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Alumnus Bikes Across Latin America

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan University, alumni depart on many different paths, some settle into comfortable corner offices, while others are pushing pennies to make it through graduate school. Still others, like 2005 alumnus Doug Pietrzak, take the path less traveled.

Currently, Pietrzak is biking through the winding mountains of Nicaragua with three other volunteers as a part of an eight-month, 5,000-mile bike trip through Latin America for the Reach the World education program. The not-for-profit organization funds environmentally friendly global journeys to help educate students in under-resourced schools in the cities of New York and Chicago. Their goal is to expand the power of learning beyond the classroom, and bring other cultures to life within the classroom.

For this trip, there are 12 Chicago schools, or about 2,500 students following the adventures of Pietrzak and his three fellow travelers. The students from these select schools experience the trip through pictures, blogs and articles written by the travelers. In class, the students respond to questions posted on the Web site and ask questions about the various cultures (www.reachtheworld.org).

Pietrzak volunteered to join the organization after teaching for three years in under-resourced schools in Chicago. The alumnus, who bikes to work year round, jumped at the opportunity when he discovered it on the couchsurfing Web site. “I saw the post entitled biking/teaching/traveling and thought, ‘I have never seen a job more perfect for me.’”

The group departed from Chicago on Sept. 9, 2009 after months of preparation. Pietrzak said they spent hours planning their route, organizing supplies, learning about bike maintenance and repair and endless hours cycling to prepare physically for the trip.

The 8,000-mile journey stops in 22 cities, and covers 13 countries with almost all traveling done on bike. The group averages 60 miles a day (approximately eight to nine hours of biking) when traveling on the bikes designed specifically for long distances.

To cover such a great distance in a timely manner, the foursome must travel lightly, carrying only five duffle bags attached to their bikes. One bag contains necessary personal items, while the other four are loaded with camping supplies, food and tools and spare parts to fix the bikes.

“The route is strategically planned so we are able to cover a number of different environments, cultures and regions,” said Pietrzak. “Since the target audience is elementary school students, we do our best to cover a wide range of topics lightly, rather than go deeply into the different aspects of the cultures. This means we travel a greater distance over a shorter amount of time.”

Although to an outsider the physical strain of this journey may seem near impossible, Pietrzak says the hardest part of the trip hasn’t been biking for hours each day. “When we are not physically challenged by biking, we are challenged by route planning, getting good content on the Web site and finding a safe place to camp for little or no money.”

The group also struggles to find a working internet connection to update their blogs which include information about the people they meet, food they taste, customs they encounter and any difficulties they have.

Even though Pietrzak has traveled extensively abroad, he says this trip is completely different than any of his other adventures.

“I love traveling, but this experience is not for myself and it’s important to be reminded of that,” he said. “This is a very challenging expedition to be a part of, and I hope the students also get that sense throughout the school year as they follow our trip in Latin America.”