

# CHASING

BY KRISTEN MANIERI

**M**ORE THAN 1,500 miles from the island life of her Trinidad home, Amy Teixeira might well have become homesick during her first weeks at Rollins College, missing her family and her favorite stew chicken. But within days she was fully immersed in campus life, thanks to the College's innovative first-year student programming known as Rollins Explorations.

PHOTOS BY JUDY WATSON TRACY



# AMY

## *The Adventures of a First-Year Student*

A “hit the ground sprinting,” full-tilt series of academic programs and co-curricular initiatives, Rollins Explorations is rooted in the basic premise that the type of experience students have in their first year of college, and beyond, depends significantly on what they experience in their first few weeks on campus. The concept is simple: Students who feel a sense of belonging and acceptance bloom where they are planted. Help them make friends, and the rest will generally work itself out.

By the end of Week One, Teixeira has made 40 friends.

### **The Class that Binds**

First-year students begin to cluster in their Rollins College Conference (RCC) class. Launched in 1994, the RCC program brings together 15 to 17 incoming students in each of 30 different seminar classes with provocative topics such as *Crime Scene Chemistry* or

*The Physics of Avatar*. Each course is led by a faculty member who is also designated as the students’ academic advisor.

“These courses build a sense of community,” said RCC Faculty Director Mario D’Amato. “Students join together in the classroom, on service-learning experiences, on field trips, in their residence halls, and during social events. They get to know each other, their faculty advisors, and their peer mentors really well throughout all the experiences and activities incorporated in their RCC.”

Teixeira is placed in the Honors class *Justice, Good, and Evil*, taught by Professor of Legal Studies and Communication Marvin Newman and Professor of English Twila Papay. Over the course of the semester, she and her classmates meet three times a week to debate controversial topics. “The class is designed to get you involved. If you don’t talk, they get you to talk,” Teixeira said. There’s no hiding out in an RCC. “In

high school, we just had to sit there and take notes,” she recalled. “Here, it’s about being involved and forming an opinion. It’s interactive learning.”

Teixeira describes her RCC as being “spirited” and “emotional,” and filled with fierce debates about topics like same-sex marriage, cannibalism, physician-assisted suicide, abortion, and cloning. But mostly, she thinks of the formation of the group of people who launched her into Rollins life.

“RCC is the program that sends the message to students and parents that Rollins really cares about them,” Newman said. “Students are not ID numbers here.” The RCC becomes, by design, a surrogate family for each new student.

### **Amy under Their Wing**

Key components of this “family” are the peer mentors. Teixeira’s been matched with juniors Isaac Carpenter, Lucas Hernandez,



and Kelsey Beaumont. Not only do they attend all of her RCC classes, this trio is also charged with ensuring that Teixeira and her compatriots know about what's happening on campus and participate in as much as possible.

"Peer Mentors create programs dedicated to teaching the students about what Rollins has to offer and also about the most important values the College holds—values Rollins instills in them to help them succeed here and after college," Beaumont said. "In many cases, as with Amy's RCC, students also learn more about the surrounding area through a community-service component somewhere in the Central Florida community."

In addition, peer mentors regularly lead the RCC group on social outings, including campus arts and entertainment events such as this fall's Annie Russell Theatre productions of *Grease* and *Biloxi Blues*. "I would have been completely lost without this structure," Teixeira said. "My RCC group is like family to me. I don't think I would have settled in as well without them."

Beaumont firmly believes the retention rate of first-year students is contingent upon the success of Explorations. "The first-year program does not allow students to come to college and simply fade into the background; they have to take part in something and are therefore much more likely to succeed, and to *want* to succeed."

### Home Schooling

To that end, students can no longer fade into their dorm rooms either, thanks to a progressive living concept known as Living Learning Communities (LLC). Director of Living Learning Communities and Faculty-in-Residence Gabriel Barreneche stresses that LLCs are, first and foremost, communities. "LLCs are where new students begin to get a sense of belonging," said Barreneche, associate professor of modern languages and literatures. "It's where freshmen start to find their little niche in the Rollins world."

Teixeira lives in Ward Hall, a "mixed-use" space combining residential rooms, leisure areas, a classroom, and study rooms, as well as a faculty residence. The people on Teixeira's floor are all from...you guessed it...her RCC. "Whenever I need help with homework, I know I can knock on someone's door," she said. But it's not all serious stuff. At least one of Ward's two TV rooms is taken over on Mondays for *Gossip Girl*, and Teixeira can often be found on the fourth-floor patio working on her tan.

### Following Her Passions

It's 7 a.m. and Teixeira begins another day filled with classes, homework, and community-service projects, but also activities that nurture her distinct passions. In keeping with its goals, the

Explorations program has helped her connect with activities that will enhance her College experience and plant her firmly in the Rollins community. Her exhaustive schedule includes dance-team practices, weekend getaways with new friends, Zumba classes, leadership retreats, and posting blogs about her Rollins experiences as one of a handful of student bloggers dubbed R-Journalists.

"Life is anything but ordinary at the moment and I am loving it," Teixeira blogged near the end of her first semester. "There is never a dull moment, never a boring thought. Life at Rollins has so far proven to be a rollercoaster of excitement, adventure, and, of course, schoolwork. I am looking forward to everything else Rollins has in store for me and I plan to take advantage of all that I can. There is so much to get involved in on campus that you really have to ensure there is a balance between your work and your play. Once that balance is met, you have officially started your four-year journey—or should I say rollercoaster—at Rollins."

### A New Home Sweet Home

Through Explorations, Rollins uniquely envelops and embraces new students so they feel safe, comfortable, and cared about—and it doesn't happen by chance. The program has perfected a winning formula that looks something like this:



create a structure in which connectivity and community can flourish, then consistently nourish that connectivity through the RCC program, peer mentorship program, and meaningful activities that enrich and deepen the college experience.

"We're here to make sure no one gets lost in the crowd," said Meghan Harte, executive director of student success and director of the Explorations program. "We know that making connections is what keeps students in college. When students connect with each other, a mentor, or faculty member, they're more likely to ask for help when they need it, more likely to stay here, and more likely to have a positive college experience."

"New students arrive on campus facing so many fears and unknowns," said Explorations Student Coordinator Laura Berk '12. "Explorations gives them the basics for not only surviving but thriving in the first semester and beyond."

As winter break begins, a contented and exhausted Teixeira heads home to Trinidad to enjoy the holidays...and, finally, some stew chicken. She holds in her rearview mirror moments that will stay with her for a lifetime. She has laughed, pulled her hair out, cried. And even though not a day went by that she didn't text her dad, she's not the same person who left the small island not so long ago. She's a Rollins student now. And while the world will need to wait three more years, it's still her oyster. ■



## *No Impact Man* provides high-impact experience

*Summer-reading assignment connects first-year students to a cause in their first week on campus.*

Although last year's classes didn't begin until August 23, incoming students dusted off their thinking caps over the summer for that dreaded first assignment: summer reading.

This year's selected book was not only big on title—*No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process*—it was big on values central to Rollins' mission. Written by Colin Beavan, the book chronicles one man's attempt to eliminate his and his family's personal impact on the environment for one year.

Students were pleasantly surprised to find the book fascinating. But after arriving on campus for orientation, they were in for a new twist on the usual follow-up discussions: *No Impact Man* spawned a week-long flurry of environmental-related events and activities that brought the conceptual messages of Beavan's book into the students' real-world experience.

Their first week on campus, dubbed "No Impact Week," began with a screening of the *No Impact Man* documentary (complete with organic popcorn) and an appearance by Beavan, who, in addition to captivating students with his story, paddled a canoe around Lake Virginia with some of them, removing trash from the water. Other activities included planting gardens at the student-run Mowbray Sustainability House, touring Winter Park on

bicycles, volunteering at Second Harvest Food Bank, and cleaning up Cocoa Beach.

To complement the program, Rollins Explorations, the College's program for first-year students, sponsored an essay contest, encouraging incoming scholars to consider the issues the book raised. Three winners



Author Colin Beavan joins Rollins students from Associate Professor of Environmental Studies Joseph Siry's RCC course, *Imeriled Planet*, as they remove trash from Lake Virginia.

received Rollins Rice Family Bookstore gift certificates as well as the opportunity to have dinner with Beavan during his campus visit. One of them, Annamarie Carlson '14, was "blown away" by Beavan's mission to make a difference, one day at a time. "The experience was one of a kind," she said. "It was truly eye opening and made me rethink many of the ways in which I currently live my life."

Beyond a much-needed reminder that we're all global citizens responsible for caring for the planet, perhaps the most important message Beavan gave students was one of hope. "The question isn't whether or not I make a difference. The question is whether I want to be the type of person who tries." ■

—Kristen Manieri

# First-Year Globetrotters

*Unique study-abroad experience eases transition to college life*

For some incoming students, the Rollins experience begins even before they arrive at the smorgasbord of activities awaiting them on campus. Launched in 2009, Rollins' innovative First-Year Field Experiences program—one of just a few programs of its kind on the national academic landscape—gives a handful of lucky students the opportunity to kick-start their first year in exotic and engaging locations across the globe weeks before the school year officially begins.

Participants earn course credit for the field-study excursions, which are led by Rollins faculty members. After completing an intensely competitive application process, accepted students tackle a hefty load of assigned reading and are required to submit a summary essay prior to departure. This year,

two-credit environmental studies course. "It was pretty amazing," Allen commented. "I left with a dozen kids from around the country and came back with Rollins students."

The Shanghai adventure was an intensive 23-day language immersion trip led by Rollins Lecturer Li Wei, who described it as "a five-credit, 101-level Mandarin Chinese language course entirely transported to China." Thanks to an exchange partnership with Shanghai University, he explained, students were able to study in classrooms weekday mornings, receive free tutoring from native speakers weekday afternoons, and engage in a multitude of cultural activities and excursions in Shanghai and its neighboring towns. "It was a total immersion encompassing everything from food to culture to history to art," Wei said.

Wei agrees that this type of opportunity allows students to grow as individuals before facing the huge life change of starting college. "The students who went to Shanghai did have cultural shocks, especially with the local food," he said. "But overall I was very impressed with their maturity and sensitivity when dealing with local culture and people. I think the social experiences and interactions helped our students not only gain more insights into Chinese culture, but also reflect on themselves through the lens of their own language and culture."

"I feel like I grew tremendously from the Shanghai trip," said Jen Jokl '14 of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "It was my first time really living on my own. I had to be completely self-propelled. There was also a kind of independence that I was able to cultivate by learning how to use the subway by myself and just going where I wanted to go. It was a much more drastic change than moving to Florida has been."

Beneath the obvious allure of a summer adventure combined with academic credit, the First-Year Field Experience serves one other important function: it gives new students the chance to begin their new life in college with confidence and ease. Over the course of the trip, participants form close friendships that continue once they arrive on campus, making the transition to college a little bit easier. "This isn't just a trip," Allen said. "Like all Rollins study-abroad experiences, these are academic courses that provide unique bonding opportunities. I still see the Costa Rica group hanging out together on campus."

"I still can't believe I got to study abroad with a school I hadn't even started attending yet," said Costa Rica participant Emily Sessoms '13, who is from Sanford, Florida. "It was an absolutely amazing experience and it definitely relieved a lot of the pressure of starting at a new school. I'm still friends with everyone from the trip. It changed my whole freshman year."

Next year, the First-Year Field Experiences program will be expanded to include field-study opportunities throughout the year. ■

—Kristen Manieri



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— Li Wei

two groups of first-year students journeyed abroad: one to Costa Rica, the other to Shanghai.

Barry Allen, associate professor of environmental studies, led 12 eager students on a 10-day adventure through Costa Rica's rugged landscape. Participants studied flora and fauna in the country's world-renowned protected areas and national parks while completing a

Since the field experiences are anchored in academics, these new Rollins students get a taste of what will be expected of them in college. "It's a fun but rigorous experience that helps prepare them for what's ahead," Allen said. "When my group got to campus to begin the fall semester, they hit the ground running."