Students

Working Internationally: Advice for Students from ASA Fellow Jim Muir

by Caroline Schneider

SA Fellow Jim Muir was born in Angola, in southwest Africa. His parents were American missionaries, and he spent his youth in Angola, Portugal, Kenya, and Grand Rapids, MI (his mother’s hometown). He grew up speaking three languages and experiencing life on three different continents. In 1977, as an 18-year-old, Muir had to choose one of three countries for his citizenship.

“If I opted for Angola, the newly independent country of my birth, I would be forced to join a side in the civil war,” Muir recalls. “If I became Portuguese, the flag under which I was born in their African colony, I would be conscripted for obligatory military service in a country whose economic prospects were faltering. If I chose to become a U.S. citizen, my parents’ nationality, I had full-ride university scholarships in a country that had just done away with the draft. Even for an addled teenager, the decision was easy.”

Though he chose to become a U.S. citizen, Muir’s interest in other countries never faded. He has worked in Mozambique, South Africa, and Brazil as well as several U.S. states. He has also observed research and presented his own work in Europe, Australia, and Asia. He is most familiar with the agricultural heritage of Mozambique, where he lived and worked for 10 years. Muir is now a professor at Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Tarleton State University. He offers the following advice to students looking for international experiences in their agronomy, crop, and soil science careers.

CSA News: What would you tell students to do, even when still in school, to prepare for working abroad?

Muir: I think one of the things that you can do to begin with, especially as you’re studying, is to learn other languages. If I’m making a list of things you can do to be able to break into international work, learning languages is certainly one. Even just classroom learning can be very helpful. I grew up speaking English and Portuguese, but I studied French and Kiswahili. So the more languages you know a little bit of, the more saleable you’ll be.

Another thing that I would recommend you do if you have any chance is volunteer—even for short periods. You can volunteer with church groups, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) farmer-to-farmer, or rotary club sponsorships, whatever you happen to find. Even things like hurricane relief or short-term experiences—any experience like that is good.

You can also hang out with international students at your school. Play soccer, invite them home for Thanksgiving, or teach them the Texas two-step. Learning to be comfortable with other cultures, accents, and foods—these will prepare you for future international work.

CSA News: Once students graduate, what should they be looking to do?

Muir: After graduate school, I recommend you find some way to spend at least two years on location doing some sort of international work. What I did after graduate school was a Fulbright. The Fulbright sounds difficult to get, but actually, if you’re willing to work in certain places, like Uzbekistan or Burundi, the graduate student research programs are fairly easy to get.

You can also get an internship with the United Nations or do development work with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Or you could work for two years with a

Jim Muir is a professor at Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Tarleton State University.

doi:10.2134/csa2014-59-1-17