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An Oregon Wildcat in St. Andrew's Court

Editor's note: Kurstin Finch Gnehm '97, former director of annual giving at Linfield College, launched an adventure in Scotland last year when she accepted a position at the University of St. Andrews.

I admit that, when I stepped out of the cab one sharp September morning in 2010, I was hoping for a fairy tale.

And I figured that a 600-year-old university in a medieval town on the east coast of Scotland was just about as close as I could get. St. Andrews is almost always "dreich" with the "East Haar" blowing off the sea. It was sunny and crisp on the day of my interview, but on most days mists hang low over the wreck of the 7th-century cathedral and swirl around the 14th-century castle ruins. Red-robed students scurry through closes and wynds on their way to classes. The cobblestones drip. The chapel bells peal and the guy with the accordion plays on the street corner. In fact, when I accepted the position I was offered that afternoon, I thought I was going to work at Hogwarts.

Kurstin Finch Gnehm '97 stands outside Stirling Castle, one of Scotland's largest castles and which is surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs. Gnehm works at the University of St. Andrews, the third-oldest English-speaking university in the world.

Since December 2010, I have been working at the University of St. Andrews, the third-oldest English-speaking university in the world. It's located in St. Andrews, Scotland, a 2,000-year-old town that was once the seat of Scottish government and religion, where St. Andrew's bones now lay and where golf was invented.

Moving across the ocean, away from friends and families, from food I recognized, accents I could understand and a wonderful position in Linfield's College Relations Department, was a life-changing decision. In 1995, I attended Nottingham Trent Polytechnic (now Nottingham Trent University) as part of Linfield's study-abroad program, and fell in love with the U.K. I have since been scheming to return on a long-term basis.

The economic recession gave me an opening. British universities have traditionally been funded by the government. That became unsustainable and for the last few years British universities have faced a world in which fundraising is a necessary evil. To accomplish this, they have started hiring American fundraisers, who they believe have the required skills (not to mention the chutzpah, although they'd never admit it) to jumpstart fundraising programs.

In 2009, the University of St. Andrews launched its 600th anniversary campaign with aspirations to raise £100 million. The campaign required a staff member who could coordinate phonathons (including two to the U.S., which begin at 11 p.m. and wrap at 4 a.m.) – a skill fairly common among American fundraisers. The university was able to prove that no one in the European Union could fill the position (a criterion for a sponsored visa) and bam! I was in.

> *"Moving across the ocean, away from friends and families, from food I recognized, accents I could understand and a wonderful position in Linfield's College Relations Department, was a life-changing decision."*

After a year at St. Andrews, I find myself most commonly answering three questions.

Are British university students different from American students?

Not really. Like Linfield students, St. Andrews students spend their time rushing from library to residence hall to

classroom, complaining about hall food, the cost of living, the need for caffeine, lack of sleep. They watch *Strictly Come Dancing (Dancing with the Stars)* and go to balls (parties). They participate in university clubs (Harry Potter and Gin is my favorite, although I have no idea what they do), go hillwalking (hiking) and play sports, although usually rugby or football (soccer). They socialize at local pubs (bars), eat at chippies (cheap fast food restaurants) and hang out at coffee shops (Starbucks).

Do British people loathe Americans?

No. I find that most of my British colleagues know more about the States than I know about the U.K. Many of them have American friends or have visited the U.S. (usually New York), and are exposed to as much American culture as they can stand through fashion, television and music. My Scottish friends can carry on a thoughtful discussion about Obama or the Republican presidential slate. Some can name the 13 colonies. One even attended Lewis & Clark Law School for a year.

While fascinated with us Yanks, however, they cannot shake the feeling that we are really a type of cartoon character from a planet where people are wealthy, juvenile and ridiculously optimistic. So I am a type of cultural interpreter.

I am variously an expert on food: "What's a Ding-Dong? So what's a Ho-Ho? Well, then, so what's a chimichanga?"

On consumer culture: "You mean you can get coffee without leaving your car?"

On politics: "Did Sarah Palin really shoot a bear?"

I find myself understanding more about American culture than when I was living it. As Americans, we have a lot to celebrate but we also have a lot to learn from countries that have been at this much longer than we have.

Do I find myself a stranger in a strange land?

Absolutely, and not only when serving on the team welcoming Prince William and Kate Middleton on a visit back to their alma mater, as I did in February 2011. I have a terrible time keeping the Commanders of the Order of the British Empire straight from the Officers of the Order of the British Empire. I can frequently be seen tootling down the right-hand side of the road in my Vauxhall Corsa, and I can't yet be trusted to properly pronounce the word "scheduled." Worst of all, I haven't learned to play golf.

None of that seemed to matter, when we celebrated Thanksgiving with 28 of our closest friends. There we sat around the table, Brits, Scots, Czechs, Kiwis, Germans and Americans, sharing turkey, stuffing, pumpkin pie and the things we are thankful for – including the chance to have incredible adventures worthy of a 21st-century fairy tale. For many of our guests, it was their first Thanksgiving. While the first year has been challenging, we wouldn't have missed it for the world.

To follow our adventures, visit www.fromsalem2standrews.wordpress.com.

– Kurstin Finch Gnehm '97

The Wildcat looks out from St. Andrews Castle.