By Heather Vander Plaat

Embracing New Opportunities

Alumni Profile

Betsy Huizenga ’06 doesn’t hesitate to venture into unfamiliar territory. “I really like being out of my comfort zone because I’m forced to grow in so many ways,” she said.

During her college years and since, Huizenga has sought out many opportunities to meet new people, discover other cultures, and hone her teaching and Spanish language skills.

Last July, the 24-year-old native of Zeeland, Mich., returned to her hometown after having lived in Tegucigalpa, Honduras for two years. There, she taught fourth grade to native Honduran children and, in the process, grew to love her adopted country and Latin American culture.

This fall, she’s drawing on her time abroad to take on two new roles: teaching in a newly established Spanish Immersion program to take on two new roles: teaching in a newly established Spanish Immersion program at Zeeland Christian School and creating curriculum for Small Talk for Kids, a new organization that teaches world languages to young children.

Huizenga’s desire to teach grew out of her passion for people, particularly children. In high school, she volunteered at a local elementary school and after-school program, and had a summer job at a preschool learning center. At the same time, she was developing a deep interest in the Spanish language – thanks to several inspirational Spanish teachers and a chance trip to Spain.

“When I started looking at colleges, it was really important for me to choose a place that offered a lot of options as far as studying abroad and doing service trips,” Huizenga said. “I remember sitting down with Amy Otis-De Grau [with Hope’s International Education Office] and she told me that wherever I wanted to go, she would find a way to get me there.”

As Huizenga began studying elementary education and Spanish at Hope, she searched out activities that would complement what she was learning in the classroom. During her first two years at Hope, she went on Spring Break mission trips to Cuba and the Dominican Republic, she was also involved with many service activities, including with the Children’s After School Achievement (CASA) program as a volunteer tutor, the Center for Volunteer Services, Dance Marathon and Relay for Life.

In the spring of 2004, she studied abroad at Hope’s Vienna Summer School, taking classes in the morning, exploring the city in the afternoon and traveling on the weekends. “During that time, I grew as an individual and became more independent,” she said. “Those few weeks there also gave me the beg to want to live somewhere abroad for even longer.”

So she did. In January 2005, Huizenga embarked on a six-month study abroad program in Buenos Aires, Argentina, made possible through a partnership between Hope and the Council on International Educational Exchange. Prior to leaving Michigan, Huizenga didn’t know any other students participating in the program. Once she arrived in Buenos Aires, she lived with a local family and studied at a nearby public university, often finding herself the only foreigner in her classes. It was an invaluable experience.

“In those six months, I went from having headaches every day from thinking so hard and not knowing what anyone was saying, to speaking Spanish without really having to think,” she recalled. “I also really immersed myself in the culture there and developed some wonderful friendships with Argentinians.”

Huizenga’s tendency to repeatedly undertake out-of-the-box challenges caught the attention of Dr. Tony Donk, professor of education and one of Huizenga’s faculty advisors. He credits her “spirit of adventure” for much of her learning and growth, both at Hope and beyond.

“The independent mindset and her capacity to live life to the fullest and seek out all kinds of opportunities has put her in a position to experience the really wonderful things she has,” he said.

During her senior year, Huizenga knew she wanted to teach abroad after graduation. - Betsy Huizenga ’06 and her young charges during her two years teaching in Honduras.