

Our Hands in the World



Goddard students often find that their off-campus studies inspire them to break out and explore the world around them. Here, three students share their experiences learning in new cultures, new languages and even new religious traditions. **BY ELEANOR KOHLSAAT (HAS '07)**

DIGGING INTO OTHER CULTURES Maya Lukoff, a student in the Individualized Bachelor of Arts Program, harvests potatoes with a friend in Ecuador. Maya has spent each semester in a different Latin American country, learning about sustainable agriculture and indigenous cultures.

When students first experience Goddard's unique low-residency arrangement, in which most of the semester is spent off-campus, they're frequently surprised to find their study plans evolving to reflect the influence of their home environments. Other students arrive at school already engaged with their communities and eager to incorporate their passion into their academic work.

Either way, Goddard students often possess a remarkable level of involvement with the world around them. Here are three students whose college education is taking place as much in the world as it is behind their desks.

Anderson's Path Leads to Islam

It's not unusual for someone recovering from drug or alcohol dependency to rediscover their spirituality. But for Micah Anderson, the experience led him toward a religious tradition other than his own: he converted to Islam 10 years ago.

Now he's writing a memoir about his recovery from substance abuse and his subsequent travels and pursuing his bachelor's degree in independent studies at Goddard, focusing on identity and cultural issues surrounding Western Muslim converts.

"I'm interested in Islamic conversion as a path of social resistance in the states," Micah says. "For me, choosing to be a Muslim in the wake of 9/11, I was essentially trying to make a break with my heritage. Becoming a Muslim was a way I could absolve myself and not be a part of the Christian, white-dominated paradigm that I saw.... I wanted to make a step that was not just talk."

Raised in the Protestant faith – his father is a pastor – Micah struggled with drug and alcohol abuse during his teens.



A MATTER OF FAITH
Micah Anderson
 converted to Islam
 during his recovery
 from substance
 abuse. A former
 Protestant, he
 has spent the last
 semester writing a
 memoir about his
 experiences from
 his home in Jakarta,
 Indonesia, where he
 works as an English
 teacher and lives
 with his Indonesian
 wife and son, Tariq.

After a decade of following twelve-step programs, he grew disenchanted with the approach and became interested in Buddhism.

While traveling through India pursuing Buddhist meditation practice, Micah encountered Islam. Immediately, he says, he felt an affinity.

“From a political and social aspect, I’ve always been interested in Malcolm X, punk rock and hip-hop culture,” he says. “And I had a framework from Christianity that was monotheistic. I started drifting away from Buddhism, and I ended up converting to Islam a couple of years after I got back from India.”

Despite his views on faith and social resistance, Micah emphasizes he has no use for the radical branch of Islam. “I love my country. I’m happy to be an American,” he says. “I may disagree with some of our foreign policies, but a lot of people do.”

After 9/11, Micah recalls, there was a realization within his Muslim community that lines were being drawn. “We had to make it clear which side we were on. And that was the side of nonviolence.”

For the past four years, Micah has been living in Jakarta, Indonesia, teaching English. He’s married to an Indonesian woman, Sarah, and they have an infant son, Tariq (Arabic for “the path”).

Though his past forays into formal education weren’t fruitful, Micah decided to go back to school to get a teaching degree. Initially, he chose Goddard because the low-residency requirement was a good fit, but by the time he’d finished the application process he was already rethinking his goals. “Goddard kind of blew me wide open,” he says. “I started really questioning and deconstructing what my intentions were. Is that really my dream [to be a teacher]; is that what I wanted to do with my life?”

Having spent the past semester writing his memoir and gaining insight into his past, Micah now says he’s considering studying psychology and counseling at Goddard.

His son was a big factor in his decision to get his degree, he says. “Having a baby really changed everything and gave me a sense that I wanted to pursue something deeper,” he says. “It’s

almost as if my Goddard experience is not just for me: it’s for him, it’s for my wife. I hope my family can benefit from my experience as well.”

Learning the Lay of the Land in Latin America

All it takes is one glance at Maya Lukoff’s blog to perceive her deep affection and reverence for the people and landscapes of Latin America. It’s plain that these communities have captured Maya’s heart. So it’s not surprising that her work at Goddard focuses on studying how globalization has changed Andean agricultural practices, indigenous communities – specifically women – and the land ethic.

Maya created her blog to illustrate her travels through Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador and Guatemala while she completes her bachelor’s degree in individualized studies.

“Most development projects focus on increasing production, often by importing outside resources and then providing market access, with the goal being global market integration,” Maya says. “This is often damaging to the continuity of community, culture and land sustainability. In my travels, I’ve seen how this pattern of cultural degradation leads directly to land degradation. One example I saw was in an Ecuadorian community that shifted to growing only blackberries for export, and when that market collapsed, they were left with tons of blackberries and no market for them.”

Instead of steering them away from their culture, Maya’s goal is to offer Latin American communities agricultural training that gives them the chance to decide how they want to integrate, or not, into the global economy.

Maya’s preferred approach is to stay in the communities she researches, either with a local host family or by renting her own living quarters. In the process, she’s developed some strong friendships, despite the cultural and language barriers. In Bolivia, she became close to a woman who helped her run a community garden and assisted as her translator for Aymaran, the indigenous language spoken in Bolivia. “That was a really great experience,” she says. “I’m still in contact with her.”

Maya’s senior project at Goddard involves interviewing women in Bolivia and Ecuador and comparing their perceptions of nature with those of women who work in industrialized agriculture in northern California, where her family lives.

“One of the big differences that has come up so far is that the women [of Latin America] place an intrinsic value on nature,” Maya says. “According to many of the women I’ve interviewed, everything in nature is alive. There’s life in the rocks, there’s life in water.

“Having an ethical constraint and an emotional connection to the earth is something we’ve kind of lost with industrial



To see Maya’s photos from Latin America and learn more about her work, go to her blog at: http://web.me.com/lukoff/Latin_American_Adventures/HOME.html.

farming, and it's clearly leading us down an unsustainable path."

At one point, Maya had been enrolled in a conventional four-year college, studying global politics. But she quickly realized she didn't want to be confined to a classroom. "I was looking for more freedom to explore my passions." Goddard offered her the opportunity to pursue her bachelor's degree while completely immersing herself in the cultures she was studying. "I wanted to learn about Latin American culture firsthand," she says. "Goddard has been a wonderful fit. At what other school can you spend every semester abroad?"

Language as the Key to Unlocking Other Cultures

Erin Wilson knows that sometimes, in order to understand yourself, you have to become somebody else.

Among many other positive experiences – including meeting her husband – Erin says one of the biggest benefits of travel is the way it allows her to step outside her usual way of seeing the world and become part of another culture. The turning point occurred, she says, when she was 21 and visited Morocco for the first time. "The north African culture was really hospitable, and



EXPLORING THE WORLD Erin Wilson says her travels have allowed her to immerse herself in other cultures. Now a student in the IMA program, she is looking at how culture plays a role in consciousness.

people were open to having me in their homes," she says. "I was welcomed by so many different families.... It made a huge impact on me."

Four years later, on a return trip, Erin met her husband. "I met him while I was teaching English in Casablanca. He lived in the same neighborhood as I did. Moroccan hospitality and neighborhood gossip drew us together," she recalls, laughing.

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ERIN WILSON, IMA STUDENT, ON HER TRAVELS IN MOROCCO

Before recently deciding to return to the United States, the couple had been living in the United Arab Emirates, where Erin was training primary school teachers to teach classes in English. "We wanted to explore America together a bit," she says. "He's never been here before."

As a bachelor's degree student at Goddard, Erin studied identity politics and postcolonialism as well as language acquisition theory. "I was especially interested in how people's identities are affected by the languages they speak, or might be forced to speak, in postcolonial situations," she says. "I was living in Morocco for a lot of that BA, so that was relevant. The way I've always survived living abroad was as an English teacher."

Erin's own process of language acquisition was eye opening. "I learned to speak French pretty quickly, and my Arabic is passable," she says. "Just the experience of being allowed to enter into a whole other culture and be Moroccan – it was interesting to me to have this flexible identity. I could be a whole different person and experience a whole different way of thinking."

The shift in perspective that comes with learning new languages changed how she related to the world, she explains. "It made me more open, more patient, more willing to understand other people's points of view."

Now a student in Goddard's Individualized Master of Arts Program, Erin has expanded her focus to include consciousness studies along with yoga teacher certification. "I'm thinking about ways I can tie them together," she says.

Her final project will explore the role culture plays in creating consciousness, specifically Islamic feminine consciousness. She plans to weave her own experiences and perceptions with those of the Muslim women she interviews to produce a kind of autoethnographic study.

"I'd like to create a new career for myself," she says. "I've been feeling a bit constrained by traditional job titles, like ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher, which is my profession right now. I don't always like my options.

"I'll probably always be a language teacher of some kind," she says. "I know I want [my career] to be physical and interpersonal, and helpful to people who interact with different cultures on a daily basis." 