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Taking the West to Croatia

by Dottie Barnes

Westerhof-Shultz, associate professor of Education, was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship for the fall of 2005 to the University of Zagreb’s Centre for Research and Training in Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship. She spent four months helping educators develop modes of learning based on the values and principles of human rights and democracy.

“The most challenging dimension of educational change is the matrix of relationships in schools and classrooms,” said Westerhof-Shultz. “Several attempts to launch new policies have failed, partly due to the lack of consensus on what contents and methods should be applied in schools.”

The University of Zagreb, the oldest and largest university in Southeastern Europe, consists of 29 faculties, three art academies and more than 50,000 full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students.

When she arrived in August, she was asked to prepare five lectures on the topic of philosophy, theory and practice of democratic education. “I also introduced the five components of my Deliberative Cycle and showed, through actual instruction and follow-up presentation, why reasoning aloud with others is the essence of a democratic classroom discourse,” she said.

The results of this teaching method were described as “outstanding” by educators. Students said her teaching style had a significant impact on their apprehension of theoretical concepts, facilitated their learning and motivated them for similar studies.

Westerhof-Shultz was able to attend the Seventh Annual Conference of Civitas at Bosnia and Herzegovina in Neum, Bosnia. Policy-makers and teachers assessed firsthand the issues and challenges teachers face as they work to support democratic development.

“This was the first time no one left the conference early because they were mad or offended — a major accomplishment!” Westerhof-Shultz said one of the highlights of the trip was visiting Sarajevo. “I’ve never been in a city that felt so multicultural. From our place in Old Town, we could hear the calls to prayer from the tops of the many minarets surrounding us — beautiful, plaintiff cries when you consider the recent difficult history of the city.”

Their guide was an economics student at the university who survived the war by spending most of his time with his family staying indoors, except for trips for food and water. They also saw a tunnel dug near the airport by Sarajevans to bring food and other supplies in and the injured out.

Westerhof-Shultz has been invited back to Croatia next spring as part of the Fulbright Senior Specialist Program. She will prepare and teach the module on deliberative democracy and education. She will also continue a separate research project on the understanding and beliefs of university students in pedagogy and teacher academies in Croatia. ©