

CULTURE FEATURE

choose your own adventure

The story of three NU students who took a summer break from the internship rat race

As students leave Northwestern's halls each June for a summer escape, many find their way into career-minded internships and 9-to-5 workdays, hoping to leave a lasting impression on their résumé or in their bank accounts. But there are those who dare to try a different route. Whether it be traveling in another part of the world, touching lives of others whom many overlook, or exploring their own country, these students open themselves up to new learning experiences that test their knowledge and help them understand a little bit more about themselves, time clock not included.

Independent Traveler

Teaching English in Eastern Europe and backpacking alone isn't the typical college experience, but Lily Vreeland isn't the typical college traveler. "I knew that I wanted to travel over the summer and try something new, and I wanted to travel by myself. I really like pushing myself and experiencing new things." While Googling different volunteer abroad programs that would allow her to be more independent than a typical study abroad program, she finally found one that suited her - traveling to Romania to teach English to children. Why? More like why not: "I thought I might never get to do this again, so I should just do it."

And she did. Vreeland, a junior social policy major, became a volunteer with Learning Enterprises, a non-government organization started in 1992. After classes ended, she headed to Budapest for a week-long orientation with other volunteers. From there, she traveled to Margitta, a town of 18,000 people where she stayed with a host family and taught English to schoolchildren for three weeks. Teaching a different language was a challenge, especially since Vreeland didn't know their language. "It was really ironic, because my whole reason for going was to be independent, but because of the language barrier and different culture, I felt that I lost a lot of my independence," says Vreeland. Because it isn't customary for women to be out alone in the second village she visited, Vreeland couldn't run or take walks by herself, something she did frequently at home.

But after her teaching was over, Vreeland finally got the independence she was looking for. Backpacking through Europe for two weeks by herself was "one of the best experiences." To experience Poland, the Czech Republic and other parts of Eastern Europe, Vreeland took a modern route: couchsurfing. Couchsurfing, where people find each other on an Internet site to see where they can crash for a night or two, is becoming more and more popular. Some may consider this to be dangerous, especially while traveling alone, but Vreeland quickly got over that fear.

"There were times when I was scared or when I realized I had no direct contact with my family, but I really wouldn't have changed anything. It was something new and different that I did for myself," Vreeland says. She says traveling alone is something you have to get used to, but it can be rewarding pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone - all while seeing some incredible places and meeting new people. "When else was I going to get to do this? When else in my life can I say that I got to go teach English in Romania for six weeks? I would highly recommend it... I learned more (traveling) than I could have in any class," says Vreeland.

Not-So-Typical Camp Counselor

When most people think of camp counselors, they picture cabins in the woods, activities like crafts and horseback riding and helping the campers acclimate to their new surroundings. But Jen Simpson's story is different. Add to that scenario moderately or severely developmentally disabled adults who require the services of a dedicated caregiver to deal with their tantrums and medications, and you'll start to understand her summer. "I don't think anyone can be prepared for it unless they've already done it," she said.

Simpson, a senior psychology major, was looking for a normal 9-to-5 job, but with NU's quarterly schedule, her options were limited.



That's when she found a job posting for Camp Anne on another school's Web site. Camp Anne, located in Ancramdale, New York, is a camp for developmentally disabled teens and adults; usually they suffer from a physical disability as well. Most of the campers come from New York City, and Camp Anne is anything but ordinary. The ratio of counselors is never more than 3:1, and one-on-one attention is a high priority. Simpson realized quickly that this wasn't any ordinary task, and that being a counselor would be the most difficult job she's ever had.

"I had a phone interview ... and (the owner) basically told me you have never done anything like this, it will be the really tough, but I didn't quite realize 'til I got there," says Simpson. A 10-day training session allowed Simpson to get a glance into what it would be like when the campers arrived. The experienced counselors role-played as campers, and new counselors practiced what they would do in different situations. When the campers finally arrived, they were ready.

"We try to follow a schedule, but it's basically what they want to do," says Simpson. She recalls sitting with one camper for eight hours on the porch swing and chasing after a camper who had taken off all his clothes as a result of tinnitus, a ringing ear condition. While Simpson did admit being frustrated almost to the point of tears at times, she soon realized what it must be like for these individuals and that, by giving them the best care, she could make a difference in their lives, even if it was just for a summer.

Building trusting relationships and helping the campers develop skills and bonds was what made it worthwhile, Simpson says. "Having an (autistic) camper who doesn't like

to be touched give me the biggest hug; that was amazing," she says. Her summer at Camp Anne taught her patience and respect for others, and she learned a lot about what she can handle, something she wouldn't have gotten from a "normal" job. And life lessons? "You definitely learn not to take the little things very seriously," she says.

Merry-Go-Round Researcher

Eric Wilson didn't imagine that his summer would be focused on carousels, let alone funded by Northwestern. But that's the idea that led him on a road trip from his hometown of Memphis, Tenn. through Georgia, North Carolina and Vermont, then back through New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky and home again. As a senior theatre and English double major, Wilson wrote an original story for his creative non-fiction class, which led him to find out more about carousels.

"I arbitrarily picked carousels. I wanted to pick something that I had been surrounded with my whole life, but that I didn't know anything about," he says. "The more I researched, the more I found out."

Because his roommate had gotten an undergraduate research grant the year before, Wilson decided to apply for one to satisfy his curiosity, while also hoping to turn it into a large-scale honors project. Thanks to the National Carousel Association, which provided him a list of carousels in the U.S., Wilson crafted his road trip and found himself visiting the sites, talking to people who own or operate the rides, and (of course) riding them. Wilson focused his research on older carousels, those hand-carved wonders made around the turn of the century. Many of them are worth millions of dollars.

Wilson soon found that many of these merry-go-rounds are being forgotten, abandoned for thrill rides and theme parks. Traveling to the towns that had invested in saving these structures, he talked to a man who spoke about the city's original desire to tear down the carousel. As he told his story, Wilson was surprised when the man began to tear up. "It's funny because they're so much a part of Americana," he says. It's the connection with the carousels that Wilson found to be one of the most fascinating parts of his trip; it gave him a glance into the lives of the carousels and the people involved with them.

But it was the road trip itself that brought him more insight into his own life. "Being by myself most of the time and driving ... it was very meditative," he says. Wilson also realized that his work was part memoir, as his travels had led him to understand more about himself and his mindset at the time. The metaphor of the carousel isn't exactly new, famously appearing in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but the circular motion of the carousel factored itself easily into Wilson's thoughts at the time. "There's something about a carousel going around and around but not getting anywhere that's frustrating, yet safe," he says.

As Wilson completed his trip, he realized that while the research he did on the carousels was informative, it was what he learned about himself that made it worthwhile. "It was a life experience," Wilson says. "Before, mentally I was stuck, going around in circles, but spending 24 hours with yourself, you kind of have to come to terms with who you are. I feel like a certain stability came out of it. that I wasn't expecting." ■