Erika Schlichting Egli ’93 – Inspiring Woman: On a mission to help others

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A pivotal moment for Erika Egli happened in the wilds of the Amazon.

While on a one-month study abroad trip to Brazil, Egli visited a village several hours up the Amazon River. After encountering darkness, delays and rough waters during the eight- to 10-hour boat ride, they finally saw their destination. Ahead, a bonfire on the beach lit up the night, its brilliance illuminating the faces of the people surrounding the flames. It soon became apparent that every single person in the impoverished village was there waiting for them.

“It absolutely blew me away,” she said, especially the idea that the people would value the students’ visit to such a degree.

The trip was her first time on an airplane — the first of many, she would soon find, as they traveled around the country — visiting everywhere from the river community to the barrios of the city. The theology class was designed to specifically study people in poverty, but was also a chance for Egli to take stock of her own life.

After growing up in what she describes as a “main-line” church, Egli experienced a period of years where she discarded those beliefs.

“I was really searching during that time in Brazil,” she said. “That was when God really called me back.”

It was a pivotal step for her, she said. Not so much the curriculum, but the experience itself.

“God used the people of that country to demonstrate his love for me,” she said. “Those things (like seeing the villagers waiting on the shore) just tugged at my heart. It was kind of a picture of his love.”

New perspective

Along with the spiritual revelations, the trip also impacted her outlook on the world.

“It caused me to see my life in a new light,” she said. To go from seeing a family of eight living in a space we would consider the size of a partial hallway, to seeing the cavernous spaces of the local Sam’s Club, was a difficult adjustment. “It opened my eyes to how privileged we are.”
Along with her trip to Brazil, Egli continued to volunteer throughout her college years, visiting rural Appalachia, Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation and Cuernavaca, Mexico. After college, she volunteered for a year at a Catholic worker house in Houston that ministered to refugees, immigrants and Spanish-speaking battered women and children.

“I lived and worked right in that homeless shelter for the year — that was very intense work,” she said. “Choosing to go there was a bit of a leap of faith; I was leaving everything I knew.”

But her volunteer work laid the groundwork for what she does now, she said.

As the coordinator for KinderStart, Head Start’s transition program, Egli and others work with children to meet their needs. Egli emphasized that although Head Start is known primarily as a preschool education program, it was created to provide comprehensive services to support disadvantaged children in terms of nutrition, health, parent involvement and more.

“We want to serve the entire family, not just the child,” Egli said.

Many families face barriers aside from poverty, including language, literacy, disabilities, lack of transportation, high mobility, a debilitating crisis or a lack of informal support systems.

“KinderStart really exists to help families overcome those barriers,” she said.

Rewarding career

Yet for Egli, the biggest challenges often reap the biggest rewards.

“It often goes hand-in-hand — the most challenging are also the most rewarding,” she said. For instance, last year workers encountered two families during home visits that had absolutely no furniture in the house. Seeing a need, they worked to connect the family with community resources.

“We encounter some extreme needs,” she said. Those needs have been compounded by the country’s economic woes, she said.

Egli started working for Head Start in 1995, transitioning to KinderStart in 2000. Besides helping connect families with community resources, Egli also works to educate people about Head Start, and connect with kindergarten teachers in a three-county area.

It’s an area she knows well, considering that she’s a Stearns County native who grew up in a family of dairy farmers, on land that her great-grandfather homesteaded. The oldest of five children, she recalls stacking hay in the summer, lots of household responsibilities and helping her mother maintain a large garden. After attending local schools, she received degrees in business management and studio art from the College of St. Benedict.

The double-major was a nice compromise for Egli, who has always been interested in art.
As an artist, she has worked in almost every medium, from pencil portraits to jewelry, to dabbling in oil to making pottery and clothes. She says she often comes up with “custom” ideas, especially for gifts: for a sister who loves shoes, she researched different vintage shoes, then created a spoof on a holiday stocking out of leather scraps.

“That has been a lifelong passion,” she said.

Additional Facts

Erika Egli

Age: 38.
Title: KinderStart coordinator.
Who inspires you? “One of the most important relationships in my life was with my grandmother; we had a very special connection. I would say we were kindred spirits. When she died ... I realized the depth of impact she had on me and how critical it is to have a person who encourages you.”