Early Childhood Education

Real College. Real World. Real You.

Photo by Thomas Lindfors

Early Childhood — worlds away from the west side of Chicago.

Lonnika’s walk to school on the west side of Chicago meant drug dealers, prostitutes, drive-by shootings, gangs. “It wasn’t a good area,” she says shaking her head. So at age 14, Lonnika, her mother and three sisters packed their clothes and boarded a train bound for River Falls, Wis., where the girls’ uncle lives.

But the house was crowded, so Lonnika’s family moved to Grace Place – a temporary housing shelter. Grace Place helped her mother find work and an apartment in nearby New Richmond Place – a temporary housing shelter. Grace Place helped her mother and three sisters packed their clothes and boarded a train bound for River Falls, Wis., where the girls’ uncle lives.

“I thought it was a place to get a burger and fries, not a clothing store!” laughs Lonnika.

When Lonnika graduated from New Richmond High School, a teacher recommended WITC for several reasons: it was ideal for a young woman with a learning disability (she needs extra time to learn) and WITC has a program in which Lonnika holds a strong interest: early childhood. In addition, WITC is close, less expensive, and classes are smaller. Plus her job is nearby, and she could save “lots of money” toward her four-year college goal.

The ECE program was an accelerated program, so Lonnika completed an associate degree in just 10 months.

“My car was packed with projects and portfolios,” Lonnika says. “We were here on Saturdays and until 10 o’clock many nights. Our group got very close.”

In addition to her studies, Lonnika works at Bear Buddies, a childcare center. “I’m the closer and a teacher’s assistant,” she explains. “I do activities with the kids and get the place all spic and span for the next day.”

After closing up the center, Lonnika goes to her live-in nanny job. “I care for two boys, ages 6 and 8,” she says. “In the evening, we do homework, activities, read stories, talk about their day. In the morning, I take them to school before I go to WITC.”

Now age 22, Lonnika continues at WITC because she is working on a second associate degree as an administrative professional. “I’m not done with WITC. I want to keep building — I want those extra skills so I’m ready when I go to the university.”

Her plan is to graduate WITC (again) May 2013 and start that fall at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls in the elementary education — early-middle childhood program for a bachelor’s degree. “I want to work with children,” she says. “I want to stay in Wisconsin and teach at one of the New Richmond elementary schools. I get posse bumps whenever I visit. I want to be there, too!”

Alisha

Halfway around the globe, a classmate employs her WITC ECE degree.

Alisha Hayes graduated from WITC’s accelerated early childhood program, in the same class as Lonnika. But her path led her to a study abroad program in Germany through the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange for Young Professionals.

As with Lonnika, Alisha was “exposed to a culture that, though similar to mine, is still at times completely different.”

Part of her experience was a five-month internship in Leverkusen, along the Rhine River between the cities of Cologne and Dusseldorf, at a school called Die Rheinpiraten. Her internship and study abroad program completed, the school hired her as a native English-speaking teacher, where she currently teaches English to German youngsters.

Alisha says, “I had planned to return to the U.S. after the study abroad program, but decided to stay longer. During the Die Rheinpiraten interview, I asked if a longer-term commitment was possible. We discovered Germany has a similar title to my associate degree in early childhood, which means I carry the credentials to do the same early childhood education jobs in both countries. I believe that a bachelor’s degree would have hindered my specific case as I do not believe I could have transferred the degree to a German equivalent.

“Work with children up to age 6 in the mornings; and then as lead teacher for older children in the after-school program. It is a completely different experience than teaching in the U.S. and it brings new challenges and joys every day,” Alisha says.

“I plan to continue at Die Rheinpiraten another year while I begin my coursework online to complete the Early Childhood Education Transition to bachelor’s degree at UW-River Falls. After that, I plan to return to the States to finish the on-campus coursework at the university. Although I hope to continue teaching abroad, it’s important for me to have a recognized degree in the U.S.”

Alisha was recently asked to fill in as director at the school she works for, while two instructors are on leave.

“My education at WITC was the defining factor in how everything played out for me in Germany: It was the boost I needed to be able to enter the scholarship program and the aid I needed to continue to live and work in Germany. WITC was the best decision for me,” Alisha says.

By Elizabeth Whitchurch
Early Childhood Education Program

Courses Lead to New and Rewarding Career

By Shawnda Schelander

When Wendy Fletcher took courses that would help her care for foster children with special needs, she had no idea those few classes would lead to a new and rewarding career.

“I got a flyer in my mailbox about the Wisconsin inclusion credentials,” Fletcher says. The professional inclusion credential classes offered online through WITC teach students to work with special needs children. Fletcher, who adopted two boys with special needs, one being emotionally challenged, as well as special health care needs. Fletcher, who adopted two boys with special needs, one being emotionally challenged, as well as special health care needs. Although area school districts often provide services to Head Starts and childcare centers, Fletcher believes it will be beneficial to have someone at the center with that specific education and background. It’s a dream she now has the passion and confidence to pursue, thanks in large part to the support from her partner and Edwards. “He connects what we learn in class to his job at the child care center. Having a male role model is beneficial for kids. It breaks the stereotype by letting them see a man as a nurturer.”

Despite the online format, Fletcher said she still developed relationships with her instructors and fellow students. Through online discussion boards, students were able to offer each other feedback and support throughout the program.

Half-Way Around the World

Ty Gerber discovered the vocation he was meant for

By Deborah Anderson

A fter graduating from Cameron (Wis.) High School, Gerber went to the University of Wisconsin-Superior, earning a degree in history and political science. During those years, he developed a special interest in Japanese history, culture and relations between the United States and Japan. He learned from one of his professors that people with four-year degrees could apply to teach English in Japan.

The summer after graduation he decided to look into those opportunities. On July 4 he interviewed for a job with a Japanese company, was quickly offered a position and found himself standing in Japan on July 27 – his 27th birthday.

He spent a year teaching at the company-run school for children through adults, but didn’t find it fulfilling. “There was very little conversation,” Gerber says. “I would talk and the students would look at the Japanese co-teacher who would translate. As a teacher, I wanted to be able to communicate with the students.”

Looking for a more rewarding teaching experience, Gerber secured a position in a private pre-school in a small close-knit community. It was a progressive school where the children were taught to care of themselves. Many of the parents had lived overseas and understood the value of their children learning English. Gerber was happy the small classes of 2-to-6-year-olds allowed direct interaction.

He especially enjoyed teaching the little ones. “Sometimes with the two-year-olds I’d have to tell them the Japanese word and then the English.”

Gerber taught at the school for four years and he came to realize the positive effect that devoted teachers have in the future of the children and even the community. “The kind of care that children get early in their lives is so important,” says Gerber. “Finding good child care should almost be treated as insurance — making sure they are prepared for the life ahead.”

Upon his return to Wisconsin, he checked out the ECE program at WITC-Rice Lake and found that the curriculum – similar to what he had experienced at the school in Japan – focused on teaching children independence, as well as respect for others and their environment.

Because he was given credit for all but two of the required general studies courses, Gerber was able to concentrate on the core classes. “The courses are more focused; and I’m more focused.”

“Ty is a good teacher, very thoughtful,” says ECE instructor, Amy Pennington Edwards. “He connects what we learn in class to his job at the child care center. Having a male role model is beneficial for kids. It breaks the stereotype by letting them see a man as a nurturer.”

Now in his last semester of the ECE program, Gerber has also started taking courses toward WITC’s professional credential for child care administrators certificate. This will enable him to run a child care center and someday teach his goal of owning a center, maybe even a chain of them.

“I will get to work with kids and have my own business,” Gerber says. “And the need for child care is not going to go away.”

To learn more about this program, visit wtc.edu/pgm/pages/earlychild