

INTERNATIONAL NOTEBOOK

Mélanie Béchar is a reporter and photographer with the *Fort Frances Times*, a community newspaper in northwestern Ontario. Béchar, 31, a native of Pain Court, Ontario, a francophone community east of Windsor, has tried her hand at several careers and travelled widely, including studying French literature in Grenoble, France, and teaching English to children in Shenzhen, China. While studying journalism at Humber College in Toronto in 2003, Béchar participated in International Notebook, a program offered by Foreign Affairs Canada to give journalism students who aspire to become international affairs reporters an opportunity to meet with foreign policy makers and learn about the department's mandate.

When I moved to Fort Frances two years ago, I expected a little culture shock. I had finished journalism school only a month before receiving the offer of employment at the *Fort Frances Times*, and knew I would have to be willing to relocate to build up some experience in newspapers.

What I never expected when I arrived in this relatively isolated community of 8,000 was to meet people who would transport me to one of my favourite places on earth: China.

A few months after starting my new job, I met Lawrence Eustace, a local lawyer involved in a Canadian aid project in eastern China. The initial aim of the Pro Bono China Outreach Project when it was set up in 2000 had been to provide a model drinking-water system for two isolated villages in Shandong province. But when organizers saw villagers' living conditions, they quickly expanded their list of goals to include rebuilding a medical clinic that had burned down and renovating the local school.

Eustace recommended that I speak to Mark Bujold, then a 21-year-old Fort Frances native studying to be a mechanical engineering technician

at Confederation College in Thunder Bay. Bujold had just returned from six weeks in Shandong working alongside Norm Becker, an engineer in Windsor who had started the China project.

Having taught English for six months in 1998 in China—where I fell in love with the rapidly changing country, its ancient history blended with an ambition to become an ultra-modern economic powerhouse—I was particularly attracted to the story.

Interviewing the young student had me reflecting on my own experiences and observations of the Middle Kingdom. Boundless generosity in the midst of crippling poverty. Smiles of welcome for complete strangers. Diligence, determination and hard work. These were the Chinese that he described, the same as those I remembered from my own time there.

While China had shown that teaching was perhaps not the best career path for me, for Bujold it was a jumping-off point. He came back here determined to do well in his studies and use his skills to help others. "In China I saw what I can be and what I can do," says Bujold, who has now completed his engineering course. "I'd rather



work for people and actually make a difference."

The Pro Bono China Outreach Project is remarkable not only in its scope, but in its ability to draw Canadians from various backgrounds, communities and ages together to put their particular skills to work in international cooperation.

But, as I found during my own time abroad, the rewards are richest for youths. They take away a better understanding of their career of choice—and the world they live in.

"It's such a lovely thing to watch the maturing a person undergoes when they have an experience like this," Norm Becker says of the students who have participated. "They come back better citizens, and better people." 🍁

Mélanie Béchar won a 2004 CIDA Award for Excellence in Writing on International Cooperation for her reporting on the Pro Bono China Outreach Project, which you can read by searching the archives at www.fftimes.com. Find out about FAC's International Notebook at www.internationalnotebook.gc.ca.

Rich rewards: Mélanie Béchar atop the Great Wall of China at Simatai, northeast of Beijing in the Jundu Mountains, in July 2000.