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Becky Houdek '07, finds student teaching in New Zealand challenging and fulfilling

Summary: Through the Global Student Teaching Program, UMM students can student teach in 49 different countries. Houdek chose New Zealand, and she's not disappointed.

(March 5, 2007)-Attracted to New Zealand for its beautiful landscape and climate, University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) student teacher Becky Houdek '07, biology, has not been disappointed. Since arriving a few weeks ago, she traveled the south island with fellow student teacher Matt Gravelle '07, Maplewood, and Jess Nagel '07, Chanhassen. The trio toured a glowworm cave, visited the rain forest, sea kayaked, hiked the Franz Josef Glacier, and swam with seals.

Wainuiomata High School, near Wellington, where she is student teaching, has not disappointed either. The teachers and student body of about 1,000 students, 30-40 percent Maori or indigenous people and 10-20 percent Pacific Islander, welcomed Houdek warmly.

“The teachers are very encouraging. I work closely with two teachers with two very different teaching styles. I have three classes: year 10 and 11 science, and year 13 biology (U.S. grades 9, 10, and 12 equivalent). It’s been a challenge to move to such an unfamiliar place on my own and to take on the responsibilities of being a teacher, but it is also really fulfilling. I have been well prepared by my classes at UMM.”

Cultural exchange is happening for Houdek both formally and informally. “The students are a riot,” says Houdek. “Have you been to Hollywood? Do you know Kevin Garnett? Do you ever see Snoop Dogg? They assume I’m from a city like L.A. or New York. I tell them about Morris and Deer River where I grew up, and they’re shocked. They find my accent very amusing. I’m still getting used to the Kiwi accent myself. I often have to ask people to repeat things.”

“The people here are generally really laid-back and easy-going,” reflects Houdek. “They are very concerned with conservation and sustainability, which is refreshing. I got a taste of Maori culture during my first weekend here when I went to a nearby music festival. I saw two Kapa Haka performances, which involve traditional Maori singing, dancing, and movements associated with hand-to-hand combat. It was really fun to watch.”

Photo: Becky Houdek (far right) with friends Matt Gravelle and Jess Nagel on Franz Josef Glacier in New Zealand

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