

portrait Jennifer Eikren



Jennifer Eikren '98 credits St. Olaf with opening her eyes to a new corner of the world: China.

The Right Stuff

By Suzy Frisch

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL SOFRONSKI

As China cements its future as one of the world's superpowers, its influence will continue to extend from Asia into other parts of the world. And the Eastern giant just might start spreading its brand of human rights to other countries. That notion, in part, has inspired Jennifer Eikren to devote much of her career to strengthening human rights in China.

"The people [of China] deserve the right to be heard and have greater confidence in the rule of law," says Eikren. "China is a global presence, so it's important to ensure that it complies with international standards, especially as it invests more in developing countries. To set up these institutions now is very important so that [China's] standards of international rights don't become the norm."

It's an effort Eikren has been working on for a decade, after graduating from St. Olaf with degrees in Asian studies and political science. She has spent a good deal of time in China, first as a participant in two St. Olaf international study programs, then as an English teacher, and finally as a representative of two nonprofits. While learning the language, history, and culture of China at St. Olaf, she became captivated by the country and its people, and never looked back.

Today, Eikren heads the U.S. office of The Rights Practice, a London-based nonprofit that specializes in human rights and public participation in China. She has focused primarily on fostering public participation in local elections and cultivating open debate in decision making, with the aim of helping the Chinese people play a bigger role in their self-governance.

"China really fascinated me early on — the idea of the old and new coming together. It gave me a sense that its society was evolving quickly and I couldn't help but want to be involved," says Eikren, who always has been interested in public policy and government. "China felt like a place where I could apply my interests in Asia, strengthening governance and human rights. Without rights and a voice, life can be very difficult."

Eikren didn't head to St. Olaf intent on majoring in Asian studies. But an informational session on Chinese language classes with Professor Richard Bodman changed the direction of her life. An associate professor of Chinese and Asian studies, Bodman made a convincing case on the importance of studying Chinese, arguing that the country was evolving into an economic and political powerhouse. So even though the Chinese classes met every morning at 8 a.m., Eikren decided [CONTINUED ON PAGE 48]

Jennifer Eikren's work for The Rights Practice has taken her from London to New York City to Madison, Wisconsin. Today she leaves the responsibility of traveling to China to others, concentrating instead on program development, fundraising, and overseeing the quality of projects.