



Gervais teacher receives Fulbright scholarship

The high school video teacher will make a film about land mines

CAPILYNN
Statesman Journal
July 8, 2004

His credentials were extraordinary.

With a background as director, producer and editor for commercials and documentaries — even a feature film — he might have been overqualified for the job at Gervais High School.



Skye Fitzgerald recently won a Fulbright Scholarship to produce a documentary in Southeast Asia. The Gervais High School teacher will leave for Cambodia and Vietnam in the fall to make a film about land-mine-eradication efforts.

"When I first looked at his résumé and application," principal Mike Solem said, "I was a little skeptical that it all couldn't be true.

"I was like, 'Whoa!'"

That applicant was Skye Fitzgerald, who, for the past three years, has used his professional experience to inspire students at Gervais, where he teaches video, drama and art classes.

"He wanted to share his knowledge with kids," Solem said. "We have a lot of students who say that they're going to pursue careers (in the field) because of him."

Those students and the rest of the rural Marion County school will have to make do next school year without Fitzgerald.

The 34-year-old has received a prestigious Fulbright research award to film a documentary about land-mine eradication in Cambodia and Vietnam and will take a yearlong leave of absence.

His selection is seen as an honor for him and for Gervais.

"I want to honor that by really investing everything I have into creating the best film I can and getting it out to the widest audience I can," Fitzgerald said.

The Fulbright award includes six months' funding for work in the two countries, including airfare, lodging, expenses and a salary stipend. Fitzgerald said that the total package comes to about \$26,000.

"They're giving you the freedom to go do your project without economic restrictions," he said.

The Fulbright Scholar Program sends about 800 U.S. scholars to 140 countries every year to lecture and conduct research. The program also offers opportunities for professionals, journalists, lawyers, scientists, artists and others.



Last year, Eddie Bauer hired Skye Fitzgerald to shoot a documentary marking the 40th anniversary of the first American ascent of Mount Everest.

How to help

If you are interested in helping support Skye Fitzgerald's documentary project about land mine eradication in Cambodia and Vietnam, contact him at skylersas@hotmail.com

Skye Fitzgerald

Age: 34

Hometown: Monument, a tiny Central Oregon town with a population of about 165

Job: Video, drama and art teacher at Gervais High School

Education: Undergraduate degree from Eastern Oregon University, 1993; Master of Fine Arts from University of Oregon, 1997

Career highlights: Member of the film crew for "Ricochet River," Kate Hudson's feature film debut; co-producer of "Monsoon Wife," a feature film about the

"Fulbrights are stellar individuals within their field," said Nancy Gainer, a spokeswoman for the program. "What particularly emerged for him is that he is a documentary film maker and has a record of success working in Southeast Asia."

Fitzgerald co-produced a feature film called "Monsoon Wife," which was shot three years ago in Cambodia. He expects the film, which centers around the child-prostitution industry in that country, to be released on video this fall.

This project focuses on another controversial subject.

In Cambodia, his documentary will feature a man named Aki-Ra, who was trained to place land mines as a child after the Khmer Rouge killed his entire family. Today, he is among those who illegally search for and diffuse these mines.

"He does it out of a sense of conscious because he has personally placed many of these mines," Fitzgerald said. "He risks life, limb and liberty on his hands and knees."

In Vietnam, the focus will turn toward a small group called "bomb hunters." These bomb hunters also risk their life to find and diffuse land mines but for financial reasons. Undetonated explosive materials from one bomb can sell for about 100 American dollars, which for many people there is one-third of their per-capita income.

"There's an economic incentive for common men to not report a bomb but dismantle it," Fitzgerald said. "There are people who do that for a living and get their heads blown off."

His goal is to raise awareness in the United States about demining activities and the dangers that remain in both countries long after war has ended.

The International Committee of the Red Cross estimates that land mines worldwide kill or maim 2,000 people monthly, and the vast majority of victims are women and children engaged in agricultural work or gathering food and firewood.

"This story can make a difference," Fitzgerald said.

Receiving a Fulbright was the first big step in being able to tell the story.

The grant will fund much of his work and a small crew, but he hopes to raise more money for equipment and additional crew members.

So instead of relaxing and enjoying his summer vacation, he has been pounding the pavement to get additional financial support for his documentary.

"I'm working harder now than when I was teaching," said Fitzgerald, whose first choice for distribution is public television.

He recently attended a documentary conference in Washington, D.C., and said his project was well-received by some of the movers and shakers in the profession.

"I walked away hopeful," he said.

Fitzgerald leaves in September, first for Cambodia and then Vietnam. He will return in March, after doing a rough cut on the documentary while overseas.

As of now, he plans to return to his teaching job for the 2005-06 school year.

His boss and his students are counting on it.

"He's a talented man," said Solem, the principal at Gervais. "I've been lucky to have him on my staff."

child prostitution industry in Cambodia; hired by Eddie Bauer last year to shoot a documentary commemorating the 40th anniversary of the first American ascent of Mount Everest

Fulbright details

The Fulbright Scholar Program sends about 800 U.S. scholars to 140 countries every year to lecture and conduct research.

These grants are highly competitive, and the process is very selective.

The application process includes submitting a detailed project plan, which undergoes peer review. The final awards are approved by a 12-person board appointed by the president of the United States.

clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6710