Missouri students try for new tailgating spot

Student leaders at the University of Missouri-Columbia are hoping a new spot for tailgating before football games will be acceptable to university officials.

Missouri Student Association President Tim Noce has been trying to find a replacement location since the university closed Reactor Field to tailgaters last year. The field had become the site of underage drinking, fighting and other problems.

The Columbia Tribune reports that this fall, the designated student tailgate spot is expected to be a parking lot south of Cornell Hall. The new site will be open only to pedestrians. Noce says the lot will close at kickoff.

Details are being worked out, and Missouri Police Chief Jack Watring said he doesn't consider the tailgate spot a done deal yet.
Students try for new campus tailgate spot

By Janese Silvey

Sunday, August 8, 2010

University of Missouri students have come up with a new spot for tailgating before home football games this fall, and student leaders are hoping this one will be around longer than its predecessors.

Missouri Student Association President Tim Noce has been working to secure a new spot since last year when the university closed Reactor Field to tailgaters.

The popular pre-game party spot had become home to underage drinking, fighting and other problems, university officials said last year.

Reactor had become a popular party spot after another such tailgating location, Frat Pit, closed a few years earlier.

This fall, the designated student tailgate spot is expected to be the parking lot on the southeast corner of Maryland Avenue and Rollins Street — the lot just south of Cornell Hall.

Unlike the 800-space Reactor Field, the new tailgate site would not be open to vehicles; only pedestrians looking for pre-game pep will be allowed, Noce said. And the lot would close down
at kickoff, a move aimed to attract those interested in attending the game, not just those looking for an excuse to party.

The location also will help curtail problems, Noce said.

“First and foremost, it’s not out in the middle of nowhere,” he said. “It’s in the middle of campus. Students take ownership in campus; they pay for campus and don’t want to mess it up.”

Noce said he’s working with administrators to make sure the student tailgate spot stays trouble-free.

Final details are still being hashed out, and MU Police Chief Jack Watring said he doesn’t consider the tailgate spot a done deal yet.

“We’re waiting to see what the requirements are and those kinds of things,” he said.

But he’s confident officers will make sure the lot doesn’t turn into another unruly party spot.

“When it becomes a reality, we will have security there to make sure it is not another Frat Pit or Reactor Field,” he said. With officers on site, “I’m comfortable that will not happen.”

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

UM System wins $12 million for educational program

Friday, August 6, 2010  |  2:07 p.m. CDT
BY NAOMI STEVENS

COLUMBIA – A University of Missouri System program has been selected to win more than $12 million in a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Enhancing Missouri’s Instructional Teaching Strategies, or eMINTS, is one of 49 educational programs and institutions chosen to receive an Investing in Innovation Fund, or i3, grant. It was selected as a "highest rated applicant" out of almost 1,700 applicants vying for $650 million in grant money, according to a release from the department.

Before the 49 selected applicants can receive grant money, they have to raise some of their own. Each must raise 20 percent of the awarded amount from the private sector by Sept. 8. Programs can request to have the 20 percent match waived. A final list of i3 grantees will be issued in mid- to late-September.

The i3 grants are part of $10 billion dedicated to school reform by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The fund will support programs that attempt to close achievement gaps and help high-need students, the release said.

The department chose applicants that will operate in 42 states and two territories.

More than half of the programs plan to work with students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. Thirty-seven percent intend to work with rural school districts, according to the release.

Four programs with strong track records for success won up to $50 million in “scale up” grants. Fifteen growing programs with evidence of successes won up to $30 million in “validation” grants — eMINTS was one of these. Another 30 institutions with promising ideas won up to $5 million in “development” grants.

According to a summary of its grant application, the UM System Board of Curators requested a little more than $12 million in funding for the eMINTS Validation Project. A document on the U.S. Department of Education website shows that UM has secured its 20 percent match.
eMINTS aims to improve classroom learning by coupling high-quality teaching with technology. The money will be used to examine the effectiveness of the program by testing it in 60 school districts in rural Missouri with high-need middle school students.

The project will span five years and is expected to work with 10,500 students and 240 teachers in that time. Project goals include assessing and increasing seventh- and eighth-grade students’ mathematics and English language arts performance, as well as considering eMINTS’ affect on teaching practices.

The project will include professional development for educators, in-classroom coaching and outfitting classrooms interactive whiteboards, student computers and other technology.
Tour guides make universities 'come alive'

BY TIM BARKER • tbarker@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8350 | Posted: Monday, August 9, 2010 12:10 am

As a tour guide at the University of Missouri at Columbia, Josh Heffernan can tell you about the legend of the shamrock built into the pathway outside the engineering building: Cross it and you are destined to marry an engineer.

The senior from Sunset Hills can talk about the history of the oldest building on campus. He knows the university is credited with creating the tradition of homecoming, and that the surest way to get an 'A' on a test is to rub the nose on the statue of former Gov. David Francis, which sits outside Jesse Hall.

And he can explain all of this while walking backward.

But this isn't what makes the Josh Heffernans of the world so important to their schools.

It's the personal stories he tells and the way he tells them. It's his ability to relate to parents and their children. But more than anything, it's his ability to turn prospective students into actual students.

That matters today more than ever, as the nation's colleges and universities face several years of shrinking high school graduating classes and increased competition to maintain enrollment levels. Campus tours are becoming a key piece of the recruitment machinery.

"Five to 10 years ago, they were simply the thing you did if you had time. Now they've become events," said Steven Goodman, an admissions consultant with Washington-based Top Colleges. "Some universities even give out tickets, as if you were going to visit the Empire State Building or some historical landmark."

Done right, these tours can mean big things for schools. At St. Louis University, for example, campus tours have proved to be the school's best tool for persuading students to join up.

"It's our No. 1 yield event," said Jean Gilman, dean of undergraduate admissions. "It's really these tour guides that make the university come alive."

More than that, it is that guide's job to essentially represent every other student on campus, said Trent Gilbert, a consultant with Atlanta-based TargetX. The company's 4-year-old consulting division has helped 170 schools improve their visit programs. The tour and the tour guides, he said, are a major part of that.
"It allows these (visiting high school students) to come to campus and see: Can I be friends with these people? Can I live with these people? Can I date these people? Can I see myself here?" Gilbert said.

Heffernan knows these things as well. And it's why he approaches his job the way he does. During one of his hour-long tours, he covers the basics, with quick stops inside a variety of campus mainstays, including the bookstore, recreation center and library. But he sprinkles his tours with tidbits about his experiences and those of his friends — and says he has never given the same one twice.

He doesn't just point out a concert venue. He recalls a concert that was there and what it was like. When touring the recreation center, he tells of one roommate's peculiar habit of working out while watching Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles videos. And about the guy from Atlanta who came to Missouri and met several people from his hometown.

And he's quick to make sure no one feels out of place.

On a recent summer afternoon tour, Heffernan took time while passing out water bottles to learn more about the three families in his group.

"Do you know what you'll be majoring in?" he asked Brandon Hughlett, a high school junior from Springfield, Mo.

No sales pitches

Hughlett, who was brought to the school by parents wanting him to understand why he needs to work on his grades, quietly shook his head.

No worries, Heffernan assured him, before moving seamlessly into a story about a friend who claims to have changed majors half a dozen times: "I don't know if it's true, but that's what he tells people."

What he doesn't do, however, is make a straight sales pitch. Heffernan never promises that Missouri is better than any other school. He just explains why he likes it so much.

And that's the way it should be, according to admissions experts, who say there's no quicker way to turn off prospective students than by following a carefully prepared sales script.


Of course, the desire to provide an honest glimpse of the school can clash with the university's need to look as good as it can for recruits. It's a conflict, however, that generally takes care of itself through the selection of tour guides — who tend to be high performers with a deep sense of loyalty.
Even at schools like Washington University, which uses volunteer guides, these aren't easy jobs to get. Administrators at area schools say it's not uncommon to get 10 to 15 applicants for each opening, giving them the luxury to be picky when hiring.

The University of Missouri puts it applicants through a three-stage gauntlet that includes a written application and group and one-on-one interviews. And everyone is required to submit a project demonstrating their creativity.

"I've received everything from songs to poster boards to Power Point presentations. I've seen a Mizzou Life (board game) game. I've received a quilt. And there was a papier-mâché tiger," said LeAnn Stroupe, coordinator of the school's visitor relations program.

'Take some risks'

Still, the fact that the guides are employed by universities — they generally make little more than minimum wage — is not lost on parents and high school students making those college visits. That's a good reason to make sure guides are free to be honest, said Lloyd Thacker, executive director of The Education Conservancy, a nonprofit based in Portland, Ore., that fights commercial influences on admissions.

He argues that tours should be designed as more than just sales pitches. In some instances, he said, they should even help students decide to go elsewhere.

"You've got to take some risks," Thacker said. "There's much more to be gained by having the courage to let recruiters be educators."

Where Heffernan, who professes a love for sales, falls in that equation is debatable. Clearly he has strong feelings for the university that educated his parents and older sister and will soon take in his younger sister. So it's no surprise that it's hard to leave one of his tours feeling like Mizzou is anything less than perfect.

Still, he insists he only says things he believes.

"I'm not trying to pull the wool over anyone's eyes," he said. "I'm not trying to be a used car salesman."
Planning and Zoning Commission gives nod to Tiger Avenue plan

By Daniel Cailler

Friday, August 6, 2010

The Columbia Planning and Zoning Commission last night recommended approval of a University of Missouri request to change the name of Maryland Avenue to Tiger Avenue.

Chris Koukola, assistant to the chancellor in the Office of University Affairs, said Maryland—which runs north and south between Conley Avenue and Stadium Boulevard—is a main thoroughfare to the sports park.

"It's a bit off-putting when we give visitors directions to campus from Stadium and say, 'turn on Maryland Avenue,'" she said.

Tim Teddy, the city's director of planning and development, said the Columbia Fire Department and Public Safety Joint Communications were concerned because there already is a Tiger Lane. It runs between West Worley Street and Bernadette Drive.

"Our 911 operators prefer to have complete dissimilarity in names, so there are no errors in calling in an incident," Teddy said.

But he also noted that addresses on Tiger Lane span 300 to 400, and Maryland Avenue addresses span 700 to 900. Ten properties would be affected by the renaming.

City staff received eight letters of support from property owners on the street.

Commissioners briefly discussed the possibility of renaming Tiger Lane to avoid any confusion.

"I don’t think it’d be fair to Tiger Lane to ask them to change," said Commissioner Doug Wheeler, adding that the numeric differences are sufficient. "We have a number of streets around town that are similar."

Commissioner Jeff Barrow said he did not like going against the concerns of Joint Communications.

"I think it’s extremely unlikely that someone will be injured or die from a misaddressed emergency call," Barrow said.
The commission voted unanimously in favor of the request. Commissioner Ann Peters was absent. The request will go before the Columbia City Council at its Sept. 7 meeting.

Reach Daniel Cailler at 573-815-1717 or e-mail djcailler@columbiatribune.com.
School of Medicine expands rural program

By William Lounsbury
August 6, 2010 | 4:41 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — In an effort to improve both the education of students and people's quality of life in rural Missouri, the MU School of Medicine has expanded its Rural Training Program.

The six-month Rural Training Program places third-year medical students in small communities throughout Missouri to study medicine with local medical professionals. The program has been expanded to include Lebanon, West Plains and Maryville. These new training sites will begin hosting students this month.

Twenty-one students are participating in the program, beginning in August, and will be spread among seven Missouri towns; St. Joseph, Rolla, Poplar Bluff, Springfield and the three towns added this year. The new programs will host nine of those students this year. Next year the program hopes to host 35 students total said Kathleen Quinn, Area Health Education Center director.

“We were getting more students interested in rural experiences; to find out what it's like to live and practice in a rural area,” Quinn said.

Begun in 1995, the School of Medicine started the Rural Training Program to increase interest among medical students to practice medicine in small towns. The hope of the program is that students who studied in these small towns might return to practice medicine there after they graduate.

“The University of Missouri is really trying to meet a need of more health professionals in places of need and training them in those communities is the best place to do that,” Quinn said.

Program leaders hope to increase the number of physicians practicing in rural areas where access to trained medical professionals may be scarce. Eighty percent of Missouri counties do not have enough physicians, a problem expected to increase as more baby boomers enter old age, as reported in a previous Missourian article.
The introduction of the program into these new communities is partially funded through a one-time state grant awarded in 2009. The grant helps cover the startup costs of the sites in Lebanon, West Plains and Maryville.

Students who participate in the program are provided with fully furnished housing. To keep in contact with their professors back in Columbia, students are provided with Internet connections and resources to communicate. This is done at no expense to the students.
They are supposed to engage readers in thoughtful debate, but some feel Tribune comments damage community dialogue.

By Janese Silvey

Sunday, August 8, 2010

It’s an online dialogue that brings community banter and private conversations out of coffee shops and homes and onto a broader stage.

But in some cases — the ones that seem to get the most notice — readers’ remarks accompanying online news reports seem more like juvenile bickering among members of a dysfunctional family.

Tribune comments: Anyone can post them. Everyone can read them. And — despite one regular commenter’s claim — rarely, it seems, is enough said.

The Tribune’s online commenting feature debuted early last year, making the site a popular place to express ideas or, perhaps, just vent from behind the safety of a screen name.

The Tribune has more than 15,800 active online users, not including staff members, and those users have posted some 175,000 comments since Feb. 2, 2009.

Andy Waters, the Tribune’s vice president for interactive media, said the comments are accomplishing their original purpose: Readers are expressing opinions, asking thoughtful questions and providing more information to accompany news reports. He knows there are a few bad apples “trolling” the boards to stir up trouble, but “on the whole, there’s a lot of good information that comes out in those comments.”

Regardless of what they think about comments, people — including city leaders — are reading. Tribune comments have been discussed at city meetings and candidate forums and have been joked about at public events.
John Schultz — a prolific commenter who posts using his real name — has even had people come up to him and thank him for sharing his thoughts online.

“People are definitely out there reading the comments, and from that standpoint, when I comment on something, I want to do a good job making my argument and getting the point across without being a jerk,” he said.

First Ward Councilman Paul Sturtz criticized the Tribune’s anonymous comments during a Columbia City Council meeting earlier this year. He’s passionate about it because he fears an anonymous minority is hurting Columbia.

“More than anything in Columbia over the past 15 years, they have coarsened the atmosphere of our city,” he said. “There’s a sense that Columbia is a nice town with lots of kind people, but if you read the Tribune comment pages day after day, you’d start to think this is a very ugly, very petty place to live.”

Most public officials say they’ve learned to filter the comments, mining for the meaningful ones and paying little attention to the rest.

“I look at them with the premise that some of them are not serious, some of them are overreactions and enmeshed in them are some very good analyses and very good thoughts,” Mayor Bob McDavid said. “As long as you’re willing to filter out the comments that are not serious or meant to be cynical, there are some gems in there.”

Although he doesn’t make public decisions or change his mind about an issue based on what commenters are posting, McDavid said he does use the comments to gauge how much interest people have in a topic.

“What’s interesting is that if you post an article and there are 10 comments, that means something, and if you post an article and there are 150 comments, that means something else,” he said. “It’s sort of a heat-measuring device that tells you how hot a topic is.”

The Columbia Police Department keeps an eye on the comments, too, spokeswoman Officer Jessie Haden said.

“I can tell you from talking to our employees — officers and other employees — they do read them,” she said. But Haden said administrators try to encourage them to “keep it in perspective.”

“It’s a small group of people who post,” she said. “Then again, there’s a large readership. So we have to determine what our level of response is in regards to that.”

Sometimes, Haden or other officers will weigh in on online comments, either to answer questions or clear up inaccurate information. The toughest part, Haden said, is when readers familiar with an incident post incorrect statements about what really happened. Because of privacy issues, police can’t always address those allegations.
"It’s frustrating to our employees when people will post things that are not true, yet we’re very limited on what we can say even if we wanted to play on that playground," Haden said. "Comments that are insulting or critical do sting them … especially if people are posting information not accurate, adding insult and criticism on top of it for things that are not true sometimes."

Other public relations people say they rely on comments to show them where information should be clarified. When an explosion occurred inside a lab at Schweitzer Hall on the University of Missouri campus this summer, for instance, MU spokeswoman Mary Jo Banken paid close attention to what Tribune readers were saying.

"That particular time, I intentionally read the comments because I wanted to know what we needed to do from our end to clarify the understanding of what had happened," she said. "It was clear to me we did need to correct some information. … So in that situation, it was very helpful to read those comments."

That’s also how Toni Messina, communications director for the city, views them.

"I approach the comments looking for areas where news reports may not have included all the information that’s appropriate or maybe there’s a misstatement of facts," she said. "Occasionally, if I see a comment that has something similar, maybe a misperception, I will attempt to correct that."

But Messina said she also keeps in mind that the comments represent a small slice of the city and that some people posting online about city issues don’t even live here.

From a news perspective, Tribune comments have helped flesh out stories by giving readers a chance to ask follow-up questions not addressed in a story or by providing more information that a reporter might not have had before deadline.

"People know different angles of a story, or they know people involved in the story" — things sometimes impossible for reporters to otherwise know, general assignment reporter and columnist T.J. Greaney said.

Schultz said that’s one of the primary benefits of having comments.

"You can certainly get information out there not in the news story," he said. "The public can add to the story after the fact."

And although comments sometimes require reporters to swallow their pride, Greaney acknowledged, they “also hold us accountable.”

In some cases, public leaders have been held accountable because of Tribune comments, too. Take, for instance, Officer Robert Fox, who was suspended from the Columbia police force after he posted confidential information about the juvenile record of a man protesting police actions.
The police department doesn’t forbid officers from making comments, Haden said, but they do have to follow other policies, such as keeping certain information confidential.

Comments also became an issue in Columbia City Council races earlier this year. Fourth Ward council candidate Tracy Greever-Rice took some heat for having her comment history deleted by a now-former Tribune information technology employee who did not seek permission from editors to do so.

And Karl Skala became the target of dozens of online attacks he suspects were part of the campaign against him in the Third Ward council race. Although Skala said he read all of the comments, he doesn’t pay a lot of attention to those who hide behind anonymous screen names.

The attacks on council candidates infuriated Sturtz. The comments during the election were “reprehensible,” he said. “I think the Tribune needs to take responsibility for what it’s putting out there, and it’s absolutely not. It’s frustrating.”

Let’s face it: Anonymous comments bring out bullies.

It’s easy to verbally attack or make fun of people for their flawed criminal attempts, their personal appearance or their behavior from the safety of a computer screen name. A reader can be naughty under a fake identity, and no one will know who it was.

For many, including Renee Maxwell, that’s the downside of Tribune comments.

“My biggest gripe is that they tend to be mean-spirited regulars who just like to push buttons,” said Maxwell, who started a Facebook group earlier this year protesting Tribune comments. “I don’t see a lot of productive conversation.”

The Columbia Missourian requires readers who comment online to use their real names. Sturtz said the Tribune should do the same.

“I’m not for limiting debate; I’m against hiding behind an anonymous tag,” he said. “I think we should all be adult enough to stand up in public, in any public forum, and say who we are. That’s what we require of people in city council. You can’t just come in there and come to the microphone and not introduce yourself.”

Although the Tribune’s policy encourages readers to comment under their own names, there are valid reasons to provide an anonymous forum, Waters said.

If anonymous commenting weren’t an option, some people would either opt not to comment or wouldn’t be completely honest about their identity, he said. And information pertinent to a news story might not be offered up if a person was required to give his or her name.
“They could lose their jobs; they could lose their friends. There are a hundred other reasons it’s a bad idea” to require everyone to use their real names, Waters said. “Do we exclude those people from the conversation or let them be part of it?”

The solution, Waters said, is to make sure comments are monitored to keep discussions productive.

But the Tribune’s commenting policy isn’t always clear and requires editors to sometimes make case-by-case judgment calls.

Editors aren’t opposed to rethinking the rules as new situations crop up. The most sweeping change to the comment policy came up last year after the granddaughter of former Missouri basketball coach Norm Stewart died in a car crash. The Tribune allowed comments on stories about accidental deaths before Jennifer Stewart’s accident, but the prominence of the Stewart name put a spotlight on just how nasty anonymous critics could be in tough times.

Since then, comments haven’t been allowed on stories involving people who die in accidents or suicides.

“In that kind of circumstance, we really have more of a responsibility to do no harm,” Managing Editor Jim Robertson said. “Families are in a fragile enough state; we don’t want to do more harm by allowing tough commentary.”

The Tribune also tries to remind readers it’s possible to debate without personally attacking others and asks that readers be courteous. The guidelines, though, have done little to stop online attacks on people who happen to land in Tribune stories and photos.

And readers, it seems, just can’t help themselves from pointing out the flaws of strangers. Case in point: Some Boone County Fair demolition derby participants who happened to attract the attention of Tribune camera lenses last month became targets of virtual bullies eager to laugh at them for the way they looked. Plenty of readers quickly rose to their defense, but not before some personal attacks were posted.

The drivers weren’t the first or last to be publicly berated online. Just last week, a man suspected of assault was criticized not necessarily for his actions but for being overweight.

“The hardest ones are the comments that are not clear violations of policies, but they’re just stupid or inappropriate,” Waters said.

Editors are rethinking comment rules after being questioned for this story, acknowledging that the personal attacks might be a weak spot in the policies. They agreed that the paper has perhaps let too much slide.

Still, deleting comments doesn’t mean deleting a person’s mindset or personal opinions. In fact, some argue that comments allow the uglier side of human nature and Columbia to bubble to the surface, revealing racism, bigotries and ignorance that have always been around.
“It’s eye-opening to see how much bigoted stuff is out there below the surface,” Greaney said. “I don’t know if it’s necessarily a bad thing” for people “to realize that mentality still exists.”

Ultimately, making sure the Tribune comments are a place for meaningful dialogue is up to the readers who post there, and the power to change the overall tenor of comments rests with visitors.

That was the advice a national tech pundit gave on his program last month. Leo Laporte advised a young blogger on his radio show, “The Tech Guy,” to thwart negative commenters by turning the site into a place for thoughtful debate. He compared a comment section to a garden: It needs tending to make sure flowers thrive and weeds don’t take over.

“It needs more than weeding,” Sturtz said, suggesting the Tribune more closely and frequently monitor the comments. “It’s more than weeds; it’s poison that needs to be drained every 10 minutes.”

Getting more thoughtful participants involved is a good idea in theory, Maxwell said, but it’s tougher in practice “because those people are productive citizens who have other things to do with their time,” she said.

Tribune comments might evolve when the newspaper begins charging for online content. In the coming months, readers will have to subscribe for the unlimited access to stories and comments now enjoyed for free. Visitors will still have access to a limited number of stories every month, but they won’t be able to comment without a subscription, Waters said.

Until then, Waters advises those who don’t like comments to simply avoid them.

“When it starts to detract from a story instead of adding to the story, that’s when we will stop doing it,” he said. But right now, “it’s a source of information and also a place where we can really engage people.”

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.

This article was published on page D4 of the Sunday, August 8, 2010 edition of The Columbia
COLUMBIA - For MU grad Claire Baker, a desire to help others has inspired volunteer efforts that have taken her around the world.

Her career goals still aren't concrete, but she loves working with families.

"Whenever people ask what I want to do for a career, I could never name something specifically," she said. "All I could say is that I want to serve and take care of people who aren't given the resources to do that for themselves."

When a friend told her about the Preemptive Love Coalition, which helps children in Iraq receive life-saving heart surgery, Baker jumped at the opportunity to spend the summer as a PLC intern. Now back in Missouri, she finds herself thinking constantly of the children in a war-torn country for whom vital health care is out of reach because of poverty and ethnic and religious tensions.

About Claire Baker

Raised in Austin, Texas, Baker moved to Missouri to attend MU. She graduated in 2007 with a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies, with concentrations in human development and family studies, philosophy and religious studies.

As a student, she recognized a desire to volunteer and help others, a passion strongly influenced by friends, she said.
After graduation, Baker put her education to good use. She spent nine months in Moshi, Tanzania, teaching second grade at a primary school. She also started a health class for the students and worked in a local mother and child clinic assisting with basic medical care.

When she returned to the United States, Baker joined the staff at Covenant House Missouri, working with homeless and at-risk youth at their drop-in center. She taught life skills and health and nutrition classes, continuing a personal campaign to do her part to help keep children in need healthy.

Now 25, she is a teacher's assistant for the Special School District of St. Louis, working with students with special needs in an elementary school. Her teacher's schedule frees up her summers, allowing her to take advantage of opportunities like working with PLC.

"Comparatively, it seemed ridiculous to bum around for the summer when I had an opportunity like this," Baker said.

**About the Preemptive Love Coalition**

According to its website, PLC estimates there are thousands of Iraqi children suffering the effects of heart disease. While the exact cause of the high-rate of heart disease among children is still a subject of speculation, three factors are considered to be major contributors:

- Saddam Hussein's chemical attacks and experiments on the Kurds.
- United Nations sanctions that resulted in corruption and intentional withholding of essential services and led to malnutrition.
- Marriage within extended families.

For the past three years, PLC has been working with Iraqi families to help fund the life-saving surgery so many children need.

Through its mission to provide these surgeries, PLC hopes to facilitate communication among ethnic and religious communities at odds. By sending both Kurdish and Arab children to surgery side by side, and celebrating the children together, PLC hopes to mobilize these groups toward local solutions for their differences.

"Once you have a positive experience or at least a face and a name of a person from a group previously only defined by your own stereotypes, it makes it easier to begin to break the stereotypes down," Baker said.

In using the Anadolu Medical Center in Istanbul, Turkey, for the surgeries, PLC is working to promote cooperation between groups in Turkey and Kurdistan that have long been in conflict.
"Many Kurds know of people who have been killed by Turks and therefore can be quite nervous to take their child into Turkey for surgery," Baker said.

But after witnessing the care and kindness with which the Turkish doctors and nurses work to save the lives of Kurdish children, the parents can take a new story with them back to Iraq — a story of cooperation and kindness rather than racism and fighting, Baker said.

Baker was part of a 10-intern team that tackled a variety of tasks for PLC while in Iraq. Baker's job was to create a curriculum for the self-help groups PLC wanted to start for the mothers of the children involved in their program. The goal was to provide the women with education, spanning topics from heart defects to coping techniques for stress, and to create a sense of community among them.

**Culture shock**

When she first arrived in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, in late May, Baker was surprised by how much quieter Iraqi culture is.

"I never realized how loud American cities and American people are before," she said.

Gender inequality is still present in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, the northern part of the country where PLC is active. Baker said she had to be more reserved in her interactions with the Iraqi people, particularly with the men.

"There are a lot of implications in your actions," she said. As a woman, she had to remember even subtle actions could imply things she didn't mean.

"If we were with our male roommates, we shouldn't be leading conversations with Kurdish men; the male roommates should be," Baker said. "We (women) always sat in the back of taxis and couldn't go to tea shops like the guys could."

Baker said she was not supposed to look a man she didn't know well in the eye or be too forward in conversation, actions that could be construed as disrespectful.

But a reserved demeanor did not mean a lack of kindness.

"It was surprising to see how taken aback we all (the interns) were concerning the huge amount of gracious hospitality the Kurdish people have," Baker said. "It showed how unusual it is in American culture to serve one another."
Baker encountered such hospitality while visiting the family of Mohammad Star, a 10-year-old boy who had surgery last November. Mohammad and his family live in a village in the mountains of Kurdistan.

"His family's home reminded me of 'Swiss Family Robinson' and involved climbing a tiny, winding staircase made of clay and dirt to enter," Baker said.

Though the language barrier didn't allow her to verbally communicate with the Star family, Baker felt an amazing amount of warmth.

"It's different because their graciousness is shown through quiet actions instead of words," she said. "There was a sincerity I have never seen before."

**Collaborative funding and medical missions**

According to its website, PLC is able to facilitate the heart surgeries at a cost 60 to 70 percent below market prices. Partnerships with Atlasjet Airlines and the Anadolu Medical Center allow PLC to keep the cost of surgery to about $5,000, including airfare for the child and a parent.

PLC takes a unique approach to funding surgeries, asking both the family and Iraqi businesses and charities to contribute toward the cost of a child's surgery. Remaining expenses are covered through donations and the sale of Klash, hand-knit shoes made by local Iraqis according to fair trade principles.

PLC works hard to be transparent with how it spends money, even providing on its website a download of its most recent IRS Form 990 showing annual financial information.

"When someone gives to PLC, there is a tangible difference that is made," Baker said. "A child is allowed to live a healthier life, a family gets to keep their son or daughter, and there is cooperation between communities that are often times told they are each other's enemy."

Donors can contribute to a child's surgery, then track the progress of that child through surgery and after he or she returns home on PLC's blog.

In addition to continuing to send children to Istanbul for surgery, PLC is sponsoring Remedy Mission Aug. 14-28. It will bring an international pediatric heart surgery team to Iraq, making surgeries even more affordable by eliminating travel costs. The goal is to provide 30 children with surgery while simultaneously providing much needed on-the-job training for local Iraqi doctors.

**More than a single story**
After her time in Iraqi Kurdistan, Baker emphasizes the importance of looking beyond the single story of a situation.

"We often hear a single story about Iraq and usually that story is one of war," she said.

However, there are many other stories of Iraq. The people are gracious and welcoming, and many children suffer from life-threatening heart defects with little hope of receiving the treatment they need because of economic factors and ethnic prejudices.

Baker said her experience has encouraged her to be more open-minded.

"Now, when faced with something I am unfamiliar with or something I don't agree with, I would rather be curious, ask questions and listen before anything else," she said.