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Natural Progression: Ryan Smith



Among his many activities, Smith led Illinois Wesleyan's Student Volunteer Center, which sponsored programs such as Make-A-Difference Day. (Marc Featherly)

students he traveled with end up being “some of my best friends here,” but his semester abroad “sparked my interest in environmental studies,” Smith says. That interest grew more intense through classes taught by Abigail Jahiel, associate professor of Environmental Studies and International Studies, who co-chairs the GREENetwork and works with members of the Sierra Student Coalition.

Now an environmental studies major — a concentration which was only officially added to IWU's academic majors last year — Smith sees lots of interest in the field from prospective students, and about 20 of the 2006–07 first-year class are declared environmental studies majors.

Ryan Smith is ready to change the world. The senior co-founded Illinois Wesleyan's chapter of Sierra Student Coalition and is active in GREENetwork, a University-wide organization which works to improve campus sustainability. But Smith's path to success at IWU started out a bit foggy.

That fog lifted in, of all places, London. His sophomore year, Smith studied abroad through Illinois Wesleyan's London Program. He remembers going to England still undeclared as a major and “not knowing what I wanted to do.”

The time away from IWU “was an exposure to things I'd never seen before.” Not only did the 12

Unlike many of his classmates, who are still undecided about their post-graduation plans, Smith knows where he'll be next fall. In September, he will leave to do Peace Corps work in sub-Saharan Africa for 27 months, focusing on environmental issues. With him will be his wife, Leslie Coleman, also an Illinois Wesleyan senior. The couple had been engaged, and after deciding to join the Peace Corps, got married over winter break so that they could leave together this fall.

"It's a great opportunity to start off our careers in public service," Coleman says. She looks forward to "being able to share our successes in the program with each other and to experience completely new things together."

In the Peace Corps, Smith will use his experience volunteering with environmental issues and underprivileged communities. Two summers ago, he worked as an intern for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, including time spent with the Governor's Junior Environmental Corps, which develops and presents environmental education programs to youth summer camps. He also spent a summer working for Greenpeace in Washington, D.C., as well as volunteering for the Ecology Action Center and the Humane Society.

If Smith has any regrets about his Illinois Wesleyan experience, it's that "I waited too long to explore my interests. It takes some active examination. I only regret that I didn't do it sooner."

As for entering the real world — even when it's across the globe in Africa — Smith feels ready to take on the challenge. "I feel prepared," he says. "Wesleyan has provided me the opportunity to feel prepared, but you must be involved in your own preparation."



(Above) Smith helps out with a Habitat for Humanity clean-up.