

Kerrie, Pavlik, and Steve

Mourning Three Classmates, the Class of 1992 Created a Fitting Memorial The Kuzmier-Lee-Nikitine Endowment Fund

by Lisa M. Dellwo

Karen Kirchof remembers vividly the phone call she received from the State Department one autumn day in 1992. “They wanted Kerrie Kuzmier’s emergency contact information,” recalls the assistant dean for career services. “I was shaken to the core; I knew something bad had taken place.”

Something had: Kerrie and her friend, Pavlik Nikitine, both recent graduates of the Duke MEM program, had died when their small plane crashed in a Costa Rican rain forest.

Kerrie and Pavlik’s fellow students were still reeling from this shock when a third classmate, Steven Lee, died of leukemia in December 1992.

“It was a tough year,” says Kevin Molloy, another member of the class of 1992 who is a scientist with the consulting firm Camp Dresser McKee.

Nikki Grober-Dunsmore, now a marine ecologist with the Virgin Islands Biosphere Reserve, recalls, “We all came together for a ceremony and stayed at Kevin’s house in Mystic, Conn. Our nerves were raw, our dreams seemed confused.”

They mourned the loss of their friends, but they also mourned the loss of their friends’ dreams and ambitions. Kerrie was working after graduation to integrate ecotourism with environmental preservation in Costa Rica. Pavlik was helping Wildlife Conservation International manage a wildlife preserve in Bolivia. Steve had been a Peace Corps forestry extensionist in Paraguay and hoped to continue working in international development. They were idealistic and they wanted to change the world. They had come to the Nicholas School to gain the tools and professional knowledge they needed to realize their ambitions. And then their lives were cut short.

“They had done all this work,” Molloy says. “And it was just lost.” First at the weekend in Connecticut and then at the subsequent

Field Day, the class of 1992 searched for a way to memorialize Kerrie, Pavlik and Steve. They decided to enable other students to continue the work their classmates had begun.

And so the Kuzmier-Lee-Nikitine (KLN) Endowment Fund was born. Working with the school’s development

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office, the recent graduates raised money for an endowment that would allow Duke MEM and doctoral students to pursue internships working in conservation and sustainable development in Latin America or developing countries. Most of the early donors were the students themselves and the families of their deceased classmates.

The internship is one of the cornerstones of the MEM/MF experience at Duke. It provides practical experience valued by employers, it usually generates the student’s master’s project, and it often leads to professional contracts for permanent employment and future collaborations. But internships are often low- or non-paying. Every year since 1993, grants from the KLN Fund have made it possible for two or three Nicholas School students to accept such summer internships by defraying travel, lodging and equipment costs. Although the grants are primarily awarded to MEM and MF students, doctoral students also are eligible.

It wasn’t enough for Kerrie, Pavlik, and Steve’s classmates to memorialize them by raising the money for this fund. “They told us, ‘We want to be involved,’” says Karen Kirchof, whose Career Services Office oversees all internships.

And involved they are. A core group of about 15 alumni, most of them from the

class of 1992, form an advisory group that reads applications and makes recommendations. Every two years, three of the group rotate into a role in which they manage the review process and act as liaisons between the advisory committee and the staff at the Nicholas School.

“Each year when we review those proposals, we talk, we reflect, we remember why we got into conservation in the first place,” says Grober-Dunsmore.

The group recently completed a fundraising campaign that brought the endowment up to a healthy \$100,000, ensuring that Kerrie, Pavlik, and Steve’s work will be continued by Nicholas School students for years to come.

This transformative gift to the Nicholas School came about because of the untimely deaths of three promising young adults. Their classmates, who have given so generously of their time and money, have received a different sort of gift. While other classes graduate, move away, get jobs, start families, and gradually lose touch, these members of the class of 1992 have remained tightly connected. Karen Kirchof watched it happen. “Out of their need to memorialize their friends, they became an unusually close-knit group, professionally and personally,” she says.

And that deep connection, lasting now almost 20 years, is perhaps the greatest legacy of their deceased friends.

To contribute to the KLN Endowment Fund or to establish an endowment fund, contact Susan Berndt, associate dean for external affairs, at 919-613-8019 or susan.berndt@duke.edu. Information is online at www.nicholas.duke.edu/career/current/kln.html.



from left to right: Kerrie, Pavlik (in white hat), Kerrie and Pavlik at a game of tug-of-war
from left to right: photos courtesy of Jamey Gerlaugh, Hudson Slay, and Sam Fernald