

U-M HERITAGE >

The first co-ed



In 1866, when U-M regents argued that

women were not persons in the eyes of the law, Alice Boise started sneaking into class — and outperforming the men.

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May 13, 2008

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Shanna Singh Hughey, B.A. 2000, is taking a year to travel the world with her husband Derek. [Click image to see more photos from their travels.](#)

Since September, 2007, Shanna and Derek Hughey have been exploring the highlights and backroads of the earth. Now in South America, they've been to more than a dozen countries, most of them in Asia, and will be heading next to traverse Africa. Michigan Today caught up with them in Buenos Aires. For more details, [visit their blog](#) and [see photos from their travels](#).

Michigan Today: Why did you decide to take this trip?

Long before Derek and I met, he had dreamed of taking a year off and traveling around the world. Lucky for me, he hadn't yet gotten around to it in January 2006, when a mutual friend introduced us. We knew we were going to get married about two months into our relationship, and so, when Derek casually asked me if I wanted to join him on his around-the-world venture, I agreed, never really thinking it would come to fruition. But two years later, here we are: married and six months into our trip.

Was there ever a moment when you said, "Oh my gosh, what have we done?"

I spent a good part of our first few days on the road thinking just that. Another moment came a few months later. We had been in New Delhi for about two weeks, and all of that city's chaos and grime began to wear on me. I doubted that I would be able to

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TALKING ABOUT MOVIES »

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.....

survive another day in a foreign environment over which I had very little control.... All I wanted to do was throw it all away in time to celebrate Christmas at home.

Obviously, you have continued traveling. What do you miss about "regular" life?

Strangely, I miss working. I miss being productive. I miss being able to contribute to causes that I care about in an important way.

On a more trivial note, I miss wearing blue jeans. (We're all North Face and Columbia gear all the time now; it packs up small and washes easily.) I miss having a closet full of clothes from which to choose. One year is a really

"The place into which someone is born has a terrifyingly large impact on his or her life."

long time to wear only two pairs of pants. I miss the comforts of home: cooking in a kitchen, using a washing machine, lying on the couch and watching a movie. Oh, and I really miss American Diet Coke. (The stuff abroad is not as good as the Real Thing. Seriously.)

I do not miss the administration involved in daily life. At all. I have no cell phone now, and therefore, no cell phone bill. I have every prescription with me that either of us could ever need, so I never have to deal with waiting in line at the pharmacy. I do not have to get gas, renew my car's registration or pay rent. Having escaped most of the minutiae of daily life for so long, I am afraid that it will paralyze me once we return.

Has your perception of the world changed?

I suppose that the appropriate way to answer this question would be to say something about how I now know that, underneath it all, all people really are the same. That is, of course, true to some extent. But more now than ever, I believe that the place into which someone is born—and, by "place," I mean not just geography, but also the time, the family, the financial and education situation, the color, the caste, the gender and more—has a terrifyingly large impact on the rest of his or her life.

Take, for instance, one of the little girls we encountered in a slum school outside Delhi. At four, she is already the primary caregiver for her two-year-old sister. She owns maybe two sets of clothing and not a single pair of shoes. She lives in a community that, due to her gender, sees little value in educating her beyond a basic level. She will likely be married in her teens and become a mother soon after. Unless her situation changes dramatically, she probably will never use a computer, drive a car or travel to a foreign country.

Compare with her my beautiful niece. At age four, her days are spent in a fulfilling preschool and at home with her attentive, well-educated mother. She has plenty of clothes and shoes and lots of toys designed to both amuse and inform her. Her parents, her extended family and her community will join efforts to educate her and to remind her that she can be whatever she wants to be when she grows up. She can, and she will.

The primary difference between these two little girls with such dramatically different futures is the place into which each was born. Until I began this trip, I did not fully understand how few children have upbringings like my niece—and how lucky I was to be one of them.

Has your sense of what it means to be American changed?

Before we began our journey, we were a little worried that we

would encounter animosity from people we met abroad, particularly in light of our country's current involvements on foreign soil. We had even heard of other Americans sewing Canadian flags on their backpacks to avoid international wrath. (I have a whole list of reasons why I think doing such a thing is completely ridiculous, but I will spare you...) I think I can fairly say that no one, upon finding out that we are Americans, has had an adverse reaction. In many cases, it has been just the opposite. It seems that—lucky for us—nearly everyone is able to view the mistakes of the Bush Administration as separate from America as a whole.

[Visit Shanna and Derek Hughey's travel blog, "One Year on Earth," here.](#)

I have begun to better define my views on what it means to be an American. My thoughts crystallized during a visit to the U.S. embassy in New Delhi in December. Upon entering the embassy, we were directed to a clean, empty room

reserved for U.S. citizens, where a staff member was waiting to assist us. To get to the room, we walked through a crowded, chaotic space where hundreds of Indian people waited in an impossibly long line in hopes of obtaining a U.S. visa. At that moment, I began to more clearly understand all of the privileges that accompany U.S. citizenship.

One of the most pronounced contrasts between our own country and many others is the fact that our citizens can depend on our government to provide us with a basic level of services, from a quality education to clean air and water to relatively safe streets. With the obvious exception of the very poor, most Americans' basic needs are met, and so we are free to focus our energies on creating a better life for ourselves. Such is not the case for people in rural India or in the mountains of Nepal, among other places we have been.

This freedom, coupled with an optimism that is, I think, uniquely American, allows many of our citizens to transcend the circumstances into which they were born and to rise to heights that their parents never achieved. Our growth is not stunted by a caste system or by paralyzing gender roles. We are, for the most part, free to seek the "American Dream." While this concept may be a cliché, it is real for us in a way that it is not for people in many other countries.

Until I saw first-hand the manner in which many governments — even other democracies — fail their people, I did not realize how far our own, however imperfect, goes in lifting up its citizens.

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