

Students

Watson Fund Gives Students the Freedom to Follow Their Favorite Dreams Abroad

Awards of \$11,000 or \$15,000 to fellows from small liberal-arts colleges have few requirements

By ELIZABETH GREENE

It took Hsüan-tsang 16 years to travel from his native China to India to collect Buddhist texts, but Karen Jagielski hopes she can recreate his pilgrimage in only one.

After that, her money runs out.

While the seventh-century traveler went by donkey and on foot, Ms. Jagielski will have the luxury of more modern transportation—planes and trains. And as a Thomas J. Watson Fellow, she will also have \$11,000 to spend as she goes.

The Watson Fellowship Program, now in its 18th year, has sent more than 1,100 college graduates abroad to travel and study. Fellows design their own itineraries based on the applications they submit during their senior years.

"This is the best thing that has ever happened to me," says Ms. Jagielski, a 1986 Bates College graduate. "I'm being given a chance to have a year to myself where I won't be anybody's employee or anybody's student."

Among the other 69 fellows this year:

► Bernice A. Harleston of Wellesley College will live in Kenya with the Samburu—a nomadic group that lives off the land.

► Sara Snyder of Bryn Mawr College will study Afro-Brazilian music in Rio de Janeiro, concentrating on woman vocalists.

► Ted Rybeck of Haverford College will travel to Japan, West Germany, Great Britain, and Mexico to observe the steel industry.

The fellowship program is the primary focus of the Thomas J. Watson Foundation, established as a charitable trust in honor of the founder of the International Business Machines Corporation. It is based in Providence, R.I.

Every year, the foundation chooses a group of universities and liberal-arts col-

leges with enrollments under 2,800 to participate in the program. Because the institutions are small, their administrators are expected to be familiar with most of their students. A committee at each reviews fellowship proposals and then nominates a set number of applicants—usually four. The final selection is made by the foundation after interviews.

'Looking for Seekers'

"We are looking for seekers," not people who think they know all the answers, says Nancy Y. Bekavac, the foundation's executive director. The fellows have demonstrated serious commitment to their topics, which often fall into four general ar-

eas—religion, music, feminism, and third-world development.

This year, single fellows will receive \$11,000, and married fellows \$15,000.

During their year abroad, the fellows are required to correspond regularly with the foundation. They send quarterly reports on their progress—sometimes in the form of chatty letters—and a final report, as well as a statement on how they spent their money. Any leftover money is sent to the student's college.

Most graduates feel the requirements are minimal, in view of the freedom given them to pursue whatever they want.

"It's a blank check to do something

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Watson Fellows Follow Their Dreams Abroad

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you've always dreamed of doing," says Jim Bolton, a graduate of Trinity College in Connecticut who returned from India last July. Mr. Bolton, who was studying Buddhism, had the opportunity to meet with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, home to the exiled Tibetan government.

He says the fellowship project "is something to focus on, but the real purpose is to experience the things you see along the way."

A Tibetan monk whom Mr. Bolton befriended during his stay will soon be coming to live with him in Connecticut. The exchange is one example of the sharing of cultures the Watson Foundation works to promote.

In Kenya, Ms. Harleston will not only observe the nomadic people who constitute the Samburu, she will also live with them out in the open plains—in homes made of donkey manure and twigs.

The Kenyan government, she says, is questioning the value of these "pastoralists" and developing new management plans for their land. She

hopes to communicate with government officials to help them avoid making short-sighted decisions.

"I'm very excited," she says. "I've never done any real self-designed research."

The independent thinking required by the fellowship can be at once exciting and intimidating. Coming from the relatively structured life of college, fellows say, the freedom of the fellowship can be sobering.

"Suddenly it's a responsibility instead of just a dream," says Ms. Snyder. "It's a big responsibility—you have to go, you have a whole year, you get a check for \$11,000, and you have to budget it. The whole thing is about having to completely rely on yourself."

The Watson has operated as a useful "calling card" for some fellows, giving them opportunities that would have been impossible for others. Impressed by the fellowship, foreign government leaders and other hard-to-get-at people have been willing to grant fellows interviews or to allow them to take part in their programs.

Martin A. Brody, chairman of the music department at Wellesley College, says as a fellow in 1972 he was asked to play in the orchestra of the Geneva opera and was able to interview composers.

"It was the last time I had the boldness to do these kinds of things—you could do them in an ingenious way."

When they return to the United States, the fellows often find their career and social paths heavily influenced by their experiences abroad. Some design their fellowships around professional or academic interests, hoping to use the material later in jobs or to expand on their study in a graduate program.

Mr. Rybeck, who will be comparing the steel industries of four countries, hopes to use the information he gathers to help the suffering steel economy of Wheeling, W. Va., his hometown. While abroad, he plans to talk with factory managers and workers, as well as government leaders.

When he returns to Wheeling next year, Mr. Rybeck wants to work with people who are trying to improve the



Former Watson fellow Jim Bolton, shown with the Dalai Lama, says he liked the program for "the things you see along the way."

employment situation. He is excited about the prospects.

Says Emery Clark, a past fellow and a professional artist who traveled to several countries to study art and architecture, "It is a wonderful experience to see so many young people

with a real seriousness of vision and seriousness of outlook. I think that the fellowship itself is a great deal about hope and optimism.

"When someone believes in your future when you're very young, it's easier for you to believe in it."