

Meet James Mockovciak, who balances family and development

MA International Development, Josef Korbel School of International Studies
BA Cultural Anthropology, Bard College

What brought you to the Josef Korbel School?

I was working for 15 years in the Pacific. Eight years in Fiji, where my wife is from. The project we were working on there was coming to an end and I had to figure out what to do next. When you're in your 40s you don't have much leeway or the grace of time. I was interested in teaching and it became clear that an MA was a minimum. Another reason was that I was out of school for so long that I felt I exhausted my own theoretical perspective. I wanted to get back into the academic world and think.

I think Korbel definitely gives you an excellent theoretical framework that is consistent with their motto of practical idealism. I've always desired to link theory and practice. Korbel really does a superb job of giving you theory but never losing sight of what it's for. If someone is interested in a serious engagement with world, then Korbel is a great place for them. It's more focused on the real needs of people around the world rather than just preparing you for a bureaucratic job somewhere.

Why International Development?

I've always been intrigued by it. My perspective on development now is simply contributing to empowering people in ways that are consistent with their goals and objectives. It's a tradeoff between what people need and what they want. There's a disconnect. I've always been interested in bridging these disconnects and mediating them.

I was unaware of my interests until later in life. I was looking for direction in my life and ended up in Australia living in tents with Aborigines. I ended up in the bush, literally, living with people I knew nothing about. I was sitting down with these amazing people who have had this horrible history. I remember giving the best preaching of my life and then thinking 'I don't know what the hell I'm talking about.'

Development is a quest to reconcile disunity in the world. I believe there are two kinds of people in development. They both have good hearts, passion and a vision of what to accomplish. One has an understanding of how to do the project. The other is worried less about how and looks to redefine their own definition of success. The emphasis is on who they are serving. I was very unaware of my own assumptions. My definition of time and success. If you're really serving people based on their objectives, you have to supplement what they lack within the framework of their own worldview. I think the trick is to weave in my expectations and goals with theirs.

Are you part of any extracurricular activities at the Josef Korbel School?

I try to get involved in the events. With a family it's harder. It's kind of a development project of its own. They both go hand in hand.

Is there anything you wished you would have known before coming to the Josef Korbel School?

Well, Korbel has all the resources to supplement any lacks that you may have. They do a pretty fabulous job of trying to help. I suppose the school could reach out more to really help returning students deal with financial issues and balance life. There's a lot of incidental financial things that go beyond just you.

Where do you want to go from here?

As far as work I'd like to do, that's something I'm still processing. Issues relating to governance, local farms, cultural context. I would like to explore the interplay between all of those and finding ways for everyone to be successful. In general, my wife and I would like to go back to the South Pacific with our 6-year-old son. We're very comfortable there. There's a wonderful dynamic between east and west. In development you have to be really clear about your perspective. You're not just delivering things. It's about emboldening people's lives. Helping them identify what they want. Help them to define it and help them move toward these goals. I really enjoy building these kinds of reciprocal relationships with people. Give them what I have learned and receive what they have learned. It takes maturity. It requires a capacity to transcend yourself – not compromise, but become more aware of what you're own assumptions are. It says something beautiful about the nature of human beings. I lived in Fiji for eight years. I'm married to one and I still don't understand a thing. And I say that with glee.

M. Schwinn, International Security candidate
Josef Korbel School of International Studies