2010

Experiencing New Terrain, Serving Others In The Tropics

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Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/stories/vol4/iss2/25

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The hilly land, lush forests, large gullies and rocky soil on the island of St. John are much different from the Midwest terrain that two Iowa State University horticulture students are accustomed.

Morgan Wright and Winston Beck spent six weeks this summer on St. John as a part of a service learning project titled EARTH—Education And Resiliency Through Horticulture. Iowa State's partner in the project is Gifft Hill School (GHS), a private kindergarten through 12th grade school on the island.

The program is funded through a gift commitment from Dana ('67 dairy science) and Martha Robes, who have a residence on St. John.

Located in the U.S. Virgin Islands archipelago, more than half of the tropical land of St. John is a protected national park containing a wide range of plant life. The remaining island is home to approximately 5,000 residents, many of whom are employed in the landscaping and service industries related to tourism on the islands.

According to Michael Reinert, assistant professor of horticulture and program leader, the purposes of EARTH are “to implement a school horticulture program at GHS as a part of an environmental science program, provide service learning opportunities for Iowa State students and have them serve as ambassadors to recruit GHS students to attend Iowa State.”

Wright and Beck assisted Kris Bennett, faculty member and project coordinator at Gifft Hill School, with teaching her eighth grade science course and a natural history course at GHS. Their classes included plant lessons, garden demonstrations and working side-by-side with students in the work around the school.

“This internship taught me a lot about teaching. It’s far harder than I had imagined,” says Beck. “Also, it’s a practical lesson in outdoor development, getting students out of the classroom and into an interactive world, while making the outdoors more manageable for teaching and providing to the students.”

Wright adds, “The most rewarding part of this internship has been working with and getting to know the kids. They are all so unique and interesting. It has been a great experience.”

When Wright and Beck weren’t busy teaching, they landscaped, designed and created trails on the school’s property. Their goals were to incorporate horticulture into the school’s curriculum, to show different aspects of the field and connect the upper and lower campuses separated by dense jungle.

As the first students taking part in the EARTH program, they played a large role in networking with professionals and experts on the island. Over the next five years, Iowa State will send two students in the fall, spring and summer semesters for twelve-week immersion service learning projects.

In addition to the practical experience the students are receiving, they are also gaining a new cultural experience. Wright and Beck have spent their free time hiking trails, snorkeling, surfing and making friendships on the island.

“Living on the island is spectacular. It’s a complete flip from all the things we’re used to stateside,” says Beck. “Everyone here has a story to tell, each unique and fascinating and the island is a fantastic place to explore.”
Perhaps it was the stage of your first college class, or your first kiss?

Did you listen to a professor whose words changed your life, or simply enjoy the music of the carillon?

Maybe here you squirmed through your first job interviews, or your wedding photographs?

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