

Education majors spend summer teaching in Chile

by David Williams - Tuesday, August 17, 2010

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While in college, students forge relationships that last well beyond four years and, in some cases, span many miles.

In June, three University of Wisconsin Oshkosh students ventured to the southern hemisphere to visit former classmates who studied at UW Oshkosh through an exchange program with Universidad Bernardo O'Higgins (UBO) in Chile.

Their reunion with the international students kicked off a summer spent volunteering through Languages Open Doors, a UWO-sponsored program run by the Chilean Ministry of Education. A total of five UW Oshkosh students participated in the 10-week experience in 2010, the first time the University has formally offered the program.

"Languages Open Doors is a wonderful way for students to spend a significant amount of time in an immersion environment at a very low cost," said Jenna Graff, director of the Office of International Education at UWO, who hopes to expand the Languages Open Doors program next year.

The students will return to the U.S. at the end of August.

Claire Staats, a social studies and Spanish education/international studies major, and Christian Vanseth, majoring in Spanish education and English as a second language (ESL), were among the volunteers. Staats, of Milwaukee, and Vanseth, of New Lisbon, spoke about their experiences in Chile via e-mail:

What motivated you to volunteer for Languages Open Doors?

Staats and Vanseth: "We wanted to gain more teaching experience in the area of ESL education as well as utilize and improve our Spanish-speaking abilities."

What did you hope to gain from the experience?

Vanseth: "I hoped to gain an understanding of the Chilean schools through a hands-on experience, working alongside the students and teachers. Also, I hoped to live in and understand another culture of the Spanish-speaking world."

Staats: "I wanted to learn more about the Latin American education system and see the similarities and differences of the American education system. Through this, teachers of students from Latin America know more about the educational background of those students."

What were you most excited about?

Vanseth: “I was excited to see my Chilean friends that were exchange students at UW Oshkosh last fall. I was eager to experience another culture outside of the United States. I was also optimistic about working with Chilean students to gain more experience teaching. Finally, as Claire and I ultimately would like to teach abroad, this is a fantastic first experience for us.”

Staats: “I was excited to work with the Chilean students. I was in Chile two years ago on a semester-long study abroad program, and the highlight of it was being able to teach English in my free time. Since I enjoyed that so much, it made me even more excited to work with Chilean students again.”

Tell a little about what you are doing in Chile.

Staats and Vanseth: “When we arrived in May, we shadowed the English classes of our Chilean friends at Universidad Bernardo O’Higgins. There we met the director of English education, Viviana Ortega. Through her, we began doing presentations about life in Oshkosh and the United States versus that of Chile.

“After working with the university in Santiago, we began our program for Languages Open Doors. The first week, we were in a hostel for orientation. There we learned about the education system in Chile as well as what the program is about. After orientation, we received our school placements. We were both placed in the Puente Alto region of Santiago. Claire was placed in a public school, Colegio Consolidada. Christian was placed at Colegio Altazor, a semi-private school.

“At our schools, our purpose is to supplement listening and speaking activities.”

What has been the highlight of the trip?

Staats and Vanseth: “Thus far, we have to say that the highlight of the trip was a cookout with the teachers of Colegio Altazor for the Chile vs. Spain match of the World Cup. During any game of the World Cup that Chile was a part of, businesses and schools closed down early, and Colegio Altazor was no different.

“For this particular match, the teachers invited Claire and me to a cookout outside the music room. Preparations for this game included grilling, snacks, friendly conversation and, of course, beer. The game was shown via projector in the music room. Even though Chile lost, they still celebrated afterward because they qualified for the second round.”

How do you think your experiences in Chile will benefit you in your future endeavors?

Staats and Vanseth: “This will be a long-term investment that will provide us with an invaluable experience that will make us more employable in the future.”

What is your dream job?

Vanseth: “My dream job is to travel abroad, experiencing culture and people through teaching English.”

Staats: “My dream job is teaching history at bilingual English-Spanish high schools in various countries.

I think traveling and teaching abroad like this is an essential part of teaching social studies, where you explore geography, world cultures, etc.”

Any advice for other students engaging in study abroad-type experiences?

Staats and Vanseth: “If possible, take the opportunity to get involved in a study abroad experience. It’s a sound investment that will teach you about a new culture, improve your language skills, help you meet life-long friends and broaden your future career opportunities.”

Tell a little about your work in the schools.

Vanseth: “I work at Colegio Altazor, a semi-private school for grades K-12, with three wonderful English teachers who know how to motivate and teach using meaningful activities. They are incredibly open-minded to the methods that I learned from the education program at UW Oshkosh.

“Likewise, I have learned a lot from them, such as discipline strategies, teaching methods, Spanish and useful activities to teach a language. They have gone above and beyond to make me feel welcome in the school and Chile in general. Any problem that I may have during my stay in Chile is no problem too big for them to handle. They have done anything and everything they can to help me out here.

“The students have shown me a great deal of respect and show interest in the activities that I lead. The school has a wide range of resources for me to do basically any language activity I can think of. The other great aspect of the school is that all students start learning English in kindergarten, so everyone gets the opportunity to practice English with me.”

Staats: “I have been working at a public school, which is a completely different experience from Christian’s. My school receives very little funding from the government. Teachers bring their own white-board markers, coffee mugs and even toilet paper. The school owns some electronic materials, but they may or may not function.

“The students do not have much money, either. Even though they are expected to bring their own materials, many simply bring a pencil and notebook to class. Although the public school system has many problems, all of the students are interested in learning and try their best in my class. They are what I love most about my school.”

What is it like being a foreigner in Chile?

Staats and Vanseth: “The families we live with, people we have met and the students we work with are very friendly and helpful. Chile is quite a homogeneous country. When we walk down the street, people notice that we’re foreign. It is also frustrating to feel as if there are certain cultural differences that will never be fully understood here. For example, it is typical for children to live with their parents until they are 25-35 years old and married. As a result, it is difficult for many of them to understand what it is like for us, as college students, to live on our own.

“Finally, the language is a challenge. Chile seems to have its own language. The rhythm, accent and ‘Chileanisms’ are nothing like what we learned in formal Spanish classes.”

How have you gotten along with your host families?

Staats and Vanseth: “Once the program began, we moved in with host families provided by the program. The families have been so warm and welcoming towards us. They have done so much to make sure we feel comfortable and safe. They have shown us around Santiago and different parts of Chile. The parents care for us as if we were their own children. Everyone claims their mom’s food is the best cooking. Well, our Chilean mothers cook the best Chilean food.”

- For more information about studying abroad and the Office of International Education, visit www.uwosh.edu/oie.