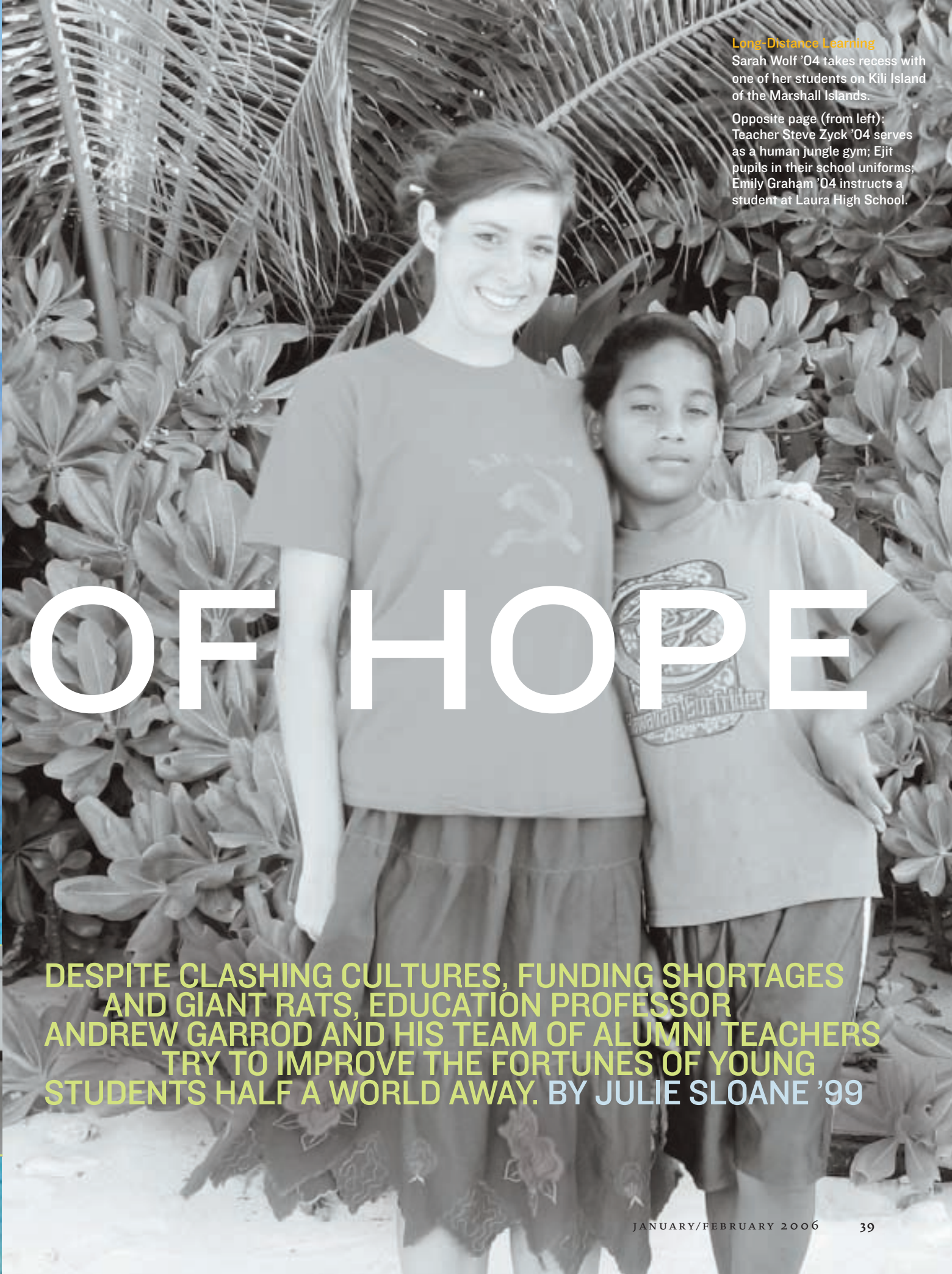




ISLANDS OF HOPE

Long-Distance Learning
Sarah Wolf '04 takes recess with one of her students on Kili Island of the Marshall Islands.

Opposite page (from left):
Teacher Steve Zych '04 serves as a human jungle gym; Ejit pupils in their school uniforms; Emily Graham '04 instructs a student at Laura High School.



DESPITE CLASHING CULTURES, FUNDING SHORTAGES AND GIANT RATS, EDUCATION PROFESSOR ANDREW GARROD AND HIS TEAM OF ALUMNI TEACHERS TRY TO IMPROVE THE FORTUNES OF YOUNG STUDENTS HALF A WORLD AWAY. BY JULIE SLOANE '99



The Marshall Plan (from left): Students line up in front of their teachers, including Rachel Baker '04 (left), as the school day begins at Ejit Elementary; Laura High School; Ejit first-graders; Andrew Garrod in Majuro.

“Maria. Maria! MARIA!” whispers Dartmouth education professor Andrew Garrod with increasing urgency. In his hands a script of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* tells him that Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Fabian are waiting for Maria to arrive on stage and join in their latest tomfoolery. A barefoot girl in an ankle-length skirt tears through the dim banana grove, her waist-length black hair flying behind her, and bounds onto the green plywood stage overhung with strings of light bulbs. “*Baj roñjak eo mok, ñe komiro kanaan ettoñ,*” she begins.

The audience of 300, seated in plastic lawn chairs, howls with laughter. Garrod exhales. Most of the audience here in the courtyard of Marshall Islands High School (MIHS) has never seen a play before, let alone one that combined English with its own mother tongue, Marshallese. If anyone has, it was last winter’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, also directed by Garrod. These are just high school plays, but for Garrod, they mean much more.

Government officials here in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, population 55,000, have declared their education system a “disaster.” They recently reported that 80 to 90 percent of their high school grad-

uates are ready only for elementary school math, and 30 to 40 percent are ready only for elementary-level English. Unless the education system improves, the Marshallese see little hope for the economic development they need to reduce their dependence on U.S. foreign aid, which makes up nearly 70 percent of the country’s national budget. “Education is important” is government rhetoric the world over, but in the Marshall Islands it rings with a distinct urgency.

For the past six years Marshallese schools have gotten help from a college 7,200 miles away. Run by Garrod and field director Jessica Souke '01, the Dartmouth Volunteer Teaching Program places Dartmouth alumni in the grossly under-resourced public school classrooms of the Marshall Islands. The mission is two-fold: to help improve the Marshallese schools and, just as importantly, inspire Dartmouth graduates to become teachers when they return home.

Mentioning the Marshall Islands to any American provokes the inevitable question: “What is it near?” Answer: Kiribati. Nauru. Kosrae. (Anyone?) Try this: smack dab in the middle of the Pacific, north of the equator and just west of the International Date Line. It’s 2,300

miles west of Honolulu and 3,000 miles southeast of Tokyo. In other words, it isn’t near anything. Even the islands themselves are far flung. In the country’s 750,000 square miles of ocean there are just 70 square miles of land distributed among 29 coral atolls and five islands. For any of them to receive even a dot on a world map is somewhat overstating things.

There are 20 Dartmouth alumni currently in the Marshalls, teaching on three atolls and one island. Half of them work in Majuro, a 30-mile-long bracelet of land encircling a central lagoon, blue as you can imagine. At its widest, the atoll is a third of a mile; at its narrowest, water laps both sides of the road at high tide. Half the nation’s population lives here, most of them in low shacks with corrugated tin roofs. It is 85 degrees and humid year-round, so most structures are in some state of rust or rot. The ministry of education gives the Dartmouth volunteers air-conditioned cinderblock houses—dorm-like, but swank by Marshallese standards—as well as a monthly stipend of \$300. Volunteers who return for a second year or otherwise have a year of teaching experience make \$18,000 plus housing. Majuro-based Souke serves as trouble-shooter, mail lady, mentor, confidante and, for those on islands hundreds of miles away, a voice on the radio checking in weekly. Since 2000 Garrod has also been bringing five to seven Dartmouth undergraduates to Majuro during winter term to student teach at MIHS and, lately, to assist with the play. To the Marshallese, they are known as *ribele* (rih-BELLY), a word that roughly translates to “foreigner” or “American.”

In his wood-paneled office at the ministry of education, Minister Wilfred Kendall doesn’t mince words about his 86 public schools with more than 8,500 children enrolled. “We have the worst education system in the Pacific,” he says. “We are not preparing kids for college.” Half of the 800 Marshallese teachers have only a high school diploma. Last year 82 percent failed one or both parts of a government test of English literacy. The ministry doesn’t blame the teachers—after all, they too are a product of the failed system.

The Dartmouth teachers are required to take one pedagogy class in Hanover, but the majority have no other teaching experience. What these novices face is daunting: Supplies as simple as paper and pencils appear intermittently in Marshallese classrooms. When there are textbooks, they are usually far too advanced to be usable or so old that Ronald Reagan is still in the White House. There are almost no books written in Marshallese, traditionally an oral language. Last year the ministry of education began fixing those problems for kindergarten, first and second grades, but it will take years to reach every class in every grade. Many Dartmouth volunteers describe their instructions upon arrival as, “You will teach English and

biology. Go.” Confounding matters, the students’ English skills vary widely within a single class. “In every class I have a kid who can ace my test and a kid who can barely speak English at all,” says Kristin Romberg '01, now in her second year at MIHS.

One of the biggest problems facing the system is the lack of support from Marshallese parents. Secretary of Education Biram Stege often hears, “What’s the point of education? We’re on these islands so far away from the rest of the world. We don’t have that many jobs here.” Indeed, the official unemployment rate is 40 percent, widely thought to be a low estimate. A quarter of the Marshallese population has moved to the United States. The idea of planning for the future is foreign to Marshallese culture. The fish you catch today will be eaten today. Tomorrow, well, you’ll figure it out tomorrow. But Stege hopes Garrod’s Shakespearean productions, in particular, will work to change that mindset. “The play helps kids stop and think that maybe there’s more out there than what they see around them,” she says. “Maybe there’s more than having babies and staying home.”

THE UNITED STATES’ INVOLVEMENT WITH THE MARSHALLS DATES back to World War II, when it wrested the islands from Japan in bloody battle. In 1947 the islands became a UN trust territory administered by the United States, which put the isolated atolls to use. In the 1940s and 1950s the U.S. military tested 67 nuclear bombs on Bikini and Enewetak atolls. The power of those bombs would be equivalent to 1.6 Hiroshima-sized nuclear bombs dropped every day for 12 years. Unfortunately, several of the bombs exposed Marshallese people to radioactive fallout. Today Enewetak inhabitants have returned, but 3,600 Bikinians are still displaced by radioactivity, many living on Kili and Ejit islands—both places where Dartmouth volunteers teach.

In 1986 the Republic of the Marshall Islands became an independent country, albeit with special status. The Marshallese share the U.S. currency, military and postal system, and they can live, work and go to school in the United States without a visa. They will also receive more than \$1 billion in U.S. aid during the next 20 years, without which many systems of life there would collapse. In exchange the United States gains a strategic military base on Kwajalein Atoll, home to the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Test Site and the 2,500 Americans who operate our missile defense shield (better known as “Star Wars”). When military bases in California or Alaska test-fire missiles into the Pacific, Kwajalein is the catcher’s mitt.

Kili Island is 45 minutes from Majuro by plane, an unreliable twice-a-week Air Marshall Islands flight. Just .36 square miles in size,





Island Scenes (from left): Jessica Souke '01 relaxes outside her apartment; children in their Laura home; Kristin Romberg '01 leads a high school chorus practice.

FLAG DOWN A VAN HEADED EAST ON MAJURO'S road—there is only one—and for \$2 it will deposit you an hour later in the Laura neighborhood, where Liz Bultman '04 and Emily Graham '04 taught last year at Laura High School. (Laura was named by American GIs during World War II for Lauren Bacall. The other end of Majuro is called

Rita, as in Hayworth.)

Inside Graham's 10th-grade life science class, 30 students in matching aqua shirts sit at wooden desks as ceiling fans spin above the dirty white linoleum floor. Graham has just handed back their latest midterm and is reviewing the answers. "Gills—who uses them to breathe?" she calls out. The class mumbles the answer. "That's right. Fish. Which of these ways can you get AIDS?" More mumbling. "Yes, sharing a needle. You will not get AIDS from hugging, kissing or sharing a drink." The next question proves the most difficult: What kind of animal is a hippopotamus? "Insect?" ventures one student. Identifying common zoo animals is difficult: They don't exist in the Marshalls.

Graham got biology textbooks mid-way through the year. They're too hard for her kids to understand, but the photos and illustrations are helpful. She and Bultman have English textbooks too, but they're advanced-level and from a religious series. After fielding questions such as "What does 'Mount of Transfiguration' mean?" and "Is 'hath' a helping verb?" they abandoned the books. "I have a friend teaching high school in San Francisco," says Graham. "He wrote me and said, 'My school gave me a laptop with a DVD burner. I have a smart classroom.' I wrote him and said, 'My school gave me a box of paperclips and I was really excited.'"

On the other end of Majuro Atoll lies the island of Ejit, located a few hundred meters off the coast of Rita. When the tide is dead low, you can walk there across the reef. About the size of two football fields, Ejit is home to 275 Bikinian people, four Dartmouth teachers and one school, Ejit Elementary. Beyond that the island contains little more than cinderblock houses, coconut trees and dirt paths.

Children on Ejit are in constant motion, climbing on and under desks, talking and singing. Teacher Amanda Souke, a 2004 University of Delaware graduate who is part of the Dartmouth program (and Jessica Souke's sister), jogs around Ejit every morning. One lap takes her four minutes. "A lot of our kids don't leave Ejit for two or three months at a time," she says. "They have a lot of energy and not a whole lot of room to let it out."

On a sunny Monday morning Rachel Baker '04 is standing in front of 15 first-graders, about half of whom are seated. First grade

and with virtually no jobs to be had, Kili exists in something of a welfare state. It is home to 602 Bikinians, each of whom receives a monthly check from the \$170 million nuclear reparation fund as well as shipments of USDA food. Since 2002 a dozen Dartmouth alumni have taught at Kili Elementary. Principal Ichiro Mark is a big fan of his Dartmouth teachers. When Mark ran for public office in 2003, he appointed Tony Lockett '01 acting principal of the school. He also made Kristin Burdge '04 vice principal last year, a job now taken over by Sarah Wolf '04, who is in her second year teaching on Kili.

Few Americans have ever heard of Kili, but there everyone knows about America. While some Bikinians harbor resentment toward the American government, they also see the United States as a kind of father figure. Thanks to the reparation funds, Kili has many air-conditioned houses and TVs. "They love to watch American movies," says former Kili teacher Meredith Bryan '02. Even the names of her students reflect a love for America: She taught two kids named Clinton, one named Rambo (and his brother, Ranto), siblings named Ronald and Reagan, and Jennifer. "You know, like Jennifer Lopez," the girl's mother told Bryan.

On Kili schools approach 100 percent attendance, in large part because there is little else going on. When former Kili teacher Allegra Love '03 offered kids any kind of alternative to watching movies, 50 kids would show. "All you have to do is pull out your guitar and sit where a kid can see you, and a huge pack of kids and adults will show up to sing with you," says Love. Much of the time Marshallese can be found doing two things, *jambo*, a sort of cruising through town on foot or by car, and *bwebwenato*, gossiping or storytelling.

As destructive as the nuclear bombs were, Kili is evidence that arguably greater damage has been done by American culture. Outrigger canoes and their use in navigating the ocean have been largely supplanted by motorboats. Except on a few remote atolls, the Marshallese have abandoned their sustainable diet of fish, coconuts and breadfruit and instead consume a nutritionally appalling array of starch and sugar—ramen, white rice, soda, candy, prepackaged junk food and the lone redeemer, chicken. Kili families regard USDA canned vegetables as food for the pigs. Exercise is anathema, so almost all adults are overweight and many are diabetic. Alcoholism is epidemic, and with it comes spousal abuse. Children begin having sex at puberty, and a typical family has eight to ten offspring. In the effort to solve all these problems, it's easy to lose sight of a more formidable danger: If global warming continues apace, the Marshalls could be underwater in as little as 50 years.



is the first time Marshallese children encounter English, so Baker's reading lesson today centers around a fat cat in a hat. When the din of little voices gets to be too much, Baker calls out, "Tootsie roll, lollipop. Now we're talking, now let's stop!" It's one of dozens of tricks she has for quieting a room. Some Marshallese teachers will hit children, but the kids know their Dartmouth teachers won't, making discipline more difficult. Later Baker sings, "Who is ready? Who is ready?" to the tune of the children's song "Where is Thumbkin?" The Marshallese are very musical, so Baker finds

lish skills and work ethic to stick with it. The whole application process is unfamiliar, right down to something as simple as filling out forms—students couldn't figure out if they were supposed to write their name above where it says 'name' or below. All 21 were accepted to colleges, but some chose not to go while others couldn't find the money. In the end, only three actually went. He isn't downbeat: "Three is better than zero, which is what the result likely would have been without the class."

The program has also been successful in shaping the future

EVERYONE UNDERSTANDS THAT CHANGE CAN ONLY COME FROM THE CUMULATIVE EFFORTS OF INDIVIDUALS. "EDUCATION IS JUST GETTING OFF THE GROUND HERE," SAYS PETER KEENAN '04.

that if she sings her directions, the children listen better.

This is the fifth consecutive year Dartmouth teachers have been at Ejit Elementary, their longest presence in any school. There is no hard and fast data showing that Dartmouth is improving the educational outcomes of Marshallese students, but Secretary Stege points to Ejit as a sign of progress. "I observed a first-grade class and there was dialogue in English between teacher and student," she says. "There wasn't much of that before."

Garrod and Souke are realistic about the kind of change their program can create. "We never allow the Dartmouth volunteers to think that in one year they're going to 'save the Marshalls,'" says Souke. Everyone in the program understands that change can only come from the cumulative efforts of individuals, year after year. "Education is just getting off the ground here," says Peter Keenan '04, a teacher last year on Wotje Atoll. "It's like working on an assembly line and our job is to put on the tires. I feel like the past 10 people in front of me on the assembly line weren't doing anything to the car. I get the students ready to graduate but there's a lot missing."

More commonly, the Dartmouth alums feel they've made a difference to individual students. Last year Steve Zyck '04 taught a class to help the top seniors at MIHS apply to community colleges in the United States. He began with 40 students, but only 21 had the Eng-

careers of its teachers. Veterans Love and David Yorio, MALS'04, are now back in the States, with Love working on her master's degree in education and Yorio teaching in Boston. Matt Davis '03 is teaching at a public school in Pennsylvania, Lockett in a charter school in Boston. For those who end up in other professions, time in the Marshalls often shapes career interests. Kate McGinn '03 is in law school, but interested in child advocacy. Leo Pollock '03 is in the Netherlands, pursuing a master's degree in sustainable development, an interest he cultivated in Enewetak. "I see Enewetak as the perfect microcosm of the world as a whole," he says. "It's a place struggling to find a balance between the sustainable ways of the past and the rapid technology of the 21st century."

JUST HOW DARTMOUTH STUDENTS ENDED UP IN THE MIDDLE OF the Pacific is a tale of random connections. In 1996 Sarah Ritter, then a member of the Dartmouth education department, adopted children in Ebeye, an island in the Kwajalein Atoll. Ritter connected Garrod with the principal of a Catholic school there. Between 1998 and 2000 nine Dartmouth alumni taught at that school. It wasn't yet an organized program—Garrod just recruited the students to go and kept tabs on them by mail.

In 2000, sponsored by \$23,000 in grants (*continued on page 101*)

from the Dickey Center, Tucker Foundation and the Dean's Venture Fund, Garrod also began taking undergraduates to Majuro during winter term. (Souke was among that first group.) When the Bikini local government, which runs the schools where Bikinians live, heard about the Dartmouth presence, it hired three graduates to teach on Ejit for the 2001-02 school year. The following year it employed six. Impressed, the ministry of education decided to place Dartmouth teachers on other atolls—bringing 17 alums to the Marshalls in 2003-04 and 14 last year.

The program's relationship to Dartmouth is unusual. Almost all its participants are Dartmouth alumni and undergraduates. Back in Hanover Garrod and education department administrative assistant Sandy White keep the dean of social sciences up to date on the program's progress. It was started and sustained for several years using College grants, but for the last year and a half it has received no funding from Dartmouth. It has been unable to get outside grants because review boards see the program as too Dartmouth-centric. Garrod and Souke are fervently hoping for a National Science Foundation grant to come through in the spring to fund the field director position.

Having had a shoestring budget for so long, the program very much runs on Garrod and Souke's enthusiasm. For the last year and a half Souke has been working without pay. To afford the rent on her studio apartment and the flights to visit the Dartmouth volunteers, she works part-time as a consultant to the ministry of education. She acknowledges her workload has been overwhelming. Garrod has spent a term in the Marshalls for four of the past six years and just arrived back in Majuro to direct the third MIHS play, *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Garrod is 68 and eligible to drift off into professor emeritus territory; he knows there isn't anyone in the education department with the time or inclination to take over this program. Souke is 26 and would like to get a master's in education in the United States. But despite uncertainty about the nuts and bolts of how the program will continue, they don't stop envisioning its future. Seated on the purple vinyl sofa in Souke's office at the ministry of education, they speak of it uninterrupted for nearly an hour. "One of the challenges is trying to get the local teachers to carry on with some of the positive things we've started," says Garrod. This year Romberg started teaching music and art at MIHS using a supplemental education grant from the U.S. government to buy instruments and supplies. To her knowledge, it's the first arts program in any Marshallese public school. "The dynamic prevalent here," says Souke, "is that the American teachers know and the Marshallese teachers don't. That's something we're fighting against." Ultimately, they both acknowledge, *ri-belle* teachers are a stopgap measure; well-trained Marshallese teachers are the long-term solution.

In speaking about the program Garrod often quotes William Sloan Coffin: "Every First World college student needs a Third World experience." But Garrod is quick to note this particular experience is certainly not for everyone. In the past two years four teachers chose to leave the program mid-year. Beyond the challenges of teaching, those who stay experience a marked lack of creature comforts. Pacific islands all have roaches the size of your finger, rats the size of your forearm. When one such rodent sprinted through the Tide Table Restaurant in Majuro, one of a handful of Western-

style restaurants in the country, the Dartmouth contingent noted it with amusement and continued eating. Ants are in beds, kitchens and walls. Feral dogs roam the streets and have bitten several Dartmouth volunteers. (Rabies, luckily, does not exist in the Marshalls.) Food sold in Majuro stores is often out of date, but then Kili and Wotje don't have supermarkets at all, nor do they have telephones, Internet, television or paved roads. In case of emergency, the school's radio is the only speedy link to the outside world. Tropical germs wreak havoc on Americans: Nearly every volunteer has had boils or diarrhea. Four of the volunteers got amoebic dysentery last year after not boiling their tap water long enough. Two have been evacuated to Honolulu after the doctors at Majuro Hospital could only confirm that their unknown conditions seemed serious. (Both were treated and returned.)

Nonetheless, to adapt a famous Dartmouth phrase, it is a small country, and yet there are those who love it. Ask any volunteer why and the answer is always the same: the people. There is a Marshallese expression, *Eta etal mon mona*, which roughly translates, "When you walk around, you will get fed." When a six-week power outage hit Ebeye in 1999 and their electric stove didn't work, Kara (Relyea) Colley '98 and Sky Colley '97 were fed by their Marshallese neighbors, even when it meant the Marshallese ate less. Children in the Marshalls share without being told. At Laura High School McGinn watched her students pass a single lollipop around the classroom. "Then they held it out to me and said 'Miss McGinn, your turn,'" she remembers, laughing.

The volunteers spend most evenings hanging out with their students, singing, chatting, watching movies. To the Marshallese, *ri-belle* fall somewhere between celebrities and objects of fascination. On Kili and Wotje (where the social event of the week is watching the Air Marshall Islands flight land) the Dartmouth *ri-belle* are a rare infusion of newness. Both for the role they play as needed teachers and the attention Marshallese children shower on them, most of the Dartmouth alums report very high job satisfaction. Seven of last year's volunteers returned for a second year. "You feel more important here than you ever have in your whole life," says Bultman, who is back in Laura and hoping to stage a school production of *Our Town* in the spring.

For all the problems the Marshalls have, they are a beautiful place, a quiet place that offers young alumni plenty of time for introspection, time to devour dozens of books. Simply to sit with a group of fellow alums by the edge of the lagoon under a starry night sky, having a slow conversation over cans of Budweiser while high tide laps at the shore and palm trees rustle in the warm, salty wind brings a peace not easily found or forgotten.

At the end of a winter term in the Marshalls, 11th-grade world history students filled a construction paper book with goodbye letters for teacher Kelly McLaughlin '07. "You are the most amazing teaching that I've never had," wrote one girl in a blocky hand. "Tam ganna miz you." Another boy wrote, "I will always remember you teaching me how to never give up on my dream goals....I know I sound like a girl, but I really want you to know what you've done to my life. I will really really miss you 100 times every day." ■

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