

Michelle Kellogg dreams big and looks ahead to working at the international level



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April 18, 2008 - Michelle Kellogg knew she was about to set off on a trip she had dreamed about for months as she settled into her seat on the plane.

Even so, when the cabin door closed Kellogg had one overriding emotion – she was terrified.

Kellogg, a senior in the Indiana University Bachelor of Social Work program, was setting off for her senior practicum in South Africa. After months of planning, the final details had finally fallen into place about a week before the school year was to start.

She was to work with a South African agency, the Association for Persons with Disabilities, and more importantly get a first-hand look at how another country's policies affect the daily lives of people with developmental disabilities.

Kellogg saw the experience as crucial to her growing desire to advocate for people at the policy level, knowing she could impact more lives this way than by working with clients one-on-one.

Now that she was on her way though, the reality of traveling to a country she knew little about began to sink in. But those initial travel worries gave way as she arrived and began working out the practical realities, like finding a place to live and getting used to her new surroundings and understanding a new culture.

In a way, it was just another step in a journey that started years ago when she was a student in junior high school when Kellogg discovered she was interested in helping people with developmental disabilities.

"I've always said you are born a social worker," Kellogg said. In her case, a classmate with special needs ignited an interest in helping others. "That's what initially attracted me. I would work in the special education classrooms and volunteer," Kellogg said.

"I just think it's in my nature," she said of her impulse to help others. "I see somebody who needs help and I go help them."

In her junior year, she spent her practicum at Noble of Indiana, an agency that helps the developmentally disabled and is working full-time for an agency that provides supportive services to developmentally disabled clients.

Interested in how policies affect people's everyday lives, Kellogg decided it would be helpful to see how other countries tackle the problem of assisting developmentally disabled people in a step towards a potential career of working on the international level.

Her experiences in South Africa proved to be eye-opening. First of all, she had to get used to a different culture and how people dealt with various issues, sometimes without the same urgency that she would have brought to a task.

Dr. Retha duPlessis, a professor of social work and Rural Free State Development Project Director, did assist Kellogg with things like finding a place to live. "If it wasn't for her I would have been very lost," Kellogg acknowledges.

During her 3 ½ months in South Africa, Kellogg worked in two areas. She helped the agency she was working at create policies, using her background at Noble of Indiana, an agency with decades of experience meeting the needs of the developmentally disabled, as the basis of creating new policies for her South African agency.

She also worked with Dr. duPlessis and the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, in a community HIV-AIDS awareness program in rural areas.

She also learned that while the agency she worked for had standards of care, they didn't match up to what she was used to in the United States. The agency primarily worked with people with physical disabilities, they didn't work with people with developmental disabilities.

Instead, they considered people with developmental disabilities as having a mental disability. Those people were primarily in psychiatric hospitals, she explained. While accessibility for people with disabilities is an on-going issue here, little attention was being made to encourage developers to create accessible buildings in South Africa, Kellogg found.

She also learned that time is another important factor in working in another country. In retrospect, Kellogg wishes she would have left for South Africa earlier than she did to give her additional time to begin the process of understanding a new culture. Kellogg also learned "you can't write a policy in three months and expect it to be implemented."

If her trip to South Africa was a major step toward working on problems at the policy level, she will soon follow that up by going to work for state government.

Kellogg was recently received the Governor's Public Services Summer Internship at the Department of Child Services, a paid position. There, she will be working on various projects dealing with policy, child advocacy and research.

Who knows, some day Kellogg could find herself working on policy issues at the United Nations. "I would love to work of the UN," Kellog said.

"Sometimes I think I dream too big, but this is definitely my passion."

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