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Nursing in the Alaska Wilderness

IWU Student Observes Health-Care Practices, Culture Among Russian Old Believers, Yupik Tribe

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Imagine joining a group of Native American Indians who are sifting through Alaskan earthquake rubble - dirt and stone - combing through bones to find precious stones, beads, and other artifacts buried with their dead ancestors.

Imagine administering vision and hearing tests, performing basic first-aid wound cleaning, and observing treatment of alcohol and domestic abuse cases on a Native American Indian Reservation in ruggedly picturesque Alaska, America's Last Frontier.

L.J. Hachmeister--an Illinois Wesleyan University sophomore nursing major from Elmhurst, Ill., and graduate of York High School--had these experiences along with many others during an Alaskan adventure as part of May Term 1999. May Term is a month-long course where students study intensively on campus, take a travel course, or work on an internship. Hachmeister was able to participate in a travel internship course in Homer, Alaska, where she was able to examine a nurse's role in healthcare with 1973 IWU nursing alumna, Gail Thomas. Thomas agreed to host Hachmeister for three weeks to expose her to nursing in Alaska and as a way for Thomas to "give back" to her alma mater.

Unique Opportunity

"I thought that the Alaskan experience might be a unique opportunity for students from the Midwest," said Thomas. Thomas, who has been a nurse for almost 25 years, moved to Alaska in the summer of 1979 to practice nursing. She is a nurse at the Russian schools Kachemak Selo, Voznesenka, Razdolna and McNeal Canyon in Homer, Alaska. She is also the primary caregiver for the Russian Old Believers, a religious group that broke away in the 1650s from the Russian Orthodox Church because of liturgical reforms.

Hachmeister's expedition to Alaska happened by chance.

Donna Hartweg, director of the IWU school of nursing, and Hachmeister had discussed nursing opportunities in the wilderness several times. According to Hartweg, the IWU Alumni Relations office contacted her about an alumna interested in facilitating internships. Knowing about Hachmeister's interest in wilderness nursing and Thomas' willingness to host a student, Hartweg facilitated the opportunity to send Hachmeister as an intern to Homer, Alaska.

Observing Nursing Challenges

Although then-freshman Hachmeister could not assist Thomas with any medical procedures and was not able to practice nursing, she was able to observe the challenges of a nurse serving a large population. Thomas gives health education classes on first-aid, nutrition, tooth brushing, and health screening of students. She also sees babies with ear infections and grandmothers needing blood pressure checks because, according to Thomas, "School nursing is community nursing in its broadest terms."

"If it had been L.J.'s junior year, she could have assisted Gail rather than simply observe," said Hartweg. "However, it was beneficial that L.J. was a freshman because she was able to get a snapshot of wilderness life and see if it was the direction she wanted to go."

Two Different Trips, Two Different Perspectives

Hachmeister is no stranger to Alaska. She first journeyed to Alaska on a wilderness backpacking expedition with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) in the summer of 1997. NOLS is a leader in outdoor skills and leadership development that offers courses using the wilderness as its classroom. Hachmeister's second journey, however, gave her a different perspective on Alaska. During her three-week internship in Homer, Hachmeister observed the practices of two groups--the Russian Old Believers and Native Americans.

"This experience was different from my last trip to Alaska. The first time, I just experienced the outdoors," Hachmeister said. "The internship really gave me a cultural flavor."

Russian Old Believers

The first cultural group Hachmeister was exposed to were the Russian Old Believers, who adhere to Christian principles and, according to Thomas, are a cultural religious group similar to U.S. Amish communities. They have very strict religious beliefs, wear traditional Russian dress, and speak little to no English.

Hachmeister was concerned about whether the Old Believers' religious traditions would conflict with their acceptance of modern medical care since they do not believe in contemporary medicine.

Hachmeister was able to observe some of the group's traditional healing practices. For example, a headache is healed by tying a belt around the patient's head. If one side is longer than the other, the longer side is pounded with a fist to make the sides equal and alleviate the headache pain. Another of the Russian Old Believers' practices is to pour kerosene on the tonsils of a patient with a sore throat. Hachmeister observed the Russian Old Believers treatments had little to no effect on the patients.

"Gail," said Hachmeister, "has to walk on egg shells to try to convert or wean the Old Russian Believers away from their dangerous practices."

Language Barriers

In addition to the strict belief system of the Russian Old Believers, Thomas also faces the challenge of language barriers. Because Thomas does not speak Russian, Hachmeister learned that non-verbal communication and body language are keys to determining a patient's illness or problem. Additionally, Hachmeister also was able to experience the patient-nurse relationship and the people-to-people interactions.

"Gail also taught me how important nurses really are to the patient," said Hachmeister. "Prior to my trip, I started to regret not becoming a doctor. Nurses, however, treat the whole person, not just the person's illness."

Yupik Indians

Hachmeister also spent time with the Yupik tribe on the Nanwalek or English Bay Native American reservation. The Yupik tribe speaks Russian, English and their tribal language. "They are losing the native language because no one really wants to adhere to the native culture," said Hachmeister.

The Yupik Indians do not have doctors on their reservation. If someone gets hurt or needs medical attention, a doctor in a nearby city is called. The doctor then gives a Yupik, who has only three weeks of medical training, instructions on how to treat the patient. "In many cases, it is scary because the people performing the treatments are performing minor surgeries," said Hachmeister.

Because Hachmeister's trip to Alaska was for academic purposes, she had assignments that included keeping a personal and academic journal and writing a paper. In the paper, she describes the different types of medicine and compares the beliefs and practices of the Russian Old Believers in Alaska to the nursing practices in a rural hospital setting. Hachmeister presented her experience as the featured student speaker at the 1999 School of Nursing Convocation, a formal assembly in Evelyn Chapel held the first day of school to honor seniors and welcome students and faculty back to school.

Cultural Differences

Hachmeister also observed many cultural differences in Alaska compared to the Midwest. "The people there are a much closer community," she said. "Everyone shares everything--including their cars with strangers." In addition to sharing, the Alaskans do not hesitate to speak their minds. "In the Midwest, if someone doesn't like you, the person won't come out and say it. In Alaska, if a person has a problem with you, he will come right out and tell you what it is," Hachmeister said.

She also was able to experience the cultural flavor of Alaska with Thomas by learning how to use a shotgun, rock climbing, clam digging, boating and island hopping. Along with grave digging, another cultural highlight was bear hunting with the Yupik tribe.

Originally a seal hunt, Hachmeister and three Yupiks ended up going bear hunting one day since they needed meat for a evening potluck dinner. "Once the bear was dead, its head was cut off and turned toward the sun, a Native American ritual for thanking the bear for its life. Then, it was gutted and carried back," said Hachmeister. "I have some of the hide and the bear claw in my dorm room now."

Eyeing a Career Path

May Term 1999 served its purpose of helping Hachmeister explore nursing opportunities in the wilderness.

"I know that I don't want to work as a school nurse, but I do want to work outdoors and do something with community health," said Hachmeister, "perhaps become the medical help for outdoor expeditions."

Hachmeister also would like to do something that examines alcohol and domestic abuse because, she said, Native Americans and Alaska, in general, have problems with abuse.

"The experience really got me motivated for nursing," Hachmeister said. "It is not typical for a freshman to learn in a clinical setting, but I had the opportunity and I am very thankful for it."

Hachmeister plans to return to Alaska next summer to climb Mt. McKinley, the highest mountain in North America at 20,320 feet, with the National Outdoor Leadership School and also to visit Thomas.

About Illinois Wesleyan

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,070 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. Construction is underway on a \$23 million library and a \$6 million student center. Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine ranks Illinois Wesleyan University 12th among the nation's top 1,600 private colleges in providing a top-quality education at an affordable cost. Also sharing IWU's rank are Princeton and Dartmouth.