

# Global Comfort Zone



JUDY WATSON/TRACY

Rollins' first resident faculty member and his family call both Ward Hall and the world home.

BY ROBYN ALLERS

As Rollins strives to bring a global orientation to the curriculum, many faculty incorporate international elements into their courses: study-abroad practica, service-learning components, or complements to the main focus of the course. For Associate Professor of Political Science Michael Gunter, however, the world *is* the focus. Through his courses in international relations, global environmental affairs, sustainable development, and international security, as well as his research and scholarship, Gunter has been a major player in the College's efforts to intentionally connect disciplinary studies to real-world situations—with an emphasis on *world*. His research has taken him to five continents and 19 countries, among them Singapore, Vietnam, Peru, Ecuador, and Germany. "He may be the most internationally traveled faculty member on campus," said fellow political science professor Tom Lairson, who heads Rollins' International Studies Center, charged with

coordinating faculty-development travel.

Whether observing the work of scientists in the Peruvian Amazon, investigating environmental devastation in Central Europe, or researching sustainability in the Galapagos Islands, Gunter sees a growing global interdependence that links our own economic and physical survival, individually and collectively, to other states, societies, and institutions. As he tells his students, "From climate change and biodiversity loss to overall poverty and pollution, events on one side of the globe clearly influence those thousands of miles away."

Gunter's students grapple with this century's thorniest problems, from the War on Terrorism to global warming. Solutions are elusive. Students could easily become disillusioned and frustrated about the future—their own future. "It's a complicated landscape," admitted Gunter. "On the other hand, today we have the power to determine the fate of our planet like never before. If students are more informed about the

theoretical contexts, if they understand the ways that power influences the debate on issues, and if they can see how we in this country fit into what goes on across the globe, then they can begin to develop the skills to formulate solutions. Hope begins with knowledge.”

And knowledge, as Gunter discovered, expands with experience.

In 2002, Gunter, then a visiting assistant professor, and Professor of Anthropology Pedro Pequeño led a dozen Rollins students on a field study in the Dominican Republic. The trip capped off 16 weeks of coursework on sustainable development in the specific context of the DR. In interviews with government officials, environmental leaders, and ordinary citizens, students were challenged to explore sustainable solutions.

Shortly after arriving in the DR, Gunter noted “how curious the students were—much more than in class.” One afternoon, he recalled, “the students were waiting in a dark, dingy lobby for a run-down bus that would take them on a four-hour, pot-holed journey to the other side of the island.” Instead of napping or text messaging, “they were writing furiously in their journals and talking about the morning’s meeting with the deputy anti-poverty director! I saw the light bulbs flash on in their minds, and I realized that connecting academics to experience creates knowledge that will be retained long after four years of college.”

In that moment, John Dewey’s concept of a “pragmatic liberal education” became concrete for Gunter, and it has been central to his pedagogy ever since. “I became a convert,” he said.

Travel, political science, and academics run in the Gunter family. As a boy, Michael, Jr. and his family lived for a year in Turkey while Michael, Sr., a political science professor specializing in the Middle East at Tennessee Tech University, taught on a Fulbright appointment. Nearly 30 years later, Gunter continued the tradition when his own children, Ansleigh and Malachi, then 4 and 1, respectively, accompanied their parents to the Slovak Republic, where Gunter taught on a Fulbright university lectureship.

Like his father, Gunter majored in political science. He then detoured from academics for several years after graduating with honors from Vanderbilt University. He worked in Washington, D.C., first as a

legislative correspondent in the U.S. House of Representatives and later as an editor for a public-policy newswire service. Gunter believes those experiences gave him not only a practical grounding in the political process, but also something of a competitive edge when it came to graduate school—another lesson in pragmatic education he passes on to his students.

In 2000, still in the process of completing his dissertation at the University of Kentucky, Gunter accepted a visiting assistant professor position to teach in Rollins’ newly created sustainable development program. Even though it was only a three-year appointment, Gunter and his wife, Linda, settled into a home only two blocks from campus and

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immersed themselves in campus life. He quickly distinguished himself as an active and popular participant, regularly attending athletic events, chairing faculty/student study groups, serving on committees, and advising students. By the end of his first year, he had achieved the consummate sign of student acceptance: he was tapped to judge the Student Government Association’s annual Lip Sync Contest.

Gunter had also earned the respect of colleagues with his contributions to the department and his impressive record of scholarship. In 2003, when the visiting position was converted to tenure track, Gunter tossed his cap into the pool of national applicants and rose to the top.

In 2004, Dartmouth College and University Press of New England published Gunter’s book *Building the Next Ark: How NGOs Work to Protect Biodiversity*. The two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and biologist E. O. Wilson, who spoke at the recent Rollins College Colloquy, called it “an important and much-needed book on a vital subject.”

Named a Cornell Distinguished Faculty member in 2006, Gunter’s latest venture

doesn’t take him out of the country, but it does take him into uncharted territory. As the first resident faculty member of the College’s Living and Learning Communities (LLC) program, Gunter and his family recently moved into an apartment in the newly renovated Ward Hall, a residence for first-year students enrolled in several interrelated Rollins College Conference courses (RCCs).

Choosing to live among 190 students might seem like sheer lunacy to some, but Gunter saw it as yet another opportunity to “better connect what Rollins does in the classroom to what happens outside it.” One of his roles—and what attracted him to the position—is to help develop a program of

activities for student residents. “Many students really want more intellectual life outside of the classroom,” he said. A spacious lounge on the fourth floor overlooking Lake Virginia provides “an intimate and informal setting for students to engage with faculty and to meet with some of the high-profile speakers that come through campus, in the vein of James Lipton’s *Inside the Actor’s Studio*.”

Gunter has drawn up an ambitious program that includes film screenings, panel discussions, and performances. Recent participation appears to bear him out: a discussion on 9/11 drew a group of 50, and about 100 students and faculty turned out for a panel on language and assimilation.

If the sandbox in the courtyard outside the Gunter apartment is any indication, the family is at home here. So far, the experience has been positive. “They’ve been very respectful and relatively quiet,” Gunter said of his hall mates. “It’s a great opportunity for us as a family to learn as well as model what learning is all about.”

Another advantage: the pool of potential babysitters for Ansleigh and Malachi just got a whole lot bigger. ■