Young teacher serves on Alaskan tundra

FORT WAYNE — Although Alaska is not necessarily considered overseas territory, to one native Hoosier it was an opportunity to travel to a community in need. Molly Slocum, a 2004 Bishop Luers graduate and daughter of S. Elizabeth Ann Seton parishioners Karen and Bob Slocum, boarded a plane to St. Lawrence Island, located west of mainland Alaska in the Bering Sea, after earning a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education from Xavier University in Ohio in May of 2008.

Slocum accepted a position teaching in the Bering Strait School District, which encompasses the schools along the Alaskan coast and the two villages on St. Lawrence Island. Her new home was in the village of Savoonga where she lived with other teachers in a house located close to the school.

Her school service ranged from teaching second graders to special classes for third through sixth graders with reading skills. All students there switched classes for third through sixth graders for a year.

Though the environment and culture were alien to Slocum, she immediately immersed herself in village life.

“I wanted to experience life as they did,” she says. School activities were a central part of community life, so “everyone knew your business,” she reports.

Villagers were known to call others out to the beach when a whale was procured. Slocum has experienced the taste of raw whale, seen seals pop up between the ice flows, survived extreme temperatures and winds, and says it was like living in a National Geographic magazine.

The children came to kindergarten speaking the native Siberian Yupik and learned English at school, and each student had a native and an English name. Her parents sent the Magnificat, a monthly magazine offering daily Mass readings and reflections, so that Slocum could keep up with Mass, as there were no Catholic churches on the island. Her faith, she says, was deepened there in the slow-paced culture, where she spent time hiking the serene tundra, which lies closer to Russia than Alaska, and reflecting on God’s direction for her life.

“I was lonely, but that gave me time to develop my relationship with God a little more,” she says, adding that she has become more in tune with herself and more at ease with the current pace of life.

Slocum flew home after the end of the school year and is currently working at a local day camp as she seeks a teaching job in her home community.

“It was a wonderful experience. But I missed my family and my faith community. That’s a big part of why I’m back,” she says. “I do hope wherever I go I touch someone’s life. It’s about the relationships I form.”

Laura Hawkins worked with students and mothers in the small town of Gauze Cua in Paraguay, South America, for part of the Peace Corps. For the next two-and-a-half years she worked with the teachers of the elementary and high schools in her town to improve their classrooms.

In her duties included teaching the teachers games to play with students, creating learning materials, improving literacy skills, instructed students to be math and reading tutors and offering workshops to self-esteem, decision making and goal setting. She also worked with her students in the town to stimulate living and to revitalize every birth to 3-year-old children.

Hawkins is back in the United States now teaching Spanish in a Chicago school and says the experience of serving abroad has changed her life. “I learned that everything we have here, all the ‘stuff’ in our lives is so unimportant and has nothing to do with our happiness. I learned that simpler is better, and the people in our lives count for more than things ever will.”

Hawkins serves God’s children abroad

CHICAGO — Laura Hawkins, a Fort Wayne native lifelong parishioner of St. Therese Parish, and daughter of Mel and Chris Hawkins, earned a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Wittenberg University in Ohio in 2001. During her senior year, she began the process of applying for the Peace Corps. It “has always had an interest in living abroad and doing something to help others,” she says. “I believe that it is everyone’s responsibility to do something to make this world better, even if we make it better for just one person.”

So in 2002, this courageous young woman found herself in the small town of Gauze Cua in Paraguay, South America, as part of the Peace Corps. For the next two-and-a-half years she worked with the teachers of the elementary and high schools in her town to improve their classrooms.

In their excitement the graduates will launch the pilot program in Kasoa, a small village outside of Ghana’s capital city of Accra, teaching second grade at Our lady of Holy Cross School. The school has an enrollment of about 250 students from preschool through second grade, most coming from poor farming families.

The graduates will also train other teachers at the school in the use of their teaching methods. And Ryan reports that the duo will be serving the Catholic and surrounding community “in any way possible,” as well, including assisting with a youth group for middle and high school students.

“We will be called to serve the community in many ways other than teacher while we’re there, and that is so exciting about it all. We will never know what to expect but will always know we are serving others,” she says enthusiastically.