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### **GWU Alumni Experience Marathon Missions**

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# GWU Alumni Experience Marathon Missions

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Office of University Communications

July 16, 2014

## *Former Students Participate in 11-Month, 11-Nation World Race*

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. — Gardner-Webb University students and alumni regularly travel to foreign countries for short-term mission trips to share messages of God and humanity. A growing number of University family members are reaching deeper into missions by participating in a journey that takes them to 11 countries in 11 months.

The World Race—organized by interdenominational agency Adventures in Missions—transports adults ages 21 to 35 on an international tour of different cultures, religious beliefs and global challenges. Participants feed the hungry, build houses, teach English, preach, and pray, among many other activities. Several GWU alumni, like 2010 alumna Hannah Dagenhart, have already experienced the race, which is financed largely through individual fundraising. Other alumni will soon depart on their missions.

Katie Axelson, a 2011 GWU grad who earned a bachelor's degree in English and Spanish, is in the midst of a journey through Latin America and South America, a trek she started in January and will complete in December. "It's super rewarding to be part of what God is doing around the world," she offered, adding that the experience also comes with significant challenges. During her work in a Bolivian youth rehabilitation center, she worked with boys battling drug and alcohol issues. Some of the boys escaped each time the group traveled to church. "You started dreading church because you never knew which boys would run away," Axelson shared. "After pouring so much into each of them throughout the week, seeing growth, and seeing what their turned-around lives could look like, it was hard to see them go back to the lifestyle of the streets."

Knowing a nearly year-long mission would come with myriad challenges and rewards, Axelson and other participants said their decisions to enter the World Race took prayer and a calling from God. Caroline Ritchey, a 2011 GWU alumna, spent several years considering the experience. "At one time, God said 'not now,'" Ritchey remembered. "I became increasingly aware of that itch for the race. Eventually, I felt a lot of peace about the trip. I think this is going to be a growing experience and eye-opener."

The long-term impact of a mission experience that lasts a month in each location excites Ritchey, who studied environmental science at Gardner-Webb. Set to embark on her trip in September, the route will take her from Haiti to South America, then to Africa and to Southeast Asia. "As soon as my team gets into a country, we build relationships with people,

do a job we need to do, and when we leave, another team comes in and works with these people,” she said. “These people have relationships they’re building long-term, and that’s where impact happens. It’s almost a camp mentality if we’re there for a week, and they think, ‘oh, cool, the Americans came and left.’ We’re disciples, building long-term ministry, and that’s how we make an impact.”

Julie Sliwinski first saw the impact of the World Race through the experiences of about a half-dozen people she’s known who took the journey. The 2013 GWU grad, who studied health and wellness, is currently preparing for her own Race experience that will take her to 11 countries, all in Asia, beginning in September. “As soon as the Lord started pressing the calling on my heart, it was like a burning that wouldn’t go away. I had to go,” she said. “Sometimes mission trips can be seen as a glorified experience. This one is so long, you are forced to look beyond that to the ultimate goal. I see this as an opportunity to give love to people who don’t know what love is. I want to walk away with more freedom, more boldness and a stronger relationship with Christ.” Also set to travel with Julie’s team is yet another GWU alumna, Roxana Bucur.

While at different stages of their World Race journey, Gardner-Webb participants said their focus is the same—God’s will. “When you make a bargain with God you have to follow through,” Axelson said, recalling that she originally had no interest in the World Race and eventually committed to the mission. “I went from ‘there’s no way’ to ‘I’m all in’ in 10 minutes.”

*World Race participants blog about their experiences. Click the names below to check out blogs from Gardner-Webb students.*

*Katie Axelson*

*Caroline Ritchey*

*Julie Sliwinski*

*Roxana Bucur*

*Based in Gainesville, Ga., Adventures in Missions is an interdenominational missions organization that focuses on discipleship. Since its establishment in 1989, the organization has taken more than 100,000 people into the mission field, some for as short as a week and others for a year or longer. The first World Race mission team launched in 2006. For more information, visit [adventures.org](http://adventures.org) or [theworldrace.org](http://theworldrace.org).*

*Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University provides exceptional educational opportunities within a Christian environment, preparing students to think critically, to succeed professionally, and to serve faithfully as members of their local and global communities.*