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Gap Year - A World of Opportunity

By Cathy Tyson



Dan Eden in Poptun, Guatemala during his first week of the program Photo provided

wanted to do after high school. Parents Lisa and Gene Eden were supportive, and recognized that not every student is ready to jump directly into four years of college. "For twelve years it's been all about school," said Gene Eden, "you need to learn about life experience - to get out into the real world. This was an opportunity to go out and try something you may enjoy and push yourself past your comfort zone." The family agreed there's a dominant mentality that most graduates are strongly encouraged to attend a university directly after graduation.

"I would absolutely recommend this to everyone - for me it has been so much better than traditional college," said Eden. "It was an excellent experience, a chance to be alone and independent." One added bonus - lack of electronics, no phone, no Facebook - which he felt was a very good thing. There were definitely challenging moments, at times rivaling the exertion of a Campo football workout. "We were moving all the time with heavy backpacks, and there were lots of mosquitoes," he notes.

A real highlight of his journey was the turtle project at Playa Langosta, Costa Rica - helping endangered turtles, like the 700 pound Baula turtle the students literally stumbled across. Their goal was to record information on the eggs she laid and bury them in a safer nest away from scavenging raccoons.

Eden is taking it easy at home at the moment, but has signed up for a spring program with Fundacion Mahatma Gandhi in the Dominican Republic, which is completely run by volunteers; it's part of the College of Saint Benedict's Alternative Break Experience. Participants spend time each day tutoring kids and running a soccer program in the afternoon.

He is waiting to hear back from a number of schools he has applied to for the fall 2010 term. He's hoping to get into UC Santa Cruz, but will have to wait like everyone else for their decision.

For more information on the programs noted above, go to www.leapnow.org or www.carpediemeducation.org. The cost of the Carpe Diem program is about the same as in-state tuition and includes all food, rustic accommodations and program activities.

While his fellow Class of 2009 graduates were attending football games and sitting in college lecture halls, Moraga's Dan Eden spent three months traveling through Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Nicaragua working on a turtle conservation project, obtaining SCUBA certification, building solar water heaters and a host of other non-classroom activities.

"I went to the college fair at Saint Mary's College and wasn't excited about any of the universities I saw there," said Eden. He did see a table for LeapNow, which advertises itself as "the most unique year of college on the planet" and specializes in study abroad and gap year programs. After doing some research, attending a workshop in San Francisco and with the advice of a college counselor, Eden signed up with Carpe Diem Education - which is associated with LeapNow - an organization whose semester programs are designed to challenge students through service and cultural exchange.

While earning up to 18 units of college credit, he was able to experience the developing world first hand and hone his Spanish language skills. Additional programs from three months to three weeks are offered in Southeast Asia, Australia, India, South America, Africa and Japan.

The group that Eden was a part of had six young men and three young women, including a male and a female guide. Groups can reach a maximum size of 12 participants. Along with their service work, the students had daily Spanish class and journal writing. Everyone was able to post entries on the Carpe Diem blog. Toward the end of the experience, Eden wrote: "I have learned how to live in the moment and be appreciative of my life and most importantly myself."

Like many high school graduates, Eden wasn't exactly sure what he

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