

B.A. IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES PROGRAM NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2008

ISSUE 1

PEACE CORPS: DISPATCH FROM BENIN, WEST AFRICA, BY AARON FORBES, BAIS GRADUATE, FALL 2005

In January, 2006 I walked the plank in a hotel ballroom, with a few hundred other UNO graduates. At that time, my city was still turned upside down and my life was all rearranged just like most people's furniture in the flood ravaged neighborhoods. Opportunities to stay at home and help rebuild opened and en suite closed. I was in limbo, so to speak.

Circumstance and logic eventually led me to where I am now, a small village in the heart of West Africa, with the Peace Corps. The name Benin should conjure up certain sentiments for most anyone who knows their Louisiana history and a bit about West African culture. This is the place from whence came voodoo, syncopated drum beats, our cuisine, and, in both the figurative and literal senses of the term, much of our spice.

So now, what thought process brought me to the

conclusion that it would be a good idea to spend two years in a village where I'd have no running water, no electricity, no po-boys, no corner bars, and limited contact with family and friends back home?

Here's a quick list: non-competitive eligibility for federal employment upon close of service, grad school fellowship opportunities, student loan deferment, French and local language training, two months of skills training in environment, agriculture, and community development, free health care, a monthly living stipend plus a close of service stipend. And of course there is the network of contacts to be established with government agencies and international aid agencies.

What else was promised me? Twenty seven months of adventure and life learning. The adventure began on that flight over the Sahara on a plane with some 60 other vol-

unteers. It hasn't stopped since. I've met the "pope" of the West African Celeste Church on a pilgrimage, I've attended traditional ceremonies, rode on a safari, brought Santa Claus to a village for the first time, done translating work for a documentary film crew, and the list goes on. . .

The first lesson I learned upon arrival was to continue to expect the unexpected. I arrived expecting a grass hut in an unpronounceable village which would be, by most means of transportation, inac-

cessible. I expected complete and utter isolation. I expected poverty at its worst and a life accompanied by a soundtrack of drumbeats, or at least the music of bush birds and crickets.

This last week I celebrated my 6-month anniversary at post. This is truly a mile-marker. Not only because a quarter of my service has been completed but also because I now call this "my village." My village is not on the map. It is that green space of palm trees and swamps, just between two small black dots on the *carte* of Benin. One narrow stretch of asphalt splits us in two and sets us equal-distant between Nigeria and the old colonial capital of Porto-Novo.

Our village is named after the towering Iroko tree. These trees stand out majestically against the green yet ravaged landscape of south-

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BAIS STUDENT ABROAD: SANDRA TRAHAN

Sandra Trahan is starting an exciting semester abroad in London, England. Interning with an international organization and participating in a couple of online classes is keeping her busy. She states she is "absolutely loving it!"



Trahan is working with an organization called Reprieve, a "group of international charities dedicated to assisting in the provision of effective legal representation and humanitarian assistance to impoverished people facing the death penalty at the hands of the

state" (www.reprieve.org.uk). Trahan writes that the organization "produces and publishes information about the use of the death penalty and raises awareness concerning human rights." The program began in New Orleans and

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A MESSAGE FROM THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR

This March marks the fifth anniversary of the official approval of UNO's BA in International Studies Program. In those five years, interrupted midway by the failure of the city's levees and the dislocation of so many of our families, homes, and students, we have grown from a program with three students to a program with nearly 150. It is time, we think, to begin developing ways to talk to each other and to other groups on campus. Welcome, therefore, to the first issue of the *BA in International Studies Newsletter*. We hope that this one will be followed by others in the coming months and years, and that students and faculty in the program will help it along by contributing to it. Our intention is to publish short articles and announcements about what our present BAIS students are doing, about the activities and lives of our graduates, about the research interests and course offerings of our faculty, about job and internship possibilities, and about events on campus and in the city of interest to students in the program. This first issue contains stories in several of these categories. Our lead article was written by **Aaron Forbes (BAIS '05)**, who has joined the Peace Corps and is currently serving in an NGO (non-governmental organization) in the country of Benin, in West Africa. I can think of no better way to inform our readers

about what such service means and what opportunities it offers for personal growth and professional advancement than Aaron's first hand account. Some of our advanced students may remember Aaron. While at UNO, he sought out an internship working with indigenous Tarahumara groups in Chihuahua, Mexico. When he came back from that eventful summer internship, he gave several presentations on campus about the work he did there evaluating a sustainable agricultural system among remote tribes, inaccessible by any means of transportation other than mule-back and foot.

We also include here several articles on some of UNO's study abroad programs and internships, both from the point of view of students and administrators. **Sandra Trahan**, for example, informs us how she is completing her internship requirement in London, England, where she is working for a legal group called Reprieve, which works with death penalty prisoners world-wide.

Another current student, **Aaron Larkin**, contributed an article describing his decision to join the BAIS program and the opportunities it has afforded him so far. Because of Katrina, Aaron's first semesters in the BAIS program were spent in Center Austria's AYA program in Innsbruck, where he arrived with

no knowledge of German. He is now fluent in that language, and has a much clearer idea about his future possibilities in international business. Aaron, a junior, is pursuing two degrees at UNO simultaneously, a BAIS and a BS in Business Administration.

Our editor, English MA student **Matt Mosley**, has also included articles on BAIS graduate **Ines Sigel ('07)**, whose family survived the Siege of Sarajevo of 1992-96 and the levee failures of 2005. In the aftermath of the second catastrophe, Ines, like Aaron Larkin, went to the University of Innsbruck for three semesters sponsored by Center Austria. In two related articles, Matt has interviewed **Michael Thompson**, UNO's coordinator for the Hessen, Germany/LSU System Agreement and the Hessen International Summer Universities Programs, which provide opportunities for UNO students to study in Germany. Other articles cover the **World Affairs Council of New Orleans**, an organization whose mission is to raise the awareness of Louisianans regarding international and global issues. Special membership prices are available to UNO students, and



the organization offers multiple means of participating in their programs, which include dining, discussion groups, social events, and lectures.

Finally, we have included sidebars with information about volunteer opportunities here in the city (BAIS students can still complete their internship requirement by contributing to the local rebuilding effort).

If you would like to contribute an article or have an upcoming event included, please contact our editor, Matt Mosley at msmosley@uno.edu

Enjoy your semester!

John Hazlett, Director
BA in International Studies Program



**SEND STORY SUGGESTIONS
TO MATT MOSLEY:
MSMOSLEY@UNO.COM
OR DR. HAZLETT AT:
BAIS@UNO.EDU**

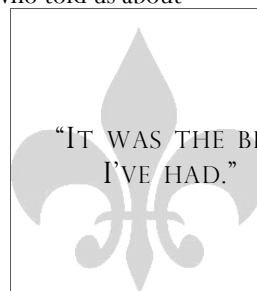
INES SIGEL AND CENTER AUSTRIA

Not everyone is instantly drawn to the BAIS program. Ines Sigel "found out about the International Studies Program through a friend during my second semester at UNO." She was majoring in History, but "studying diplomacy, peace and war, and the functions of international organizations, seemed like an excellent idea." She continues by saying her courses "really helped [her] understand how some

things happen throughout the world, and what the causes are."

Ines spent three semesters studying in Innsbruck. The medieval center of the "Old Town" boasts the imperial palace and church, museums, a multitude of shops and cafes, an exciting nightlife, and a hotel that housed Goethe and Mozart. "I lived with a host family in a village called Thaur right outside of Innsbruck." She states, "It

was the best experience I've had. We did a lot of traveling, partying, outdoor activities, and attended some functions" that included meeting the Mayor, "who told us about the city and its politics."



"IT WAS THE BEST EXPERIENCE I'VE HAD." INES SIGEL

IN HIS OWN WORDS: AARON LARKIN

I can still remember the day when I decided that I was going to pursue a degree in International Studies at UNO. It was a winter afternoon in the Destrehan High School Library. I was 17 years old. Like many at that age and in that situation, I was worried (perhaps prematurely) about the future and wondering what I wanted to study and, ultimately, "do" with my life. Noticing the look on my face (which must have been one of total befuddlement) as I browsed university web sites, I was approached by the particularly caring and motherly head librarian.

She asked me what I wanted to be doing in 10-15 years. I told her I wasn't sure, but that I wanted to travel, work abroad, and hopefully meet some beautiful, exotic foreign women (for a 17 year old in a small southern town, this was a major motivational

factor). She asked me if I'd ever heard of the International Studies program at UNO, and I replied that I hadn't. She went on to tell me about her daughter in law (whose name I only wish I knew and could provide) who had recently graduated with her BAIS and had gone on to work for the State Department in Washington, DC. She was travelling, working with people from all over the world, and was planning to do graduate work at the London School of Economics. Soon thereafter, I had my orientation at UNO, met with Dr. Hazlett, made my decision and haven't looked back.

Shortly thereafter, Hurricane Katrina swept through New Orleans and completely changed the trajectory of my life. However, I was extremely, unbelievably fortunate in that this led to me

being accepted to the University of Innsbruck in Austria as a visiting student on a very generous scholarship. I packed my suitcase, told my mother "I'd call her when I got to Europe" and boarded a plane for Munich to commence what eventually became a two-year stay abroad.

I'd like to use this opportunity to encourage everybody who might be considering studying abroad to give serious consideration to Austria. UNO and the University of Innsbruck have a great partnership and it's an excellent opportunity to study in Europe that more students should be taking advantage of if they have the resources.

I'm back in New Orleans now and after all this time my commitment to my studies has only grown greater and I'm more and more thankful I happened to

sit down and talk with that wonderful woman in the Destrehan High School library. I'm still working towards my BAIS (business track), and I am also pursuing a simultaneous degree in business administration. Thanks to the guidance of Dr. Hazlett and the opportunities presented to me by International Studies at the University of New Orleans, my outlook on the future is very positive and I feel that the opportunities for work, travel, and life are wide open and completely attainable.

I only hope that everybody involved in this program realizes how progressive and dynamic what we're studying is and that with the right attitude, ethics, and work, we've all got the chance to realize those dreams of international lives and adventures we had as 17 year olds.

TRAHAN, CONT.

has an office on Baronne Street (www.repriev.org).

"This semester is shaping up to be incredibly busy," Trahan adds. She works twenty-five hours a week at her internship and is enrolled in Microeconomics and Macroeconomics online courses. Classes are arranged through CAPA, The Centers for Academic Programs Abroad. A program that is "designed for individual students looking for a fully comprehensive, afford-

able program that challenges them both academically and personally" (www.capa.org). She notes the challenges of online courses. "The online classes are a little weird too, one wants a bunch of attention and work...and the other just has a list of chapters to read and a couple of tests."

"UNO HAS SOME OF THE
BEST STUDY ABROAD
PROGRAMS IN LOUISIANA"
MICHAEL THOMPSON

STUDY ABROAD IN GERMANY

Want to study abroad? Now it is easier than ever in Germany. With two new programs designed specially for UNO students, Germany's historic and prestigious universities are now available for all to enjoy.

A new blanket exchange agreement with the German state of Hessen and all Louisiana State Universities makes

available eleven public institutions of higher education in Germany. Only three other universities enjoy similar agreements with Germany: the University of Wisconsin, The University of Massachusetts, and the University of Queensland, Australia. LSU school systems were sought out by the German state of Hessen for this

agreement because of Louisiana students' hard work and positive attitudes in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and Rita, when several of them were granted scholarships to study in Germany.

The agreement allows students to pay UNO tuition in order to attend an institution in Germany,

making it one of the best deals for studying abroad in the country. Students receive rail passes, housing, and a limited meal allowance. Supplementary grants are also available through DAAD (www.daad.de).

Worried about speaking German? Most of the courses being offered in Hessen are in English. As a student, you may wish to enroll in a German language course but it is often not required.

SIGEL, CONT.

Sigel's trip was organized through Center Austria which recently celebrated its 10th year anniversary. As a result of her experience, she decided to donate some money for the program. Sigel says she "felt that I had to give something back to show my appreciation for the generous scholarship I was awarded after Katrina.

After graduating in De-

cember 2007, Sigel has maintained her job of seven years at Drago's Seafood Restaurant. "When I returned from Innsbruck in 2006, I asked for my old job back (hostess), but I was told that the position was filled, so they offered me the management position."

She is currently "looking for new opportunities in the diplomatic field."

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS
CENTER AUSTRIA
1997 - 2007

**10
YEARS**

For information about Study Abroad in Germany, contact Michael Thompson at mjthomp2@uno.edu
<http://inst.uno.edu>
For information on Center Austria,
www.centeraustria.org

WORLD AFFAIRS COUNCIL OF NEW ORLEANS

The World Affairs Council of New Orleans is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization dedicated to presenting diverse views on a variety of international topics.

The main vehicle for educating their citizenry on foreign affairs is a speaker programs. These programs provide an opportunity for first-hand exposure to prominent statesmen, diplomats, journalists, educators, scholars, and business and military leaders. Ample time is allowed for questions and interactive discussion with individuals who are making today's headlines and affecting the policies and initiatives of the global village. The briefings take place in a variety of forums, including luncheon and dinner programs, lecture presentations, and informal discussion groups.

Ordinarily, membership in WACNO costs \$35.00, but UNO students can join



for a mere \$5.00. With that membership, one is provided with an environment to discuss international and national matters of importance, uncover insights into relationships and events which go beyond (and even correct) public perceptions and media output, interact with people of similar commitment to intellectual inquiry in the international sphere, and network for educational and business purposes.

The sessions of the WACNO's Great Decisions 2008 program are scheduled for the third Wednesday of the month. Discussion topics for 2008 are:

- U.S. China Economic Relations: Evolving Rivalry
- European Integration: European Union at 50 - Looking Ahead
- Latin America: The Next President's Agenda
- Russia and 'Putinism'
- Iraq End Game: Dealing with Uncertainty.
- Blacklisting the Enemy
- Foreign Aid – Private Philanthropy

For more information, www.wacno.org or Email: wacno@bellsouth.net



VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES:

Catholic Charities Helping Hands: 895-5439

Common Ground: 947-0270

East Bank United Methodist Recovery: 461-0425

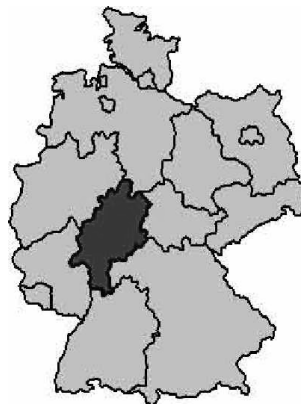
Habitat for Humanity: 861-2077

Total Community Action: 873-0356

Youth Rebuilding New Orleans: yrno.com

INTERNATIONAL SUMMER UNIVERSITIES: HESSEN, GERMANY

From June to August 2008, Hessen's ISUs take place at various universities and universities of applied sciences. Each university in the German state of Hessen offers a four-week course comprised of an interesting study program with exciting topics from a wide range of subject areas. ISU classes are taught in English and/or German and include various excursions and cultural pro-



grams. The program is designed for students, researchers and teachers, as well as people working in the fields of politics, economics, law, culture, technology, and media who want to learn more about the German and European dimension of their respective subject and learn the German language or refresh their German by participating in an intensive language course.

In a globalizing world, it is important to meet people and create networks. The Hessen International Summer Universities can play a vital part in this process, as it will give you the opportunity to meet new people in different countries and establish friendships, which will last well beyond the duration of this program.

Website: www.isu-hessen.de

FORBES, CONT.

ern Benin. Where acre upon acre of lush tropical forest used to stand, now sit cash crops—primarily corn and palm. This is Benin in the 21st Century. The one stretch of tarmac no wider than Decatur Street is frequented by old retired Peugeot produce and cotton trucks, blowing their horns and taking out any chicken or goat who idles too long. Black market gasoline runners strap 15 ten-gallon gas tanks to their dusty dirt bikes and race back and forth between border towns and Porto-Novo, like kamikazes. Bush taxis carry piles of bleating goats and countless sacks of oranges, greens, onions, and chickens. Half-naked children precariously straddle adult-sized bicycles like Muppets, dodging women who gracefully carry entire corner stores atop their heads. This is Benin in the 21st century.

Village gossip centers around sorcerers, gris-gris, who stole whose corn and who bought a new moped. Nowadays, a lot of this gossip is carried on with cell phones. This is Benin in the 21st century.

I have been sent here to work with a gentleman by the name of Mr. Benoit Assogba. He is the president of the one NGO in village, La Solidarite. Upon arriving, I expected to be handed a machete and a pack of seeds for planting. Instead, one of the first things I was given was knowledge of another item trafficked on our stretch of asphalt--children. In most villages in this country, family planning is practically nonexistent, polygamy is prevalent, auto accidents and life-threatening disease are commonplace and every day the cost of living rises. And so, the number of homeless children grows exponentially. According to tradition, many unfortunate children are passed among

extended family members, pawned off as free household and field labor. Many of these children are subject to abuse. Most never receive an education or training in a craft. The even less fortunate ones are sold to traffickers. These child slaves are forced to work as street vendors, plantation hands, *domestiques*, and quarry laborers. Too many never make it home alive.

I learned about all this from Mr. Assogba. During the past four years, this man has single-handedly taken charge of the food, medicine, schooling, and apprenticeships of nearly 50 children. Most live with foster parents, others in two small storage rooms at the NGO, and the youngest in the president's household. Our mission during the next two years is to put a roof over these kids' heads. Only housed together can their health, education, and security be guaranteed. The construction of a children's home, as my president says, is one small step toward putting a halt to child trafficking in our area. Another step we plan to take in the near future is to provide a widowed mothers group with assistance in starting up their own businesses. With a more steady income, these mothers will not be forced to give up their children to family members, traffickers, or orphanages.

And so what does all this have to do with an environment/agriculture volunteer's job description? Just a month ago, on the same plot of land where we will soon build a children's home, the president and I took the first steps at breaking ground for a children's garden. In an attempt to improve our kid's nutrition and to help cut costs for the NGO, we will begin harvesting greens, tomatoes, chili peppers, and onions within two months.

I've also spent my time paying visits to local farmers

and fish hatcheries. Presently, I'm working with some villagers on soil replenishment practices. Our goal is to create systems which are self-generating or sustainable. This means growing the food which will feed the animals that will make the fertilizer to grow the food to feed the people. Creating systems which are sustainable not only curbs immediate hunger but may help stall internal migration to already-congested urban centers.

Back again to that stretch of asphalt. Being placed in such a blink-and-you'll-miss-it village has afforded me the opportunity to be mobile and to create contacts of every sort imaginable. In fact, the first four months of my service was spent primarily on networking. One day I'd be shoveling waste with a rabbit raiser and talking about raising earthworms. The next day I'd be sitting in the World Food Program office, in Cotonou. One day I'd visit with a group of kids at an inner-city orphanage and the next at a children's farm. One day I'd pay visits to the Peace Corps office and the Embassy, the next I'd spend sitting in a circle with villagers waiting, just waiting for something to happen. That's right, it's not always the highlife, either. There are lots of busy moments and even more moments spent waiting for something to happen. I might add that skill set to my resume upon close of service: ability to sit still for indefinite periods of time.

And so where do I go from here? It's hard to say. I'm only a quarter of the way through my service. I've considered taking advantage of those grad school fellowships. I've also considered becoming a teacher. I may even join the Crisis Corps for a shorter stint of service. Opportunities are out there and my eyes are bigger than ever before.

Now you might wonder what would service be like for you? Well, my service is my own experience. Each volunteer's service is different according to his or her village, his or her job description, and of course his or her own character and background. If you've thought about dedicating two years of your life to service with the Peace Corps, now is the time to do it. After all, it's hard to push a baby stroller on a foot-path or pay a mortgage on a volunteer's stipend.

It is true that this is not for everyone. It is also true that the Peace Corps aims to place each volunteer according to his or her own capacities and personal needs. Posts vary; some are urban and some are rural. Jobs vary from environment and agriculture to health to education to community development. Log onto the Peace Corps website or talk with your local recruiter. Professors, please continue to encourage your students to think outside the box and to take educated risks in life. You are their mentors and their way of thanking you for your advice will be with their personal successes. To close, the Peace Corps' catch phrase is "This is the hardest job you'll ever love." I couldn't say it better myself.

*If you'd like to help with the LA SOLIDARITE Orphanage fund or start a fundraiser for this fund, a project proposal will soon be posted on the Peace Corps website. All donations are tax-deductible. In the meanwhile, you can keep in touch with me at:

aaronforbes2008@gmail.com; chabochi-gueron@yahoo.com.



THE UNIVERSITY of
NEW ORLEANS

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