International Aide

By Ann E. Kolakowski

Throughout our lives, seemingly insignificant decisions sometimes become serendipitous turning points. For Crispian Kirk ('99), formerly the director of international affairs for the NAACP, such a moment came when he accepted a casual invitation to attend an informational session for the South Africa Externship Program.

Since 1989, the program has placed students in the African country, where they spend fifteen weeks providing direct legal services to clients, developing legislation, monitoring human rights law—satisfying the School of Law's experiential learning requirement in the process.

Intrigued, Kirk applied and was accepted. He embarked on what he considers "the one experience that ranks above them all" in his legal education when he left the U.S. for the first time to spend the fall of his third year in Johannesburg. He also worked with the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and Khulumani Support Group.

Kirk served as pro bono counsel for survivors of apartheid who had initially been denied victim status by the South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He was able to gain such status for 80 percent of them: A memo he drafted for President Mandela was instrumental in releasing interim reparations to victims.

Kirk returned with a perspective that informs his career, with the NAACP and beyond. "I came to appreciate the victims' capacity to forgive and to work for change. I saw things differently. The world seemed bigger—but smaller as well.

After graduation, Kirk went to work for Grubb & Ellis, an international commercial real estate firm. He soon made his way back to the NAACP, where he had completed an internship. As bureau counsel in 2002, he focused on voting rights; he moved to international affairs in March 2006.

Kirk reflects on the successes of the last year, including his work with Liberia Watch, which resulted in an address to Congress by Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and aid to her country. He accompanied actor Isaiah Washington on a trade mission to Washington's ancestral homeland, Sierra Leone. He led a team to monitor elections in Venezuela, drawing on his experience as the NAACP's national 2004 presidential election protection director.

His pride in these accomplishments is tempered, however, by frustration over the lack of progress in Darfur, despite NAACP's three-year-old "Darfur Can't Wait" campaign to end the genocide. "When there is peace in Darfur that is real," he says, "that's when I will consider we have been successful."

He sowed the seeds of these global missions as a child in Roxboro, N.C. The African Xhosa word for "nurturing love"), continues to inspire him. "I never could imagine the passion I have now," he says. "[Parenthood] drives your perspective."

Kirk, who serves as vice chair of the American Bar Association's Subcommittee on African Human Rights, says one of his main goals is to convince Americans to care about those beyond their borders.

"In my work, there are no easy one-two-three steps on how to solve problems," he says. "The South Africa experience taught me to pull on resources that may not always be the easiest to use. I learned to be a self-starter, and to let others define their reality as opposed to trying to define it for them.

"Last year, when I was in Venezuela," he continues, "sitting with Afro-Venezuelans discussing the complexity of race and its impact on people of color across the globe, I thought, Thank God I decided to pursue the South Africa experience instead of following the advice to stay in the U.S. to position myself for the best job upon graduation. International affairs is what I do—professionally and personally. I would not have it any other way."

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