Service first
Graduates find enrichment overseas before starting grad schools, careers

MACON, Ga. — What if college graduates didn’t go straight into graduate school or an entry-level job? What if they had opportunities for reflection and service that also gave them international exposure and experience?

What if, from the time a student enrolls as freshman, he or she is encouraged to discover a long-developing “life dream” rather than to simply declare a major?

Those were the ruminations of Scott Walker, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas, that led to the ServiceFirst program he hatched at Mercer University in Georgia.

“The uniqueness of ServiceFirst is that it is for graduates — not a degree-oriented program but a service-oriented program,” said Walker.

The new program that has sent more than 30 graduates to various parts of the globe over the past two years is part of the larger "Institute of Life Purpose” that Walker directs at Mercer.

NEW DISCOVERIES
Jay Hood, who graduated from Mercer in 2010 with degrees in English and Southern studies, went to Bangkok, Thailand, rather than directly to graduate school. There he learned from cross-cultural experiences and discovered a gift for teaching.

"Bangkok is perhaps the most international city I’ve ever been to,” said Hood.

“There are people there from everywhere; the entire place literally thrives on tourism.”

Many adjustments were required, he said, such as riding motorbike taxis that are both fast and dangerous.

"On a darker note, it’s hard to ignore the level of poverty in which most people live in Thailand,” said Hood. “Bangkok is a first-world city, but Thailand is a third-world country. Workers who build the five-star restaurants and hotels, the people who wait on you in a restaurant, and who give you your ticket at the movie theater, live so far below the poverty line that it’s difficult for us to imagine.”

Now Hood is a graduate student at the University of Mississippi where he is studying English literature.

RIGHT FIT
Alicia Jonah, who also spent nearly a year in Bangkok, didn’t exactly do ServiceFirst first; she went to law school for a year before deciding such an experience was just what she needed.

“At first I was scared and unsure of making the move to Thailand, but with the help

and guidance of Dr. Walker, I was able to gain the most out of my move,” she said. “By going through ServiceFirst, I was able to learn more about myself and gain an independence I would have otherwise never found.”

She is now considering a career in
international diplomacy or international aid. While Thailand was right for her, she said the ServiceFirst program does a good job of matching the student with the place of service.

Walker said that finding "a place of service that fits" is an essential part of the program — and that many options exist.

"We are a linking organization," said Walker. "We are coming up with a menu of things we can link graduates to."

Peace Corps, Teach for America and other volunteer-oriented organizations provide service opportunities as does the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship — which he describes as "really helpful to us."

LIFE AS 'THE OTHER'

Neil Boggan served at the Philippines Baptist Theological Seminary in Baguio City, from August 2010 until April 2011. Unlike most ServiceFirst participants, his experience followed graduate school.

Boggan is a 2009 graduate of Mercer's McAfee School of Theology who did undergraduate studies at Berry College in Northwest Georgia.

"Experiencing life as 'the other' is crucial to building empathy and understanding with those whom are different from you," said Boggan of his experience in the Philippines. "It is also an enlightening path to self-awareness and discerning one's vocational calling."

Boggan spoke of another benefit from participation in ServiceFirst: "In addition, having opportunities to work overseas boosts one's résumé in this era of globalization."

New grad Tyler Jenkins spent January to June of this year as an educator at Kicks Institute, a Baptist-oriented boarding school located in Virginia, Liberia.

"I taught eight classes, including middle school geography and high school reading," he said. "This experience not only strengthened my belief in hope, but most importantly, in Jesus Christ."

NEXT STEPS

Graduates who complete their terms with ServiceFirst say the experience helps them take the next steps with greater clarity. Those steps are as individual as the graduates.

Mark Young and Abby Rowswell both graduated in 2010 and went to China to teach English. After completing their service, Rowswell chose to join the Peace Corps and is now teaching in Africa.

Young has enrolled in New York University Law School in hopes that he will one day teach law. Raised in a small town, he said his experience in China not only helped clarify his next steps but also gave him a broader worldview.

LIFE DREAMS

Walker, who grew up in a missionary family in the Philippines and is a Mercer alumnus and former trustee, developed his dream apart from any particular campus and now hopes other colleges and universities will adapt the program.

"Sometimes you have to get a sense of what you want to do and propose it," said Walker of his own emerging dream.

He explored recent research that suggests "a new stage of adulthood" has emerged for 20-somethings who tend to marry and begin families later in life and need more specialized and advanced education than previous generations.

Walker said he wanted to do this work within a college curriculum since "typically higher education doesn't focus on dreams, purpose."

He raised the needed funds to launch the program and found Mercer president Bill Underwood to be receptive to the concept.

"I hope this can be used at other schools," said Walker. "I think the key here is: Is this helping the lives of students?"

Adam Mauldin thinks so. He was part of a team that taught public school teachers in China to teach English. His ServiceFirst experience made a great impact on more than one level, he said.

"Mercer's ServiceFirst program enabled me to see places I had only read about in a textbook," said Mauldin. "I traveled to a faraway land and met new people. Over the year I broadened my understanding of the world, and also of myself."

Mauldin, who also "met the girl of my dreams" through this experience, added: "Mercer's ServiceFirst Program fundamentally changed my life, and I will forever be grateful to have been lucky enough to experience it."

LARGER PURPOSE

ServiceFirst is different from the popular Mercer on Mission program — also a brainchild of Walker's — that engages students in service learning.

"The uniqueness is that (ServiceFirst) is for our graduates," he noted. "They don't go as students like study abroad or Mercer on Mission."

But ServiceFirst is definitely a continuation in educational development, he added.

"There are some things you can learn in a classroom and some things you can't learn any other way than to be there," he said of the extended, post-graduation, overseas service experiences.

A post-graduation experience through ServiceFirst is the culmination of the broader mission of the Institute of Life Purpose said Walker, who teaches related classes and seminars to assist students in exploring the larger meaning of vocation (calling) rather than simply a career choice.

"Some students will never sit down and talk with someone about life dreams," said Walker, who also offers personal counseling and consultation.

"Instead of saying, 'Fill out this form,' I will say, 'Let's sit down for coffee."

Students, who do, often come away with a new awareness of dreams that have long been rooted in their lives.

"The larger purpose of the Institute of Life Purpose is to help students discover within themselves that 'life dream' that has been evolving within since infancy," said Walker. ServiceFirst, he added, "helps you put wheels on a dream."

—For more on the ServiceFirst program, visit mercer.edu/servicefirst.