

The Global Teacher

One Alumna's Experience in Education in All Four Corners of the Earth



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Dana Schwarzkopf '84 is something of a modern nomad. Since graduating from Western Reserve Academy, she has planted her feet on all seven continents and made a home in more than eight countries. And throughout her wandering, she has continued to be a steadfast and devoted educator of young minds.

Now teaching in Zambia at The American International School of Lusaka, Schwarzkopf took the time to talk about her experiences abroad, the adventures she has had, and how Western Reserve Academy has influenced her and continues to inspire her.

At the time of the conversation, Lusaka's electricity was out — a frequent occurrence in the region — so the interview was conducted through FaceTime. On a late October day, Schwarzkopf stood outside, with her phone in hand, framed by a backdrop of a brilliantly sunny sky and scrubby, yellowing overgrowth.

“We're in the dry season,” she said. “It hasn't rained since April.”

The weekend prior, she and her visiting Norwegian relatives had traveled to Zimbabwe to take in the full view of Victoria Falls. In every place she has lived, friends and family have visited Schwarzkopf, including Reserve classmates, who are eager to explore her new home.

Her international travels began with study-abroad opportunities offered by Valparaiso University, including a summer abroad in Norway and a semester study in Germany. These experiences ignited her already adventurous spirit, and upon graduating with her B.A. in communications, she set out for her first long-term destination: Mexico.

“All I wanted to do was figure out how I could leave the country again,” she admitted. “At Valparaiso, I connected with a woman who, at the time, was the principal of a bilingual school in Mexico. The day I graduated, she called and asked if I still wanted to teach.”

Schwarzkopf agreed to teach English at the school, an experience she describes as a “baptism by fire.” With no prior experience as a teacher, it was an overwhelming but rewarding undertaking. When she returned to the U.S., it was to receive her master's in education from the University of Wisconsin.

In the years after, her home address changed from Germany (before graduate school) to Ankara, Turkey; Bangkok, Thailand; Nanjing, China; Bucharest, Romania; Jakarta, Indonesia; and, more recently, Lusaka, Zambia.



In Germany, Turkey, Thailand, China and Romania, Schwarzkopf worked primarily as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in two-to-four-year stints. In Indonesia, her teaching took a turn, and she moved into the regular classroom, teaching middle school English and social studies for six years — the longest she has lived in one place since her early years in Minneapolis.

She began to feel a little restless. She had been teaching for more than 15 years and, while she adored her students and her constant change of pace, she longed once again to be a student herself. The answer was simple: She would pursue another degree, but she didn't want to return to the States to do it.

It turned out that Michigan State University offered a master of arts in educational technology program seemingly designed for people exactly like Schwarzkopf. Program participants would study over three summers and live in new places for the duration of their study.

France and Ireland were next on her list of destinations, thanks to the program.



Top photo: Schwarzkopf in Antarctica.
Bottom photo: Schwarzkopf poses with her catch while lobster fishing in Galway, Ireland.

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Top photo: Schwarzkopf visits a castle during her stay in Ireland.
Bottom photo: Schwarzkopf relaxes with a book on a snowbank in Antarctica.

Now, Schwarzkopf has made a life in Zambia, teaching sixth through 10th grade students design, a course very similar to Reserve's Digital Engineering and Fabrication. Her vast experiences have kept her curious mind busy, connected her to people from all walks of life and made her rather adaptable. For instance, she keeps a large supply of candles, solar lamps and flashlights in her home in Zambia in preparation for the frequent unexpected power outages.

At this stage of her life, she says that she really couldn't be happier.



"I feel that in my professional life, it's just gotten better and better the whole time," she said. "I get to keep doing these interesting things and trying something new. I love my sixth graders who are still so wide-eyed and lovable, and then my 10th graders are fun too because I can get into these really great debates with them. They're all so smart, but they're still really sweet. They'll see me across the school and yell, 'Hi, Miss Dana!' I feel like I have a great relationship with my students, and I love that."

As an educator, Schwarzkopf often has Reserve on her mind — particularly the interactions she had with memorable faculty.

"My experience at Reserve has played a huge role in who I am as an educator," she said. "I had Herr [Travis] Webber for German, and I remember being in class with Herb Haller '85 [now WRA's Director of Athletics & Afternoon Programs], who is a year younger and whose German was fantastic. What I loved about it — and I didn't see it at the time, but I do now — was that Webber had really high expectations for all of us. But the expectations that were high for me were different than the ones that were high for Herb. He was differentiating in the way that he taught, which is such a big buzzword in the education world today, but that's just what he did all those years ago."

When she describes her teaching philosophy, she talks about being a facilitator and guide, not a lecturer in the front of the classroom. She works with her students, not as the holder of all knowledge, but as someone who presents them with opportunities to learn, make choices, think critically and solve problems.

She has also paid special attention to the recent changes her alma mater has made to its curriculum and is an avid supporter.



Top left photo: Schwarzkopf travels to see the Tiger's Nest in Bhutan.
Top right photo: Schwarzkopf — and an elephant herd! — stop by the Zambezi river in Zambia.
Bottom photo: An avid scuba diver, Schwarzkopf explores the Great Barrier Reef.

"I can see the school is focusing even more on developing these skills like critical thinking and problem solving, and I think really it's fantastic," she said. "And I just saw that they opened up the [Wang] Innovation Center, and wow, I'd love to take a tour of that space! Teaching design is what I do, and I love to see what kids can create. It's exciting to see Reserve move in this direction."

No matter where or how far she roams, Schwarzkopf keeps Reserve in her heart.

"I'm forever grateful that I was able to attend Reserve," she said. "It's been one of the most important things I've done in my life. I learned so much there, and as a result, whenever I give to the school, I always designate it for scholarship kids because I was a scholarship kid. I really hope we continue to get as many kids in there who wouldn't necessarily be able to go, because the opportunities provided to these people can make all the difference in the world."