

Trip to Tanzania will afford students new perspective, appreciation

by David Williams - Thursday, December 20, 2007

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/284/trip-to-tanzania-will-afford-students-new-perspective-appreciation/>

It's one thing to learn about impoverished countries in a classroom; quite another to go to one and see the effects of poverty firsthand.

Early next year, a new study abroad program at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh will send 22 students halfway around the world to Tanzania. Poverty and Privilege, offered through the Office of International Education, not only will immerse students in a new culture with its own unique problems, but also will give them the opportunity to help.

"We picked Tanzania because at the moment it's one of the safest countries in Africa, but it's also one of the poorest," said interim Women's Studies director Liz Cannon, who, along with associate professor Carmen Heider, developed the syllabus and other aspects of the program.

As faculty leaders, Cannon and Heider will accompany the students on their trip from Jan. 11 to 28, which will include visits to a coffee plantation, an orphanage, hospitals, schools and other organizations. On Jan. 16, they will assist a community with the construction of a secondary school.

"The point is to learn more about issues related to poverty ... listening to what the Tanzanians have to say about it so that we can learn more about their perspective," said Heider, of Fond du Lac.

The project will focus on how poverty affects health care, education, gender roles and other social issues. Students will have the chance to interact with Tanzanians as they go about their daily routines — from working at a mine or a dam to contending with the AIDS epidemic at a rural hospital.

Throughout the trip, students and the faculty leaders will gather in the evening to reflect on what they have seen.

"We'll lead students in discussion sessions to process what we've seen and discuss the challenges that arise," Heider said.

The UW Oshkosh group also will have the chance to see the more touristy side of Africa, including sightseeing at national parks, going on a safari in the Serengeti and visiting a Maasai village. Between the natural beauty and the exposure to a unique culture, Heider expects there will be plenty to take the students' breath away.

"There's stunning beauty but also stunning poverty," she said.

'A little bit of change makes a big difference'

The Poverty and Privilege program is not connected to any one academic department. Its three credits are not a mandatory component of any major. And it will cost students roughly \$3,600 — not to mention several days of travel — to make the trek to Tanzania.

Yet 30 students applied for the 22 available slots for 2008.

“What I really love is that it’s so unique,” said senior Katie Parenteau, 24, of Oshkosh. “We as students and as a University get to go to these wonderful places and really help people.”

Parenteau hopes to gain a broader perspective on life and looks forward to sharing “luxuries that we don’t recognize as luxuries,” such as coloring books and crayons, to the Tanzanians.

Other participants in this program include communications majors and women’s studies minors as well as students of English, journalism, religious studies and other disciplines — reinforcing the idea that the global context of poverty transcends any one field of study.

“I’m one of those weird people who loves to be taken out of their element. I love experiencing that uneasy feeling and really opening my eyes to the fact that there’s a whole world out there,” said Parenteau, an organizational administration major.

Of course, \$3,600 isn’t exactly pocket change. Parenteau, who is no stranger to saving money, knew she would to get some help of her own before she could help anyone else. Her solution: setting aside loose change every day.

“People don’t always believe me when I say that a little bit of change makes a big difference, but having a change jar paid for my first year of college and a part of my car,” she said.

Since there are more than 1 million orphaned children in Tanzania, Parenteau decided to distribute baby bottles to anyone interested in helping her save up money. Labor of Love, a local maternity home that provides support for women facing unplanned pregnancy, donated the bottles, which Parenteau passed out to her coworkers at Community First Credit Union in Appleton.

“The response was overwhelming. I passed out more than 100 bottles, and the total came to \$897.04 over about four and a half weeks,” she said, adding that she raised the rest of the money for her trip a study abroad grant and donations from friends and family.

Parenteau said she is most looking forward to working with the children at the orphanages in Tanzania.

The two faculty leaders hope the trip will help students see connections as the differences between cultures and to redefine what privilege means.

“We want to dispel the myth that the U.S. is better because of our wealth and our privilege,” said Cannon, of Columbus, Wis.

Heider expects that everyone who participates in the program will grow from the experience.

“I hope to learn more about different ways of understanding the world. I also hope to learn about myself. I’m open to being challenged,” she said.

And for those who wish follow in their footsteps, there are plans to offer the program every two years, with the next trip scheduled for 2010.

For more information about Poverty and Privilege, visit the Office of International Education at <http://www.uwosh.edu/oie/abroad/tanzania.php>.