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Study abroad interests continue as undergraduates become alumni

Summary: Study abroad opportunities at the University of Minnesota, Morris offer students the opportunity to advance both academically and professionally. UMM alumna Kate Thanel '06, who traveled as a UMM undergraduate, is living and teaching English in French Guiana.

(September 20, 2007)-Study abroad opportunities at the University of Minnesota, Morris offer students the opportunity to advance both academically and professionally. UMM alumna Kate Thanel '06, who traveled as a UMM undergraduate, is living and teaching English in French Guiana in South America.

Professor of French Sarah Buchanan says of Thanel's teaching track, "This is a rare instance." Many UMM French majors utilize a program known as the Assistantship Program, which is sponsored by the French government. The program pays students of French to spend a year in France teaching English in schools. "Kate requested French Guiana, which is a French department located in South America, much like Hawaii is an American state. She was placed on the coast [of the country], first in a town called Kourou, and then moved farther inland to the village of Maiman for her second year," said Buchanan. "Most students do not choose remote locations."

Buchanan visited Thanel this summer when she was invited by a Rwandan colleague to do a presentation for the Congrès International d'Études Francophones (The International Council of Francophone Studies) (CIEF). The council is an international association whose goal is to develop studies, research, publications and productions of the Francophone (French-speaking) world.

Thanel lives and works in the village of Maiman, which is home to about 300 adults, plus their children. The village is accessible only by a two and one half hour dug-out canoe ride up the Maroni River, which separates the French Guiana from Surinam. This area does not have roads and is in the heart of the rain forest, which covers the majority of the French Guiana. Thanel's home has running water and electricity however many of the homes in Maiman do not. According to Buchanan, most of the houses are built with solid materials that people float up the river on canoes and are quite nice, although a few of the houses resemble shacks. In general, though, she says none are in terrible poverty. Each family with children receives a sum from the French government, called an allocation familiale – the rough equivalent of American welfare. An important difference between the allocations familiales and welfare, however, is that all French families, regardless of income, are entitled to receive these benefits.

Schooling is a challenge for young students of Maiman. The vernacular in this section of the incredibly multi-lingual French Guiana is a Creole language called Bushi-tongo however in schools children are instructed in French and are later taught English. Thanel has learned quite a bit of Bushi-tongo, and is now able to converse nearly fluently with the people in her village in their native tongue. This is a definite advantage and has allowed Thanel to learn a lot about the population of Maiman.

The people she lives among are the descendents of Maroons, or run-away slaves, who lived in the rain forest with the help of Native Americans to avoid the French colonialists and plantation owners. Until the abolition of slavery in French

territories in 1848 (American abolition was in 1865), they would regularly raid the plantations to help other people escape slavery. To this day, the citizens of Maiman, as well as other similar villages in the French Guiana, are very proud of this heritage. Thanel has had the opportunity to help celebrate the anniversaries of the abolition of slavery in the French Guiana and in Surinam. There are many bureaucratic problems with in the schools as well. Many times there are problems assigning teachers to the locations that need them. On average, the highest education the children of Maiman receive is through the elementary level, although there are students from Maiman who go on to receive high school and university educations.

Buchanan maintains that Thanel's success is a reflection of her UMM education and its flexibility in allowing students to study abroad. UMM does an excellent job of encouraging its students to be open to other cultures and to recognize that other cultures are not inferior, simply different. Buchanan described her trip to the Amazonian rainforest as a once in a lifetime opportunity, and Thanel's experiences as yet another example of the excellence of UMM's foreign language programs and the potential of UMM students.

Buchanan said of Thanel's work: "... [it is] amazing. She is living in a place with no internet and no phone, where she and her husband are minorities and where English is far down on the list of spoken languages. In this context, she is working with kids and making a difference in their lives. I have great respect for her."

SUBMITTED PHOTO: Kate Thanel and some of her students

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