Student Dynamo Accepts Challenge

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Student dynamo accepts challenge

Despite bouts of homesickness and financial stress, Dendere blossomed. Political science professor Dawn Nowacki, whose research projects Dendere has worked on, witnessed a transformation from “this kind of tentative, confused and really lonely person when she got here. She has come so far in her intellectual development and had these incredible experiences.”

One of those was Dendere’s internship last summer at the Carter Center in Atlanta, Ga. She researched four nations: Palestine, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe and Ghana, and the African Union, for the Center’s democracy program, which includes elections monitoring.

“I met people who talked about things I love to talk about – international relations and politics. We had intense conversations,” Dendere says.

And yes, she met former President Jimmy Carter. She visited his home in Plains, Ga., and also met wife Rosalynn, whom she describes as surprisingly funny.

Dendere was one of two interns, out of 32 in the program, chosen to make a presentation before the Center’s Board of Trustees. Later, during a photo session, Carter pointed her out, declaring: “She’s going to be a president someday.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her,” Nowacki says. “I remember thinking, when Chipo first told me, in our very first conversation, that she wanted to be president of Zimbabwe, that this was unrealistic and somewhat arrogant, and that perhaps she was not serious. She assured me that she was quite serious, and over the course of the next year, as I got to know her and observe her talents, I could see that this goal is actually quite realistic and attainable for her. I told her I want to observe her talents, I could see that this goal is actually quite realizable and attainable for her.”

Nowacki, whose research projects Dendere has worked on, witnessed a transformation from “this kind of tentative, confused and really lonely person when she got here. She has come so far in her intellectual development and had these incredible experiences.”

The Linfield College senior swallows a bite of yogurt and flashes a smile at an acquaintance in O’Reilly’s café. She admits she loves to sleep – 10 hours a night – and watches junk TV.

Typical college slacker? Here’s how Chipo Dendere ‘08 spends her waking 14 hours: as president of the student body (Associated Students of Linfield College); forensics team member; International Club president; founder of the campus Global Action Club; and Sunday school teacher for McMinnville middle-schoolers.

Oh, yes, and she works 20 hours a week in Nicholson Library and the Observatory and does collaborative research with Linfield professors. All this, while maintaining a 3.6 GPA as a double-major in political science and psychology. And she will graduate in May after only three and one-half years.

Still, she insists, “I’m so lazy that I only do the things I really want to do at the time.” And those 15-credit semesters? “I love to read, and I take courses I enjoy. When you enjoy it, it makes it easier to earn good grades.”

Dendere grew up in Zimbabwe and attended boarding school with the same classmates from age 10 in Marondera, about an hour from her home in Harare. Several friends chose East Coast schools; Dendere went West to Linfield.

Somehow, this shy and reserved girl has succeeded where her classmates have not. “Here, students are more individualistic, but that’s not the way I was raised,” she says. I ask her what she would have done differently if she had known there would be a scholarship waiting for her.

“The best advice I can give is to study and try to maintain a good grade point average,” she says. “I was able to come to a wonderful school because of my scholarship.”

For now, Dendere has a more modest goal as student leader: “I want to get students on campus involved and really knowing what’s going on.” She also wants to increase the visibility of student government.

As for her future, Dendere is applying to graduate schools, hoping to pursue a Ph.D. in comparative politics. Roommate Sharon Tan ’07 admires Dendere’s tenaciousness. “Chipo proves anything is possible if we are determined enough,” she says.

Adds Nowacki, “Working with someone like Chipo is what makes it worthwhile to be a professor. Such students keep us going!”

– Beth Rogers Thompson

Reaching out to youth

You might say that Gabriel Del Rayo ’08 is straddling two different worlds.

Whether he’s encouraging players on the soccer field or dispensing advice, counsel and sometimes punishment through the juvenile justice system, Del Rayo is serving local youth.

Sandwiched between classes to complete his business major and Spanish minor at Linfield and his work as an assistant soccer coach at McMinnville High School, Del Rayo also finds time to work as a juvenile probation assistant in the Yamhill County Juvenile Department.

He began as a translator assisting with local Latino youth who found themselves on the wrong side of the law. As his responsibilities increased, the job evolved into an internship for credit at Linfield. He spent last summer working full time under the supervision of Dana Carelle, probation officer.

Del Rayo’s duties include talking to parents, filing paperwork, conducting probation visits, taking young people to court and treatment programs, and administering drug tests. He’s even learned how to present in court, which he calls “nerve-wracking.” In some cases, he has had to help cuff kids and take them back to detention. The crimes range from misdemeanors to felonies and may include criminal mischief, harassment and sex abuse; the majority are drug related.

The work has been both rewarding and eye-opening.

“The interesting thing is that there is nothing normal about this work,” said Del Rayo, whose own strong family and parental support kept him out of trouble. “You can make a difference with some of these kids. You have patience. Sometimes it takes a couple of years to see any progress. But it’s rewarding when you hear about a kid who is going to college, playing sports or getting good grades.”

He may be the perfect role model for young people who have few examples to emulate, said Carelle, his supervisor at the juvenile department.

“Gabriel is a young Hispanic male in college and that’s a good role model,” she said. “He has a genuine compassion for people, and I think he wants the best for these kids. He’s learned a little bit about life and the struggles some people face. He’s learned how to draw a line and hold kids accountable for their behavior and accountable for the court’s expectation.”

Playing and coaching soccer – at McMinnville High or in Joe Dancer Park – gives Del Rayo the opportunity to interact with young people in the community, some of whom are at risk to make poor choices.

“The parents are the most frustrating to work with, either because they are in trouble themselves or because they haven’t raised their kids right,” he said. “Some of these kids are really needy and all they want is someone normal.”

Although he’s not sure of his plans after he graduates in May, Del Rayo is considering working in the juvenile corrections field, at least for a while. But he also wants to pursue the opportunities his business degree will offer.

“They have given me a great opportunity in the juvenile department and I’m grateful for that,” Del Rayo said. “Even if I don’t go into this field long term, I’m getting some good training at how to deal with difficult people.”

– Mardi Mileham