Alumni Profile

ALUMNA COMPLETES FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIP, USES PHOTOJOURNALISM TO EDUCATE ABOUT CULTURAL & ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION IN THE AMAZON

By Emily Kintigh, Communications & Recruitment Specialist

"You're never prepared for what life brings you."

Megan Westervelt (BA '10) graduated from DU with a dual degree in journalism and international studies and a passion for photography spurred by her work at The Clarion. Years later she’s back on campus, fresh off a Fulbright excursion in the Ecuadorian Amazon, a fully-fledged photojournalist.

Megan has spent the last two years working with Waorani people deep in the region of the rainforest encompassed by Yasuni National Park. The indigenous community had no contact with the outside world until only 60 years ago. Since then they have had to process 2,000 years' worth of development and are now in danger of losing their traditional way of life amid the bustle of modern Ecuador.

The Waorani people do not have a written language, so preserving their past is difficult, says Megan. Even more difficult is convincing them that someday they may realize how important it was.

Megan first became connected to the Waorani as a graduate student at Ohio University, where she began work with a Catholic University with a connection to the Yasuni National Park on their efforts to document the lives of the indigenous community. The Fulbright scholarship allowed her to continue the project, using photography to capture the traditions of the Waorani as well as the impact on their lives by the oil companies who threaten the future of the rainforest.

A native of Durango, CO, Megan has been a lifelong conservationist. In 2013 this passion was further enflamed when National Geographic published an article on the Amazon titled, "Rainforest for Sale." "It enraged me," said Megan. To get more involved she decided to apply for a Fulbright scholarship, hoping to use photography to provide a new outlook on conservation efforts in the Amazon. Over the course of her work with the Waorani people her
focus shifted: she began to look at cultural conservation as a way to learn more about ecological conservation.

One of Megan’s goals during her Fulbright was to collaborate with the Waorani community to gain access to the facets of their life that they view as most important. To this end she used “photovoice” methodology, putting cameras into the hand of the Waorani people themselves and asking them to take pictures of their lives: what they saw, what they experienced. She trained over 50 photographers overall and compiled their work into an exhibit that opened first in the city closest to the National Park, and then in Quito, Ecuador’s capitol.

The exhibit is called Wao Mimo, Wao referring to the Waorani culture and Mimo meaning “heart.”

Encouraging the Waorani people to document their own world was an incredible experience, Megan says. Over the past 60 years of accelerated modernization they have come to understand the importance of ownership over things, so the concept ownership over moments, memories, and pieces of their lives is so special to see them comprehend, says Megan. It inspires in them a level of respect for their way of life while also bringing them a level of respect within the community.

Many of the photographers traveled with Megan to the exhibits which allowed them to present their own work during the opening. This was important for Megan: “It's so important for them to know how important they are,” she said, as well as for the world to understand their importance.

Now that the project is complete, Megan is hoping to show the exhibit at other universities across the United States along with one or more of the photographers. She plans to split her time between Colorado and Ecuador, continuing to work with the Waorani to preserve their culture as much as possible and educating the world through photography. "I know I can't save an entire culture and this part of the rainforest," she says, but that doesn't mean she won't try.
Megan’s advice to current students is to follow your interests: explore passions that may lead you outside your department. “Never believe anything’s impossible,” she says, laughing. “I had never heard of anyone using a Fulbright for photojournalism, but they accepted my application. . . . Life places things in your path - you have to look for them.”

Find out more about Megan’s work and see some of her photography on her website: Megan Westervelt Photography.