

Katarina Zsoldos Doctor is an undergraduate major in geography with specialization in GIS and geomorphology at George Mason University. Born in Subotica, Former Yugoslavia, Katarina immigrated to the U.S. in 2002. Before leaving Europe, she earned a Diploma in Professional Management from the Open University Business School, London and established a profitable regional branch for the software company MIS Alpe-Adria in Slovenia. Since coming to the States, she has earned two associates degrees with honors in Math & Engineering Science Studies and in Business & Computer Information Systems as well as a certificate for GIS Analyst from Foothill College, California. Doctor received an inaugural AAG Darrel Hess Community College Geography Scholarship to transfer to GMU. At GMU, she has made the Dean's List, received the John Gruber Memorial Award in Geography, the Osher Re-Entry Scholarship and the ASPRS Kenneth J. Osborn Memorial Scholarship. She is the first-ever GMU recipient of the Morris K. Udall scholarship. She recently completed a summer internship at Google Inc., as the first ever GIS specialist intern to work on Google Earth and returns this fall to full time study while working as GIS Specialist with the U.S. Geological Survey. Katarina speaks five languages fluently. She currently resides (with her husband) in Reston, Virginia.

AAG: How did you discover geography?

Katarina: I have always been interested in maps as a tool for learning about the world and my environment. Growing up in a region of the world where someone could live in three different countries without ever moving from his or her home plot of land instilled in me a deep appreciation of the power of maps and borders, both natural and political.

AAG: Your personal background covers a lot of geography.

Katarina: Yes, I grew up as an ethnic minority, a Hungarian in Serbian Yugosla-

via which is today Serbia. After finishing high school in my hometown I moved to the region of Slovenia, once part of the same country, and began studying at the University of Electrical Engineering in Ljubljana. As soon as I began, my father passed away. I had lived alone with my father ever since my parents divorced when I was very young and I was very close to him.

AAG: Was this around the time of the war in that part of the world?

Katarina: Yes. Almost simultaneously, the war in Yugoslavia broke out. Slovenia became an independent country and I suddenly became a refugee without having fled. Fortunately, I didn't personally experience the violence of the war, but I was affected by the economic and moral crises created by it which prevented me from traveling freely to almost every other country in the world. I was truly trapped. Because the Yugoslavian government had frozen my monetary assets, I stayed in Slovenia without any finances. I started to work as an interpreter and translator and as a sales person for computers, and later in software sales.

AAG: And your studies?

Katarina: Due to lack of finances, I could not continue my studies, but I was determined and managed to gain a diploma through a correspondence study program while working full time.

AAG: How did you come to immigrate to the United States?

Katarina: I met a person for whom I would leave it all behind and move to America. I arrived lacking fluency in English, and so I immediately began to study ESL. I realized that this had given me a second chance at a college education, offering to me the opportunity I



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had lost in Europe to study full time and pursue my intellectual interests. My enthusiasm for geography opened the world of GIS to me, and I found the perfect discipline at Foothill College and then at GMU.

AAG: How did you find the transition?

Katarina: Receiving the AAG Darrel Hess Scholarship in 2006 was a great help to me in my climb up the steep steps from community college into a four year university. Since I am not a resident of Virginia I had to pay out of state tuition and the Hess scholarship helped me to overcome this financial challenge. But I realized that the financial assistance is just a part of the scholarship.

AAG: How so?

Katarina: The award made a deep impression on me at a time I was struggling with confidence in my ability. It elevated my self-worth to a level where I now have higher expectations of myself in all I do.

AAG: What were your expectations of the U.S. education system?

Katarina: Well, I have noticed that community colleges are often stereotypically regarded as being lower standard not just from a four-year university faculty and students, and also from society at large. But I was impressed by the excellent quality of teaching, resources, and attention I received in my two-year education. I highly recommend going to a community college.

AAG: What advantages did going to community college give you?

Katarina: Due in part to small class size, I formed close working relationships with some of my instructors, and was even able to initiate independent research projects under their guidance. As a result, I was encouraged to join AAG early in my undergraduate education. The AAG Hess award has helped me become recognized for my achievements as a student "even if from community college", and it helped

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me become an accepted member of the geographical academic community. It has also given me added inspiration for performing well.

AAG: What inspires you?

Katarina: I finally feel recognized and accepted for wanting to pursue higher education in my life, especially considering that I am returning to college after having gained some challenging life experience.

AAG: What does the future hold for you?

Katarina: Now, I am in my last year of undergraduate studies and am looking

ahead toward opportunities for my graduate studies.

AAG: What kind of work do you want to do?

Katarina: My career goal is to conduct geographic research using the most advanced technologies, such as virtual globes, GIS, satellite imagery, remote sensing and other techniques that will help conserve natural resources and reduce the negative consequences of environmental disasters. I want to create digital maps that can be used for disaster forecasting and prevention, promoting sustainable development, influencing environmental policy, and improving public environmental awareness.

AAG: You seem well on your way toward realizing this goal.

Katarina: I view this opportunity as a gift, letting me pursue my education in a field like geography for which I have genuine passion rather than out of necessity to advance in life as before. I hope AAG will keep up this tradition of supporting students who wish to accomplish their dreams.

*The AAG Darrel Hess Scholarship supports community college students transferring to four-year institutions to major in geography. Deadline for applications is **December 31, 2007**. For more information on eligibility and application instructions, see www.aag.org/Grantsawards/hess.html. ■*