a small Lutheran college surrounded by cornfields, Belazelkoska resisted. But Johnson kept encouraging her to take a look.

"When you get to know your students well enough, it becomes crystal clear," Johnson explains. "Vera really thrives in an environment where you develop personal relationships, and St. Olaf helps you forge them in beautiful ways."

Already set on Chicago's Loyola University, Belazelkoska agreed to visit St. Olaf. "I just fell in love with the college and the community," she recalls.

A political science and economics double major, Belazelkoska has found a home at St. Olaf that she never expected, and through her academic work, service trips and student groups, she believes she's also found her life's calling: to promote peace and justice through international development.

"Every time something angers me I read up on it. I try to spread the word or organize a meeting or attend a peace rally," she says.

Through service learning, Belazelkoska has also confronted oppression and injustice up close and in person. Her understanding of homelessness and public policy grew during a January Interim experience in Washington, D.C., and her continued leadership in

Ole Spring Relief — in which St. Olaf students travel to New Orleans and Mississippi to assist with Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts — has deepened her desire to serve.

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VERA BELAZELKOSKA '09

But it was the summer she spent at the McKean Rehabilitation Institute in Chiang Mai, Thailand, that perhaps had the most impact on Belazelkoska. Luyen Phan '92, St. Olaf's international student adviser, used his 2006 Lilly International Service Learning program grant to take five St. Olaf students to the Buraphaniwet Village where they worked with leprosy patients.

"I've never had such grassroots contact with people who are suffering from such a bad disease," she admits. "The physical disability is hard to get past, but their spirits are so high . . . these are people who have lost everything in their lives and who have been shunned by their own families. Yet they have so much hope for the future."

A WORLD OF INJUSTICE

Unlike Belazelkoska, the move to Northfield was a more comfortable transition for Laura Groggel, who grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. Culture shock struck her in a most unlikely place: at home during fall break. "I was home with my father and



we went to see [the film] *Hotel Rwanda*," she recalls. Horrified and angered by the international community's seeming indifference to Rwandan genocide, she stayed up late talking with her father.

"I was 18 years old and this was the first time I'd heard about 800,000 people being killed for racial and cultural reasons," she explains. "I came back to campus and needed to put that anger into an outlet. That's how I got involved with Amnesty International."

Groggel added a concentration in Africa and the Americas to her declared majors in music and women's studies. She became president of the St. Olaf chapter of Amnesty International during her junior year and organized Human Rights Week, raising money for CARE International's relief efforts in Sudan's Darfur region.

But she longed for hands-on experience. That opportunity came in 2005 when she received a Kloeck-Jenson Scholarship for Peace and Justice Internships that allowed her to travel abroad. In January 2007, filled with anticipation, Groggel boarded a plane bound for Orissa, on India's eastern coast, to volunteer at an orphanage.

"The day before I was to leave I was completely frightened because I was going on my own," she recalls. "When I stepped off the plane, my fears completely disappeared."

"International service is what I am called to do with my life."

LAURA GROGCEL '08

The six weeks she spent at the orphanage tested her. Conditions were grim. The children weren't hungry, but they were malnourished, living on an unchanging diet of potato curry and rice, with no fruits or vegetables.

"An eight-year-old child looked like a

five-year-old because of the malnourishment," she says.

The children slept two or three to a single bed, gnawed on by bed bugs. While many were orphans, some, especially the girls, had been given up because their parents couldn't afford to provide dowries. Despite their hardships, Groggel says, the children seemed happy and thankful for what they had.

"That was the hardest thing for me," she says, "seeing how happy they were and not knowing if that was a good thing or if it was sad because they didn't know what they were missing."

Coming home was difficult. Groggel had become attached to the children and she felt like she was doing more good at the orphanage than she could at school. Against the starkness of the orphanage, her life seemed carelessly easy, and her friends' concerns about boys and clothes seemed trivial. She even contemplated dropping out of school to return to India. But Groggel found sympathy and perspective talking with Social Work Professor Mary Carlsen '78 and English Professor Jonathan Hill. "They listened and they asked about my trip and they really understood where I was coming from," she says.

REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Groggel's feelings aren't unusual for students returning from a service-learning experience, says Carlsen, who tries to help them take the long view. "When they see so much possibility for their energy, their smarts, their time and their resources, they just want to do it all right now. My job," says Carlsen, "is to say 'when you do it, you'll be better equipped if today you sit in class and learn about economic theory or strategies of helping families to communicate or political history in a certain country you care about.'"

After graduating this spring, Groggel will travel to South Africa to research working conditions and the use of sweatshop labor. Afterward, she intends to join the Peace Corps and hopes for a placement in West Africa. "The main thing I came back with from India," she says, "is that international service, on whatever level, is what I am called to do with my life."

Similarly, Belazelkoska felt the pain of reverse culture shock after she left the leprosy center in Thailand. "It was very difficult leaving because I grew attached to the patients and the staff, who were just wonderful people," she explains. "Even though I might not think about this every day, I feel like a lot of my decisions are subconsciously impacted by what I saw and what I experienced."

Her experiences also cemented her desire to pursue a career in international development. She plans to use her Hawkinson Foundation scholarship award to study in Namibia, and she's looking for an internship with a nongovernmental organization in its capital city, Windhoek.

Where ever her journey takes her, Belazelkoska knows she'll be guided by her mentor, Dave Johnson, and the inscription on a necklace he gave her bearing a quotation by one of her heroes, Mahatma Gandhi: "We must be the change we wish to see in the world."

"We can't wait for change to happen," Belazelkoska says. "We must be the change." 🦋

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