

A Brazilian odyssey

UPEI student pursues social work and science abroad

BY SEAN MCQUAID



WHAT BEGAN AS A MISSION OF mercy and a journey of self-discovery became that and much more for Karen White when she went to Brazil to spend a year as a social worker. She has just returned to UPEI to complete her degree (begun before her departure), and is settling back into the routine of life on the Island.

White went to Brazil last summer as part of a special program wherein she would do fieldwork as a social worker for predetermined periods of time, with some vacation time for herself as well. She spent her first six months in Porto Alegre, in southern Brazil, where she stayed with a host family.

Strangely, the time spent with her host family would prove to be one of White's most trying times in Brazil because of an ongoing conflict with the eldest daughter, a disturbed girl who stole from White constantly and denied it, pitting Karen against her host parents. White is quick to point out how unusual this was, not wanting to discourage other people from similar programs; in fact, she found a good friend in the host family's younger daughter, with whom White "got along really well." They still correspond, and her pen pal is trying to come to Montague High, P.E.I. as part of a Rotary exchange

program. "I'd love to see her," White declares. "She's great."

Despite this friendship, tensions within the host family were such that Karen left their home early to look for work over a two month period. Later, during a reunion party for the travellers and their original hosts, Karen found out that the troublesome sister's problems had been revealed, and she was seeking help, so even that aspect of her host family experience ended on a hopeful note. Family troubles aside, Karen says the rest of her trip was "great," and Porto Alegre was only her first stop.

During her months in Porto Alegre, Karen worked week-days at an institute for the blind, working mostly with orphaned street kids. At first her contributions were limited by the language gap, but she eventually became quite fluent in Portuguese. Karen was in charge of recreation for the children, as well as such things as hygiene, phys. ed., and later English lessons, music lessons, and dance lessons-- much of which was quite new to Karen's charges since their institute-- a sort of Catholic-run school managed by nuns-- was an extremely sheltered place. "They would never learn from nuns," Karen remarked, referring to the sisters' isolation from the ways of the world, apparent in their bewilderment at such commonplace activities as climbing trees with the children. The nuns were "flabbergasted" at displays like that, she recalls.

Asked to describe her position at the time, Karen paused for thought and described herself as a "recreational therapist" or, more whimsically, "playtime pal." This work wasn't without its challenges and new experiences, though. Karen learned to play "goalball", a ball game whose sightless players (blind or blindfolded) must track the ball by means of a ringing bell sealed inside it. Even more daunting was the task of providing sex education to the youngsters-- a delicate enough task in one's native language, to say nothing of the disarmingly uninhibited "hands-on" approach some

of her pupils took. "It was very traumatic," she says with a half-joking moan.

Sex education was also an aspect of Karen's week-end work, which consisted of visiting a slum area on an island dump outside the city-- no electricity, no running water, and virtually no education among the residents. Karen and her co-workers set up a small school, teaching mothers and children the basics of such concepts as hygiene, baking, and sex education.

Prior to departing for Brazil, Karen's biggest fear had been that she would be overwhelmed by the poverty and suffering she encountered. Perhaps because she went into the experience fearing the worst, the reality of it was less of a shock for her-- at any rate, she retained a healthy emotional outlook. Again, she said, the most distressing aspect of her stay was the conflict with her host family.

The family conflict led her to decline the two weeks of family time allotted her, and she left early for a two-month cross-country trek in search of new work and a better look at Brazil. After weeks of travel, including a visit to a street festival in Olinda, Karen and a fellow social worker arrived at their prearranged destination in northern Brazil-- where they were to take on their next social work assignment for the remainder of their time in the country; however, on arriving they were told that their services "were no longer wanted", and the boxes of good clothing they had sent ahead had been looted, supposedly given to the poor (From that point on, Karen said, she hoped to glimpse some street child in one of her stunning ensembles, thereby restoring her faith in humanity). So it was that Karen ended up in northern Brazil without a job and nothing more than the few possessions she carried. Undaunted, she and her companion tried to find work in another social work project, soon contacting the government (a course of action considered audacious by the locals). Co-incidentally, the city they were in had just won a social work award, and

there was going to be a tour of the city by the Rotary Women. Karen and friend wrangled invites, and ended up riding with the Brazilian First Lady in her air-conditioned bus, a bitterly sharp contrast to the poverty surrounding them. Unfortunately, none of the projects they visited were hiring, so Karen was still left without a job.

Strangely enough, this proved to be a blessing in disguise. A biology major, Karen landed a work-training job at a marine biology institute. She studied dolphins and whales, and was invited to take part in writing several scientific papers which were presented at scientific conferences in Brazil. These papers are now in the process of being published, while Karen muses on the irony of slipping back into her role as a biology student (fruit flies are somewhat less endearing subjects than dolphins). By the time she returned, Karen had gained valuable experience in both social work and science.

Karen had always wanted to pursue social work, and feels that, despite the setbacks, she accomplished what she set out to do-- though she wishes she had the time to accomplish more.

She misses Brazil, too-- "its weather, the sun, the beach, the lifestyle... Everything!" She has had some difficulty returning to the habit of speaking English, and she is also much more security-conscious than she once was. At the same time, she remembers fondly that Brazilians are, she says, "less goal-oriented"....more relaxed.

While she's glad to be home, Karen takes on the aspect of a trapped animal when asked how she's enjoying her return to campus. After recovering from that brief moment of panic, Karen admits to finding the school boring after all she's seen and done. Much as she loves the campus, she'd "much rather be someplace else. there's so much out there, and I think that our little campus is so limited." Whether it is or not, Karen White has broadened her own horizons to a degree that few can hope for, and seems the better for it--better still since others are the better for her efforts.