Interview conducted by Nathaniel Javid with Professor Sonja Darlington on November 17, 2009. N=Nathaniel, S=Sonja.

N: What were you doing in Ethiopia this summer?
S: I was there for one month, because I wanted to prepare for my FYI course called “Environmental Cross Currents in Ethiopian Sudan.” Although I had read a lot for my course, I also thought it was important to get a first hand experience. There weren’t many opportunities to go to Ethiopia, so as I looked at various websites including WWOOF, I found the program called Projects Abroad. One of their projects enables you to go to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to teach. While there, I taught English at Practical International Language and Leadership School. The students ranged from high school to Masters degree students. The courses I taught were general English, exam prep, and leadership development. The teaching conditions were challenging – very small classrooms with anywhere from 3 to 40 students, out of date texts, and frequent electricity outages.

N: Did you have an opportunity to do some research aside from volunteering at Practical?
S: Most days I was able to visit museums, historical sites, and other schools, such as The School of Fine Arts and Design at Addis Ababa University. My research included having the opportunity to interview some major Ethiopian artists, Getahun Assefa (http://beloit.edu/~darling/Ethiopia/getahunasssefa.html), Wondwossen Melakeselan (http://beloit.edu/~darling/Ethiopia/Wondwossen.html), Abdurahman Sharif (http://beloit.edu/~darling/Ethiopia/abdurahmansherif.html), and Bisrat Shibabaw (http://beloit.edu/~darling/Ethiopia/bisratshibabaw.html). I’ve always been interested in the fine arts, and particularly in art education. In Ethiopia, there’s typically not much money to support the arts so I was happy to see the developments that I did. In fact, I met with the director of the School of Fine Arts and Design and he noted that the newest disciplinary aspect at the fine arts school that had been added was art education.

N: What was noteworthy about the art you saw?
S: It was interesting to see religious, propaganda, and contemporary art. I was also curious about the themes of alienation, dislocation, and immigration. These themes were the basis for my FYI seminar. I have also investigated the art of Julie Mehretu who is a well-known Ethiopian artist, noteworthy for her large scale paintings that include worldwide immigration patterns and architectural plans in which she tries to conceptualize large global movements of people.

N: Where did you stay while you were there?
S: I stayed with a host family who owned and managed Lemlem School, which was created to provide a better quality education for rural students.
Welcome, Kris Gonstead

The department warmly welcomes its permanent secretary, Kris Gonstead, who is replacing interim secretary, Beth Erickson. Ms. Gonstead has served previously for two and a half years as the Visit Coordinator for Admissions. As the new secretary, she is most looking forward to getting to know some faculty and working with current students rather than just prospective students. Although Ms. Gonstead is excited to be part of the Education and Youth Studies department, she misses the people she became close with at admissions: “I made great friends there…it’s just a great group of people.”

Some of her goals for the office include improving organization and eliminating general clutter. Ms. Gonstead also would like to have more paper files transferred to an electronic database to improve efficiency.

In her spare time, Ms. Gonstead enjoys spending time with her husband and two kids, cycling–road riding and mountain biking–and reading, as part of her book club. “I’m really looking forward to meeting people here around MI and learning the ropes,” she states.

2009 Beloit Graduate Full Time Teacher

Beloit College 2009 EDYS graduate Laura Bayle found an essential life-line from her college education during her difficult first year teaching high school in Rockton, Il. She realized that “I’m often frustrated, tired, overworked, but I still feel like I can achieve what I want to in the classroom. I never doubt that I am capable of doing more, doing better.” This sturdy lesson helps buoy her during especially rocky times.

Laura recounts an endless parade of challenges in teaching freshman English and juniors American Literature at Hononegah High School—enough to make many first-year teachers walk out the door. “The grading never ends, the emails are continuous—from concerned and inquisitive parents, students with down-to-the-wire questions about the essay due tomorrow, administrative issues, etc.—and most of my free time during school is spent planning for the next day or the next hour. Then there’s the tutorial slips, late homework, discipline issues, IEP meetings, department meetings, faculty meetings, meetings about future meetings…It’s not so much the degree of difficulty about the work, it’s the sheer amount and diversity of it that can melt your brain.”

She attributes the education lessons she learned at Beloit in helping her to understand the underlying environment of the school and her students so that she can better teach the lessons. “As cheezy as that may sound, I do think that’s something Beloit instilled in me.

I feel prepared to understand the philosophical and sociological effects and intentions of both the school environment, and the lessons I attempt to instill. I constantly find myself trying to implement the ideas I was taught in EDYS classes. I often feel that I fall short, but I also feel like I know how I can do better.”

Laura is also adjusting to life as a working adult. “As a recent graduate of college, I mostly feel like I’m in a hazy in-between phase of adulthood. I pay bills and rent; I have a car and insurance; I do laundry on a more regular basis; and, I cook all my own meals. That does not make me a responsible adult, though.

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2009 Beloit Graduate at the Lac du Flambeau Public School

Beloit College Education and Youth Studies Department alumnus, Lia Bengtson, is currently student teaching a first grade class at the Lac du Flambeau Public School on the Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe reservation in northern Wisconsin. “[The school] recently received the Wisconsin Promise Schools of Recognition award for their high math and reading scores on statewide assessments compared to schools with similar poverty rates,” Lia states. The school has both Head Start for pre-kindergarteners and SAGE (Student Achievement Guarantee in Education), a state program that promotes achievement through four strategies: 1) class sizes limited to 15 students in grades K-3; 2) increased collaboration between schools and their communities; 3) rigorous curriculum; and 4) improved professional development and staff evaluation practices.

Lia notes that the most interesting aspect of the Lac du Flambeau School is the Native American focus in the curriculum: “The school has Ojibwe-themed artwork and cultural displays throughout the school and has Ojibwe language and culture classes.” Lia notes the significance these classes have to the students as reflected in their learning retention rates: “I have been impressed by how much the students pick up and retain. I can see how much students value their time in this class and take to heart what they learn.”

In her class of 14 students, Lia is teaching every subject area except reading, which is being taught by her cooperating teacher who is working on her master’s degree in literacy. She and her students have also embraced the use of SmartBoards, an interactive projector chalkboard. In addition to teaching, Lia is assisting with the afterschool program – helping with Boys Native Outfit Making, in which students design and make traditional dance regalia.

Lia has a passionate interest in other cultures that has influenced her attraction to the Lac du Flambeau school. She has previously worked with deaf children, Somali children, and Hmong children, but did not have much exposure to Native American cultures. Yet those experiences, coupled with her background in education and youth studies and anthropology, have taught her how to think more critically and analyze external factors that may be affecting people and situations. “I feel this experience at Lac du Flambeau will play a very integral role in preparing me for my future as a teacher,” Lia said.

This fall’s Student Assistant: Nathaniel Javid

The Department welcomed its new student assistant for this fall semester, Nathaniel Javid, who is filling in for Gabby Gaudreau while she is abroad. Nathaniel is a junior majoring in Environmental Studies here at the college, and is planning on applying to law school after graduation. “I really enjoy working at the Education Department – all the faculty and staff are very congenial and helpful.” Nathaniel has continued the work of Gabby: his main tasks are writing the newsletter and doing assistant work. In his spare time, Nathaniel loves playing the piano and is an avid car enthusiast.

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Lia student teaching using a SmartBoard.
Laura Bayle continued...

Sometimes I still want to laugh when a student makes a ‘that’s what she said’ joke, or I have to fight my initial response to shrug at the PDA in the hallways. I’m supposed to be the responsible ‘parent’ here!”

Although Laura notes that socioeconomic status is just one indicator that can characterize a student body, the students at Hononegah are more than 90% white, with less than 10% living in poverty. There are no gangs in the school, and the majority of the students do not have serious problems. Still, she has encountered students with drug problems and students who have lost their homes. On more than one occasion, she finds herself in the role of “pseudo parent:” “Besides providing the occasional Band-Aid or Kleenex, I’m asked to give relationship advice, be a sympathetic audience to the teenage anxieties constantly unfolding around me, and also provide comfort to students who have recently lost loved ones.”

But she sums up her first year by saying: “I feel like Beloit has prepared me well for my first year of teaching.”

Sonja Darlington continued...

N: Aside from Lemlem and Practical, were you able to visit any other schools?
S: Yes, I visited a Tefsa school in Shiromeda that has 60 students. The Tefsa foundation (http://tefsa.org) builds schools for disadvantaged students in Ethiopia where no public education is available.

N: Based on what you learned while in Ethiopia, what connections can you make for students here in Beloit?
S: What’s terrific is that we’ve established contacts to each of these places. Students can volunteer or find internships at these schools.

N: Would you go again?
S: Yes, I established wonderful relationships with the people I met. I would love to go back, so I could visit some more historical places e.g., Lalibela, Gondar and Axum.

N: I know you travel a lot. Today, in fact, you just came back from somewhere – where did you go?
S: Abuja, Nigeria where I was on the International Conference Committee, and I worked with Tess Onweme, the most famous female contemporary Nigerian playwright. Actually, she is a distinguished professor at UW-Eau Claire now.

N: That sounds interesting! We will have to talk about that another time.

Report from the Department Chair

With Thanksgiving just ahead, fall classes are nearing the end. The student teachers are busy with teaching, working on their portfolios, and hosting visits from their supervisors. Students in methods classes are out in the schools. We have very high enrollment in the EDYS classes in the spring. We are happy to see so much interest and demand! I spent a day in the Dells earlier this month, attending a couple of meetings for teacher educators in Wisconsin. The first group to meet was WACTE (Wisconsin Association of Colleges of Teacher Education). In the first meeting, we discussed the Teacher Performance Assessment Project, a national project that several schools in Wisconsin have been piloting. We also had an interesting teleconference with Kimberly Riley from AACTE (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education) on what the "mood" and issues are in Washington, DC, in education, especially in the area of teacher preparation. This was an especially stimulating discussion, coming so close on Secretary Arne Duncan's less than laudatory recent remarks about traditional routes to teacher preparation (Read them yourself at: http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/10/10222009.html). The second meeting was just for the representatives from private institutions, including Beloit. We started by sharing book recommendations, then shifted to the issues involved in assessing "Dispositions," the third member of the "Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions Trio" of areas for assessment of teachers and those who wish to become teachers. We also took up the problem of how to ensure that our views are heard by state and federal politicians as well as other decision makers.