



Those who study abroad frequently return home with more than just “additional book learning.” They understand cultures better, and often find themselves using those out-of-the-classroom experiences and lessons to drive their adult lives.

The five entrepreneurs profiled here say their education abroad experiences left them better educated and gave them clearer paths to careers that have been both profitable and rewarding. Their time learning in other countries shaped not only their degrees and personalities, but also their companies as well.

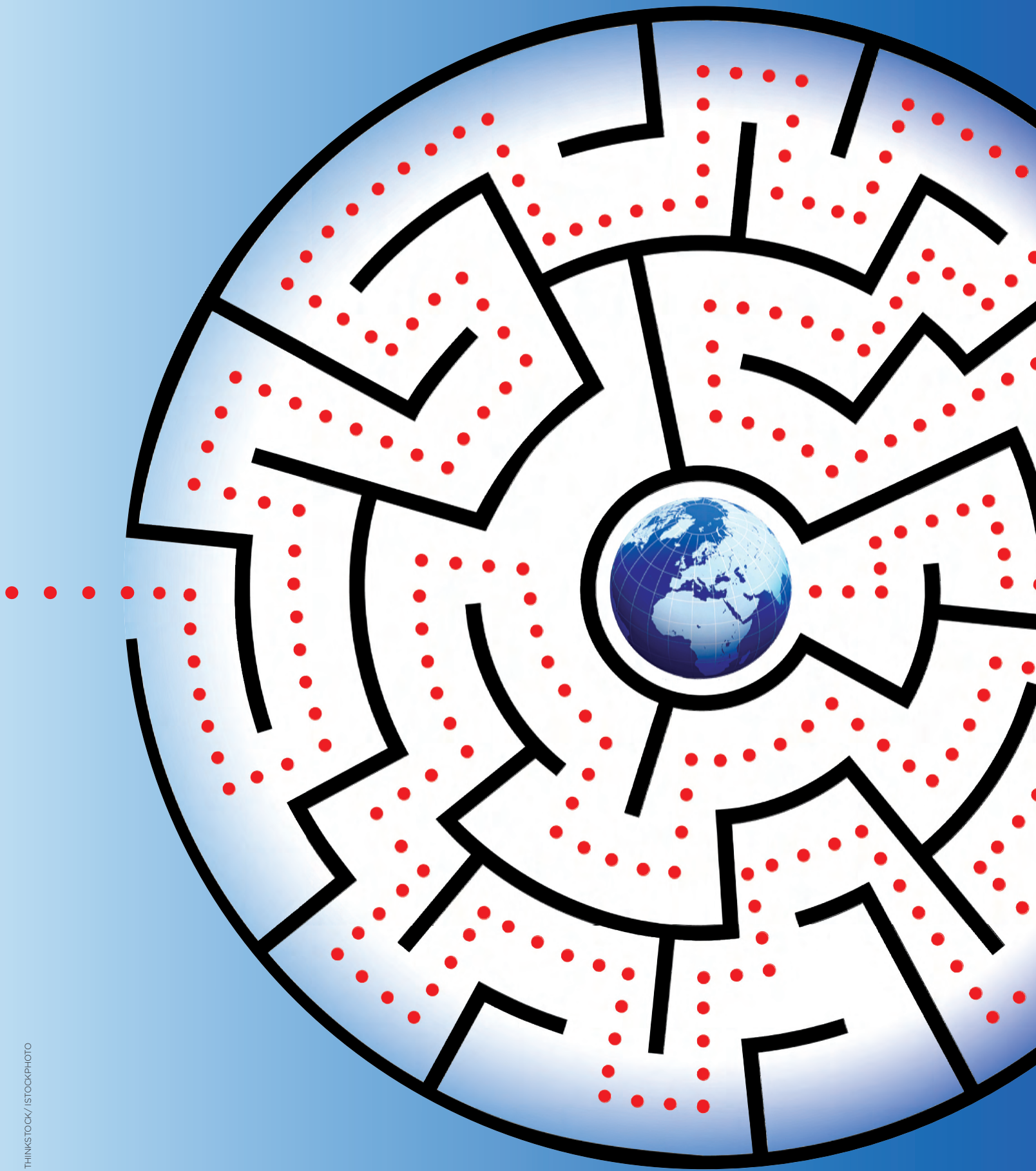
PATH

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BY KIM FERNANDEZ

**PROFILES OF FIVE ENTREPRENEURS WHO FOUND THEIR LIFE'S DIRECTION WHILE ENGAGED IN EDUCATION ABROAD**



## DANNY O'NEILL

### Founder and President, The Roasterie

For most people, the path to a career is a bit circuitous, with detours and a series of experiences that finally lead in one direction.

For Danny O'Neill, the road to launching his own business was more like a single green light. He's among the rare people who can trace his entire career choice to a single memorable moment.

"I grew up one of a family of 10 in Iowa," he says. "It was my senior year of high school, and I was riding motorcycles, playing football, and dating this exchange student from Australia, and I heard about this study abroad program. I thought that would be fun and on a weird whim, I signed up."

He'd never been overseas—he'd never even been on a jet before—but the chance to study in the home country of the girl who'd smitten him was too much to pass up. So he signed up, waited a few months, and eagerly ripped

"Three weeks into school, I got recruited to play basketball," he says. "Soon after that, my new friends told me they were going into the mountains to go coffee picking. I didn't drink coffee—I drank tea—but I went, and I loved it, and my life changed right there."

He finished his year in Costa Rica, returned to the United States, enrolled in undergraduate college courses, and started drinking coffee.

"I really got into it. People now would say, 'He's got such a passion for coffee!' Back then, they just thought I was weird," he laughs. He graduated from college, went to work in Kansas City, and realized on a trip to Russia a few years later that his zest for life had been sucked out of him.

"They had this enthusiasm and spirit that I used to have," he remembers of the Russians he met. So he returned home and started traveling around the country, studying the coffee market.

"The only thing I knew that I wanted to do with my life was coffee," O'Neill says. "I pursued it. I had no idea where it would take me, but I ultimately found this new type of roasting called air roasting, and that was that."



**Danny O'Neill is the "Bean Baron" of The Roasterie, inc., a specialty coffee roaster that services espresso bars and coffee houses, fine restaurants, high-end grocers, and coffee-lovers all around the world. Danny was born and raised in Denison, Iowa. He received his BA from Iowa State University with a double major in International Studies and Political Science, and a structured minor in Economics. He later received his MBA from the Rockhurst University Executive Fellows Program in Kansas City. After holding various sales and marketing positions for 10 years, inspired by his study abroad experience, he decided to take the leap and start roasting coffee in the basement of his home in Brookside. He is also a past president of the Specialty Coffee Association of America.**

open the letter when it arrived in his mailbox.

"I got the letter at the end of January 1978," he says. "It said, 'In three weeks, you're going to Costa Rica to live. Here's your family.'" And that was it. [He thought he would go to Australia, but the study abroad program sent him to Costa Rica instead.]

He was, in a word, terrified, and says his family and friends were sure he'd lost his mind. But he packed his bags, flew to Costa Rica (without being able to speak a word of Spanish) spent three weeks hiding in his host family's home with a stack of books, and was finally tossed into school and activities by the family's matriarch, who feared her new American stead planned to spend his entire year in a bedroom.

In 1993, O'Neill founded The Roasterie in his basement, hoping to bring air-roasted coffee to a small audience. "My goal was to find maybe 50 people who would buy my coffee so I wouldn't have to go back to a corporate job," he says. That happened, and then his air-roasted coffee really took off. Today, The Roasterie is a thriving Kansas City business and cafe where employees and patrons alike are encouraged to "live life on the rim," and where O'Neill tells everyone that his year in Costa Rica changed everything. And to this day, when he makes coffee buying trips to that country, he stays with his host mother from high school.

"She tells all these embarrassing stories about me," he says. "Oh, he was so homesick! All he did was read all day long!" But we didn't grow up with money. I went from having no money to having a lot less money than that, and it was hot and dusty and windy, and I couldn't say 'bathroom' or 'hungry.' It changed everything.

“I think of my experiences there and how profoundly they changed my life,” he says. “People tell kids to go overseas and learn another language. But it’s not just a language you’re learning. There’s the whole culture, which is so much more than the language. You’re learning to communicate, and there are all these unintended consequences that go with it.” Learning about the Costa Rican culture and that coffee on the mountain, he says, directed his life in a way he’d not ever contemplated

before—and he wouldn’t have it any other way. He gives his host mom all of the credit.

“It all happened only by the grace of God,” he says. “It’s only because my host mother made me get out there. She started dragging me all over the country—she’s still strong, but very sweet. She could fast-forward in her head, and she thought, ‘He’s going to stay in here the whole year. I’m not going to let that happen. Not on my watch.’”



**Mitch Gordon is from upstate New York and lived in Taipei, Taiwan for four years before moving to San Francisco, where he currently resides. Mitch is an entrepreneur, starting a number of companies in the field of education. His most recent company, Go Overseas, helps students research, study, teach, and volunteer abroad through programs around the world. Mitch is currently completing his MBA at the University of California, Berkeley.**



## MITCH GORDON

### Founder and President, Reach to Teach and GoOverseas

Mitch Gordon grew up in upstate New York with a constant feeling of wanderlust. “I always knew I wanted to travel,” he says, despite only leaving the country once before he started undergraduate studies at Binghamton University.

His father, who Gordon calls “really forward thinking,” encouraged his son to enroll in a Chinese class his senior year of high school. The younger Gordon did, and says the class “really changed my life.”

“My dad pushed me to take that instead of Spanish or French or Latin that everybody else was taking,” he

says. “I took it for a semester in college,” and after that, jumped at the chance to study Mandarin for a year in Taiwan.

Getting on the plane for the first time, he says, “I remember looking at my dad as I’m about to get on the plane, saying, ‘Why are you letting me do this? This is crazy!’” But he boarded the aircraft, and his world flipped upside-down.

“You can’t recreate that excited nervousness of living abroad for the first time,” he says. “It’s a great feeling in so many ways. Your senses are heightened, everything is new and amazing and fresh and exciting. I was definitely out of my element, but I embraced it and faced what ended up being a great challenge.

And doing that—spending that time abroad—makes you better at anything you do for the rest of your life.”

He spent a year in Taiwan, returned home to finish his bachelor’s degree, and went to work for a large firm as a CPA. It didn’t go quite as he’d planned.

“I felt like I died a little bit every day on the inside,” he says. “Every day when I got to work, the bars on the spreadsheets felt like bars on a jail. Working 100 hours a week in an office with a tie on just wasn’t what I wanted to do.”

After three years, he hit his limit and launched Reach to Teach, which helped line up U.S. teachers with schools in other countries that needed them. “The teachers wanted to make sure they ended up in really good schools, and they often didn’t,” he says. “The company helped them find those good schools. We’re like international H.R.: we do the screening for you.”

The idea came directly from his year in China, he says, and the gumption to go do it came from that same spirit that put him on the plane after high school. “There’s no way I’d have started a company without that experience,” he says. “I don’t think I’d have been an entrepreneur, and it absolutely would not have been that kind of company had I not taken that leap and studied abroad.”

Several years after launching Reach to Teach, Gordon started GoOverseas, which he equates to an Expedia for education abroad: it’s an online clearinghouse to help students and professionals zero in on the best overseas study or work experiences for their own interests. Users can specify study, teach, intern, or volunteer abroad, and pick any program in any country to see ratings, reviews, and information.

“I definitely view what we do as social entrepreneurship,” he says. “I wanted to do something meaningful, and we also encourage people to go abroad.”

That’s not to say it’s easy. Gordon routinely puts in 80-hour weeks, but says the difference between this and his CPA job is that he believes in what he does, and “I don’t wear a tie. It doesn’t feel like a jail.”

It all goes back to his year in China, he says. “It was way more challenging than I expected it to be,” he says. “The culture shock definitely hit me hard, and I’m almost embarrassed at the ways I thought and felt about things then. It was a really maturing situation for a young person and really challenging to me.”

Success in that, he says, made all the difference, and it’s why he’s structured his life around helping other young people have the same experiences.

“The great thing for me was that I was totally away from anyone else I knew. I was totally free. It’s pretty special to know you can get by without any support like that. You’re going to make it. I think that’s something everyone should go through—I think it should be required.”



## MICHAEL GRAVES

**Founder and Principal,  
Michael Graves & Associates, and  
Michael Graves Design Group**

Before his name became synonymous with gorgeous homes and office buildings, and before Americans began beautifying homes across the country with sophisticated and quirky home goods from his Target line, Michael Graves had a normal upbringing in Indianapolis—one that definitely did not involve world travel or fame.

“I went to the University of Cincinnati because it was close to home and I could co-op,” he says. “I could work two months and go to school two months, and I paid my way through school that way.”

He’d wanted to be an architect starting at age eight, he says, when his pragmatic mother sat him down to talk about his dreams of being an artist.

“She was worried,” he says. “I told people I wanted to be an artist, and she finally said, ‘We should talk about that.’ She was very conservative. She told me maybe I should pick a profession that included art or drawing, but was a profession, and she said those were engineering or architecture. I asked what an engineer did, she told me, and I said, ‘I’m going to be an architect.’”

Architects, of course, need graduate degrees, and Graves arrived at Harvard University with what he considered to be a distinct disadvantage. “Out of my

graduate class, I was the only one who’d never been to Europe,” he says. “Out of 36 students, I felt like they had an edge—they knew all the monuments, they knew all of the history. And they knew it from their travels, not from their formal educations.”

When the chance came up for a two-year fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, Graves applied and was accepted. “I’ve said it before,” he says, “But that experience really changed my life.” He went to Italy and immersed himself in the buildings and the books, spending hours among ancient library stacks, studying everything he could find about classic building design.

“I had a friend who’d won a prize the year before,” he says. “He had a Volkswagen Beetle, and as tired as I was from the trip—the fellows came to Rome on a ship because we had not just luggage, but trunks with everything we’d need for two years—he came to pick me up and we toured the city. I remember driving into the palazzo of St. Peter’s, which you could do then, and it took my breath away, I couldn’t believe it.”

He told his friend that he wanted to see everything they could in the next two hours, and they whizzed around from monument to monument, and Graves was hooked.

“What I saw there is the basis for architecture as a language,” he says. “Architecture, like literature, is continuous. One idea or story relies on the ones past and the ones in the future. That continuity is what we were looking for.”



**X** A native of Indianapolis, Michael Graves received his architectural training at the University of Cincinnati and Harvard University. In 1960 he won the Rome Prize and studied at the American Academy in Rome for two years, of which he is now a Trustee. In 1962 Graves began a 39-year teaching career at Princeton University, where he is now the Robert Schirmer Professor of Architecture, Emeritus. He has received 13 honorary doctorates and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. Michael Graves and his firms have received over 200 awards for design excellence. Graves received the 1999 National Medal of Arts from President Bill Clinton. In 2001 the American Institute of Architects awarded Michael Graves its Gold Medal, the highest award bestowed upon an individual architect.

He spent his two years studying and traveling across Europe. “I went east to Greece and Turkey and Yugoslavia, and then back through Switzerland and France, Spain, and England, and the low countries,” he says. “I’d always return to Rome and look at my wife and say, ‘Why did we ever leave Rome?’”

Upon his return to the United States, Graves secured a job teaching at Princeton, which he thought would allow him to teach some days and establish a New York practice part-time. “I loved it so much that we decided to stay in Princeton,” he says. “Ultimately, I was lucky enough to get a house to design for a faculty member, and I studied for my [architecture] exam and I passed.” He’s never left the town, teaching at Princeton for 39 years while building and leading his well-known practices.

It all, he says, goes back to his time abroad in Rome.

“Whether you’re looking at the ancient first or second or third century Romanesque or the Renaissance or the Baroque or the modern architecture of the 20s and 30s, you see the continuity of the language,” he says. “You get a sense and importance of the stories. A door isn’t just a passage to get into and out of. It separates the human being from one mode of being to another. Outside is being more public and more exposed. You come over the threshold to the interior and you’re more private, more familiar. Those issues became clear to me when I saw them done in the first century and all through the architecture of the Roman capital.”

He laughs when asked if he recommends that young architects study abroad. “The only thing I know is that it certainly worked for me,” he says. “I would recommend it to anybody.”

## THOMAS H. TRUETLER, PhD

### Founder and CEO, FlyClinic

To say Thomas Truetler grew up in a sheltered world may be quite an understatement. That phrase, after all, is normally reserved for those whose childhoods were spent in small towns or poor areas. Truetler's hometown makes some of those locations look positively metropolitan.

Truetler spent his growing-up years behind the Iron Curtain; he grew up in East Germany before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. And spending one's formative years in a city physically cut off from the rest of the world means there aren't a lot of opportunities to consider how everybody else lives.

The Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and by 1994, Truetler was immersed in graduate studies at the Universität Leipzig in Germany. That year, he applied for and won a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship to study in Cleveland, Ohio, for three months. There, he jumped into language and cultural studies, and realized he had a taste for living in other countries. "This scholarship opened the world to me," he says.

One year later, he self-financed six months in the United Kingdom, studying physics, marketing, and software development, and completing an internship at the same time.

Some of the things he learned on those trips were more than eye-opening. "I realized how wrong the things were we learned about the U.S. in school in East Ger-

many," he says. "I also realized how innocent I was when I came to the U.S. My first weekend, I went bicycling in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Cleveland. I learned that when I came back!"

The trips also opened his eyes to the diversity of the rest of the world; he met students from all over in Cleveland and learned about more cultures

than American, and opened his mind to possibilities he'd never considered before.

"Growing up in a 'monocultural' country made me very critical and always distrustful of anyone, individual or government, was trying to tell me," he says. His Cleveland education abroad experience changed that.

He returned to Germany to finish his studies and again traveled to school, to the UK. Once he earned his degrees, he traveled frequently to visit friends he'd made in his study abroad programs.

After earning his doctorate degree in natural sciences in 2002, Truetler worked in sales for Daimler Chrysler and Nissan in Germany, Madrid, and Tokyo. By 2009 he'd relocated his family to Medellín, Colombia, and launched FlyClinic, an online medical tourism portal, offering information to patients wanting to receive healthcare services in South America. Such "medical tourism" has become increasingly popular with those who can't afford care in their home countries or who hope to receive better care overseas than they would at home. The site offers information on specific procedures in specific countries allowing patients to research both hospitals or clinics and doctors before booking their trips.

Truetler also teaches intercultural negotiation skills at EAFIT University, Medellín, Colombia, making the most of his skills in four languages (German, English, Spanish, and Russian) and the things he said he first learned while traveling abroad as a student.

His education abroad experiences, he says, absolutely influenced his decision to launch the company.

"I met many people who helped me understand how the economy really works," he says. "These were highly entrepreneurial people that I am lucky to call friends. The experience changed me completely from a somewhat innocent bystander in communist East Germany to an expressed libertarian."

It also made him more open to the idea of launching his own business to begin with. "It made me accept risks in a way I had never actually experienced before," he says. "Did it change my career path? I do not know because I do not know the alternative timeline I evaded by opening myself up and going abroad. It certainly changed me. This was a first step in a direction where continuous experiences opened my eyes and let me see and experience that I as an individual determine my future."



**Thomas H. Truetler, a native of Germany, now lives in Colombia. He holds a PhD in natural sciences from the University of Leipzig in Germany as well as a diploma in physics and bachelor's degree from the same institution. He has worked in England, Germany, Japan, Spain, Sweden, the United States, and since founding his company, Colombia.**



Tonya Fitzpatrick, Esq., is an attorney, author, entrepreneur, speaker, sought after travel expert, and the executive producer and co-host of the Award-Winning World Footprints radio show—a leader in socially responsible travel and lifestyle. Prior to transitioning from corporate America, Tonya received a political appointment to the U.S. Department of Education where she served as a deputy assistant secretary, and was previously contracted to work as a senior legal advisor for the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. She graduated from the London School of Economics and Wayne State University Law School and spent a summer studying comparative law at East China University of Politics and Law in Shanghai.

At the time being a lawyer seemed like her focus. Looking back today, though, she admits that her drive for an international education may not have been all about the degree at the end.

“In all honesty,” she says. “These things were excuses to travel. Travel has always been in my blood.”

So she left Wayne State University, Detroit, for Shanghai and a semester at the East China University of Politics and Law. “It was just something I wanted to see,” she explains. “I’d never been there, and it was an opportunity to experience a totally new country and a totally new culture.”

After that, she returned home and went to work at a prosecutor’s office, later relocating to Washington, D.C., where she worked for Congressman Bob Ehrlich. She switched to his campaign for governor of Maryland when he launched it, and when he won the office, realized she was completely burned out, and tried lobbying for awhile, followed by a stint at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

“I was not necessarily an ideal government employee,” she says with a laugh. “It was a bit challenging for me. I got married and my husband went on a trip. I struck up a conversation with a woman at a cocktail party who asked me what I did. I told her that my husband and I were both lawyers but that I wasn’t happy—I felt like there some something else I was supposed to be doing.”

As it turned out, her new friend was a life coach. “She gave me this question and told me to think back to when I was five years old,” Fitzpatrick says. “What made me happiest? What things brought me the greatest joy? And the answer was horses and travel.”

“We had no money for a race pony,” she continues, and so travel was it. Fitzpatrick and her husband opened



## TONYA FITZPATRICK

### World Footprints Media

Tonya Fitzpatrick grew up idolizing her uncle. That’s not so unusual—uncles, after all, play a similar role to grandparents in children’s lives, arriving now and then to spoil their nieces and nephews in a hurricane of fun before going home.

Fitzpatrick’s uncle, though, lived in London with his British-born wife. And his niece found that so fascinating that she not only vowed to live there one day, but adopted bits of the country’s culture, sight unseen.

“I adopted a British accent,” she says with a laugh. “I was a very popular kid on the playground. And I promised myself that I was going to live in London, just like my uncle Michael.”

Children’s dreams often change as they grow, but Fitzpatrick never let go of that one, and wound up being accepted to the London School of Economics for her graduate degree.

“I lived in London for three years,” she says. “It was a yearlong course, but I kept renewing my student visa. Then I returned to the U.S. and went to law school, but after the first year, I found an opportunity to go abroad again for a semester in China.”



a travel agency and, after awhile, began appearing on local television and radio stations as travel experts.

“We caught the attention of a local radio station,” she says. “You see? You step out on faith and pursue your passion, and everything else falls into place.” Fitzpatrick transitioned to broadcasting, and when the station was bought by a local entrepreneur who changed up the station too much, she started her own company, broadcasting about global citizenship and human trafficking digitally, under the name of World Footprints, which broadcasts and blogs online in a multimedia effort to leave “better footprints as responsible, conscientious, and responsible travelers.”

That, she says, was an issue that had become dear to her heart while in China as a student. It took awhile, but she finally figured out how to make a career out of it—she calls herself a “recovering attorney.”

“Doing this has brought me full circle,” she says. “My study abroad experience opened my eyes to this. One of the greatest educational experiences anyone can have is travel. There are things that studying abroad and being immersed in a culture can teach you that you’ll never get sitting in a classroom. It’s that hands-on experience.”

“My first semester in China, I studied the history of the law,” she says. “I can’t say that we in this country were much better, but I was honestly shocked at some of the earlier trials and sentences there. They’re quite brutal.”

Looking back, she says, that was the start of her commitment to human rights offenses and working toward the end of human trafficking.

“Our mission has always been to foster a global citizenship,” she says, pointing at her time abroad as the very start of that. And her experiences just getting onto the airplanes that would take her to new places and new cultures still factor in.

“When I travel,” she says, “I try not to go with any expectations. I try to go with a very open mind. It’s about stepping out on faith, and I try to do that a lot. I’ve certainly done it with World Footprints. Everything else follows.”

**IE**

**KIM FERNANDEZ** is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was “Launching Pad,” which covered English as a Second Language programs at community colleges, published in the intensive foreign language supplement with the March/April 2012 issue.

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