

Madagascar from a JMU perspective

Halfway around the world, my Madison Experience is still making an impact

BY SEAN MICHAEL FRANCIS ('11)

Four years since graduation, JMU is still impacting my life. My Madison Experience included participation in the Undergraduate Research in Biology and Mathematics program. As part of my interdisciplinary research funded by a National Science Foundation grant in conjunction with Duke University, I studied sifaka lemurs – my first exposure to Madagascar. Thanks to JMU professors Roshna Wunderlich and Anthony Tongen, I learned to become an efficient and motivated researcher. I also had the opportunity to study with professor Stephen Leslie. During his class Geology and Ecology of the Bahamas, we examined fossilized patch reefs and extant ecosystems to infer how San Salvador Island has changed over time. This class was the catalyst for my interest in scuba diving, as we had to frequently snorkel through many parts of the island. Students from a variety of majors – geology, education, psychology, business, even dance – participated and each brought a unique perspective to the lectures and the overall expedition.

The Bluestone mindset of pursuing your passion stayed with me, and I have continued to seek opportunities in conservation and marine biology.

My search led me to Blue Ventures, an ecotourism program, which includes two months on the island of Madagascar. Volunteers spend the majority of their time living in Andavadoaka, an isolated village of the Vezo tribe, “the people who fish.” The program immerses volunteers in the culture and language of the village. Free time includes teaching English to villagers, collecting weather data, updating identified species logs, cleaning and storing dive equipment, and treating slightly salty drinking water. I have JMU to thank

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Hanson Hall Dukes reunion. (L-R): Ruth Miller Corell, Donna Yingling Bucher, Linda Grandle, Cory Nishaguchi Skeen and Joan Clasbey. Seated: Betty Jo Boone English

74 Suite mates from Hanson Hall (above), these members of the Class of 1974 had a mini-reunion in October in Harrisonburg: “We met and reminisced, had lunch downtown, did some painting at You Made It and ended the day with a visit to Kline’s for an ice cream cone.”

78 Montte Hall Christiansen says, “In 1981, shortly after college graduation, seven couples, all JMU graduates, began a tradition of vacationing in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. This year we celebrated our 35th year.” (See photo on Page 61.)

80 Debbie Pruett ('82M) retired from Rockbridge County Schools after 33 years as a school counselor. She served as director of school counseling for several years at Rockbridge County High School. **Paul J. Weber**, attorney at Hyatt & Weber, P.A. in Annapolis, Maryland, has been honored for his work in malpractice and will be featured in the 2016 edition of *The Best Lawyers in America*, the oldest and considered to



Paul J. Weber ('80)

be the most respected peer-review publication in the legal profession.

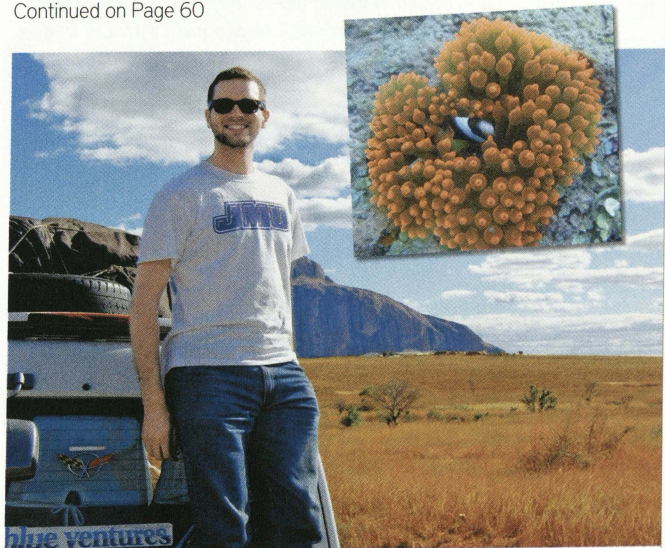
84 Jay Mervine recently attained the rank of Captain on B737 aircraft for American Airlines based in Washington, D.C.

87 Barry I. Matherly is the new president and CEO of the Greater Richmond Partnership, a regional economic development group that creates opportunities for new jobs and investment in the Richmond, Virginia, region.

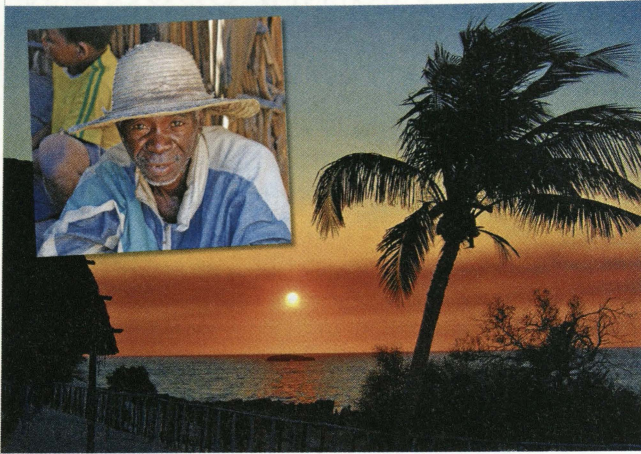
89 Frank Payne is vice president and partner at PD Brooks Traffic Control. The firm provided all traffic control for the UCI World Championship bike race held in Richmond, Virginia, in September. “My partner, Sarah Brooks, attended JMU and my vice president of sales/operations, Chris Pizzini, is also Class of 1989.”

91 Joel Cochran recently began a new career with Microsoft, serving as a technical evangelist on the cam-

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The author near Ranohira, outside Isalo National Park. Blue Venture volunteers spend six days traveling through Madagascar visiting cities before journeying to the village of Andavadoaka. (Inset): Anemone fish looking out from its home. Volunteers must pass identification tests to successfully survey the 150 marine species studied in and around fishing reserves.



A view of the sunset from the beach cabins of Andavadoaka. (Inset): Vezo village elders called Nahoda commune with ancestral spirits and perform rituals and blessings during important community events.

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for helping me cultivate the discipline that allowed me to adapt to the austerity of the program.

The Vezo diet primarily consists of fish and marine invertebrate. Many sail their pirogues, small fishing boats, over five kilometers from shore in search of food. It is a hard life. An increased global demand for seafood has put pressure on the Vezo to remove more sea life, depleting their resources faster than they can be replenished. Blue Ventures works to bring awareness to the dwindling stock and proffer corrective action. Now, farming alternative income sources, such as seaweed and sea cucumber, has helped to lighten the pressure exerted on fish populations and provides a marketable, more reliable source of international revenue. The Vezo are growing more independent, handling the responsibility of running and maintaining the reserves.

While immersing myself in the culture of the Vezo, I collaborated with other Blue Ventures volunteers. The program attracts a full spectrum of people: medical doctors, scientists, gap-year students, vacationers, and photographers, among others. The ages of the volunteers in my group ranged from 17 to 56; however, I heard that the oldest volunteer was over 70. Most come from Europe, Asia and Africa. It was the first time, as the only American in the group, I felt like an outsider. Fortunately, JMU had taught me to approach new environments with an open mind.

My travels came to fruition because JMU instilled in me a desire to explore, learn and broaden my horizons. Researching sifaka lemurs introduced me to the beautiful world of Madagascar and its rich landscape. A hands-on class studying the Bahamas ingrained a greater appreciation for the ocean and catalyzed my interest in conservation. Becoming more open and receptive to others expanded my worldview and bestowed upon my life a sense of richness and depth. All of these life-changing events shaped me into the man who can dive into the ocean at six in the morning near an island half a world away from home. I may have been scared

of what could go wrong, but I was excited to experience what would go right. My years at JMU made me a better person, and for that I will be forever grateful, or as the Malagasy say “Misaotra Bevata.”

‘My years at JMU made me a better person.’

– SEAN MICHAEL FRANCIS (‘11)



ANNOUNCEMENTS

FutureDukes

1990s Chris Greame (‘92) and Michelle, a son, Seamus Walker Greame, 8/22/15 * Gwendolyn Waddy Jones (‘95) and Herbert, a son, Collin Pierce, 08/01/15

2000s Chrysalinn LeDoux Archie (‘00) and Ulysses, a son, Amos Micah Salvatore, 7/3/15 * Julie Vogel Smit (‘04) and Brandon, a son, Luke Robert, 5/4/15 * Leigh Stisser (‘05) and Brian, a daughter, Charlotte Carr

‘Charly’ 5/30/14 * Melissa Scott Pechulis (‘06) and Daniel, a daughter, Charlotte Anne, 9/23/15 * Lisa Talley Eickel (‘08, ‘10M) and Brandon (‘08), a son, Easton Carter 7/7/15 * Ted Goshorn (‘09) and Dana, a son, Carter Arlen, 9/8/15 * Chinah Helmandollar Jewell (‘09) and Brad, a daughter, Maggie Marie 8/8/15 * Emily Hartman Fanning (‘09) and Daniel (‘10), a son, Kailar Zale 7/10/15

Weddings

2000s Ashley Galvin (‘08) to Grant Ruder (‘07), 9/4/15 * Allegra Smith (‘09) to Brandon Lapetina (‘08), 9/6/15

2010s Anne Blessing (‘10)

to Aaron Tenney, 7/11/15 * Telmyr Lee (‘10) to William McCoy (‘10), 9/26/15 * Chelsea Glynn (‘13) and Tyler Copan (‘13), 9/26/15 * Kelsey Rakes (‘14) to J.P. Kelley (‘13), 10/3/15

In Memoriam

ROBERT PAUL GOLLER (‘94), of Gloucester, Virginia, 5/2/15

ELIZABETH ANNE DAVIES JOHNSON (‘34), of Falls Church, Virginia, 8/10/15

Madison Project

20 Year Reunion

Save the date:
March 18-19,
2016