



8-15-2011

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Recommended Citation

Connelly '12, Jackie, "Culture Shock: Student Learns to Adjust after Witnessing Earthquake Abroad" (2011). *News and Events*. 1669.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1669>

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Culture Shock: Student Learns to Adjust after Witnessing Earthquake Abroad

August 15, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — “Experience an earthquake” was not on the list of things Joe Daniels '13 was looking forward to when he planned to spend spring semester of his sophomore year in Christchurch, New Zealand.

But as many members of the Illinois Wesleyan community know, studying abroad can be full of surprises.

“It was going to be a whole different experience,” said the Brookfield, Ill. native, who arrived in Christchurch on February 10 to study through the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) at the University of Canterbury. “The earthquake pretty much changed everything for me.”

On February 22 at 12:51 p.m., Daniels was packing up after class in a second-floor lecture hall in the University’s forestry building. “The room just started to shake all of a sudden,” he said. “It started as a little shudder, then quickly escalated into something that moved the room what seemed meters side to side and up and down, all pretty violently. It was honestly probably one of the strangest things I’ve ever felt—like one of those 3-D movie rides where the seats move with the movie, mixed with bad airplane turbulence.”

Daniels was experiencing a 6.3-magnitude earthquake centered only 9 kilometers from the city, which between destructive aftershocks and the damage caused by the quake itself killed nearly 200 people, according to stuff.co.nz. “I can’t recall how it sounded,” said Daniels, noting the city center is still cordoned off nearly six months later. “But a friend in the same room said you could hear the building groan with the shaking.”

An environmental studies major who is active in Illinois Wesleyan’s environmental club, the Sierra Student Coalition, Daniels had wanted to travel to New Zealand ever since he saw Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy in middle school. “Then after doing a bit of research, I realized how environmentally aware New Zealanders are,” said Daniels, who also runs cross country at IWU. “I figured it would be perfect: a country that is absolutely beautiful and would benefit my major as well.”

Daniels remembers spending his first 11 days in Christchurch “having the time of my life.” Placed in a home-stay stationed only a short 20-minute walk from campus, he was looking forward to spending the rest of the semester with a host family he had already grown to love. “I was really just trying to move outside my comfort zone and be as outgoing as possible,” said Daniels. “After the earthquake, it took a pretty long time to get back in the mood to be outwardly social again.”

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Daniels did all he could to contribute to relief efforts: transported water jugs from his home-stay in the suburbs to classmates who had no running water; attempted to give blood; shoveled debris with a volunteer army. “After learning how bad it really was, all I wanted to do was help,” he said.

However, the IES program quickly evacuated Daniels and other participants from the city before shipping them to the North Island to continue their studies at the University of Auckland. The University of Canterbury had been closed until further notice. “I chose Christchurch in the first place because I had no desire to be in a large city while in New Zealand,” said



Joe Daniels '13 helps clean up in the aftermath of the 6.3-magnitude earthquake that struck the city of Christchurch, New Zealand in late February.

Daniels, noting the additional appeal of Christchurch's close proximity to hiking opportunities in the Southern Alps. "So I was originally very disappointed by the move. I really liked my home-stay family, the city of Christchurch and the friends I had made there outside my program who would not be transferring to the University of Auckland."

According to International Office Director Stacey Shimizu, the first few weeks of studying abroad already feature many normal stages of culture shock, and seeing such immense devastation in a new home would only further complicate the transition. "Flexibility is probably one of the greatest skills a study abroad student can have," she said. "Every student leaves here with some expectation of what life in their host culture will be like, but cultures and people are too complex and various for anyone to be fully prepared for what awaits them when they choose to live in another country."



Daniels soaks up all the stunning views New Zealand has to offer during a mid-semester break field trip to the South Island, including the Otago Peninsula, pictured here.

In order to reap all the possible benefits of studying abroad, then, Shimizu believes it's essential to expect the unexpected. "What we hear, time and again, from returned students is that they became more independent, more confident, more adaptable, more patient and more self aware as a result of spending a semester or year abroad," she said.

Somehow, Daniels was able to do just that. Despite stress and struggle, he is grateful for the opportunity the earthquake and transfer presented to adjust and grow in a tough situation. "I wouldn't say it tainted my study abroad experience," said Daniels, noting his new host family lived right on a beautiful harbor in Auckland and that his new location on the North Island allowed him to explore more of the country. "Things aren't always going to go your way. It's important that you're willing to accept the negatives and try to move on as quickly as

possible."

Overall, Daniels feels the semester taught him a lot about himself and how to approach negative situations. "You have to be willing to accept change, even if you don't want it," he said, adding that he finished his semester by acting as a keynote speaker at a New Zealand Educational Association conference held in Auckland, where he offered an international-student perspective on how he dealt with the earthquake. "Having all control taken out of your hands is not a great feeling, but living through it—and knowing things ended up working out in the long run—has helped me realize that good things can come out of horrible situations. It may have been the hardest time of my life, but it was the most amazing as well."

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