



## Scenes From My Fulbright Year

By Jessica Harper

I look out my bedroom window each morning and see the sun beaming, the birds singing, the endless mountain ranges, fields of lemon trees and olive trees, and smell the salt from the nearby beach. It couldn't get any better than this. I'm in paradise—also known as Greece. On September 15, 2008, I arrived here to start my nine-month adventure with a United States Fulbright Fellowship.

**I remember the day I found out about the Fulbright Fellowship program.** It was another typical night as a UIC student—studying for the multiple exams, quizzes and reports due the next day!



*Opposite page—Top: Harper visits the Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion, Greece on a weekend of sightseeing. Bottom: Harper teaching English to one of her students as a volunteer at the Varkiza Elementary School.*

*This page—Harper enjoying her work in the Stem Cell Biology laboratory of Dr. Eumorphia Remboutsika at the Alexander Fleming Biomedical Sciences Research Center in Athens, Greece.*



I received another one of those endless mass emails sent by the UIC Honors College. Before I hit the delete button, the headline “research in a foreign country” caught my eye. I went to the website to learn more about Fulbright and I immediately knew this prestigious scholarship was something I wanted to do. By aiming to increase the mutual understanding and cooperation between students of the United States and other countries, this scholarship allows anyone who has received their bachelor's degree to do any type of research in any country of choice. Stem cell research has always fascinated me and Greece was always a country I dreamt of visiting. I did some research and found the laboratory of Dr. Eumorphia Remboutsika at the Alexander Fleming Biomedical Sciences Research Center (BSRC) located in Athens, Greece. After an extensive application, interview, and Greek visa—I am finally here!

In the past few months of living out this dream I have realized that every day of being a Fulbright fellow means another exciting day of learning about science and the Greek culture. My research project takes place at B.S.R.C. Alexander Fleming under the supervision of my host, Dr. Eumorphia Remboutsika. In Dr. Remboutsika's laboratory I work with five PhD students on a gene called Sox2. Only a small amount of information is known about this gene, but past research has shown that Sox2 is a stem cell, pluripotency gene that maintains the self renewal of embryonic stem cells. In other words, an increase in Sox2 levels reverts cells to their embryonic stem cell state. Using mice as the experimental organism, my research analyzes the effects of a conditional by inversion allele that affects the Sox2 gene, which in turn, affects the stem cell fate of cells. So far, I have gained a vast amount of knowledge about lab work and different techniques, and have worked with some amazing technology. For example, I've learned how to use FACS analysis, prepare and run PCR experiments, how to photograph and examine neural stem cells under a microscope, how to dissect embryos, and most importantly, how to think like a scientist. I believe stem cell research is important because in the near future it can lead to therapeutic approaches for diseases in humans.

As a Fulbright fellow, I think it's important to be well-rounded and involved in the community. Therefore, I became a volunteer at the Varkiza Elementary School. Every Thursday I spend two hours with first and second grade Greek children and teach them English. To me, this has been one of the most amazing and rewarding opportunities. Each week I enter the school with English phrases, vocabulary, grammar or games and I leave with hugs and kisses from the students. Nothing is more rewarding than having children who have no knowledge or access to learning English become able to have a con-

versation with me. Not only am I teaching them English, but they have helped me to improve my Greek in the process.

I came here to learn more about science and stem cells, but I also came to learn more about myself and the world around me. Every weekend, I take the time to explore Athens and the town I reside in, Vari. So far, I have seen some amazing sites in Greece—Olympia, Nafplio, Meteora, Corinth, the ancient theatre of Epidauros, the island of Aegina, the Parthenon, and the Temple of Poseidon at Sounion, to name a few. During Christmas break I went on a tour to Egypt where I saw the pyramids of Giza, cruised down the Nile, explored the Luxor temple, and met some great friends from all over the world.

My host, Dr. Remboutsika, has become a friend, mentor, and role model. The first day I arrived in Greece she picked me up from the airport and we went for a swim in the sea and out to a Greek tavern. I think an important part of the Fulbright fellowship is finding a host that is willing to take you in like a family member. I wouldn't have felt so comfortable and at home here in Greece if it wasn't for Dr. Remboutsika.

There is not one day that goes by that I regret my decision to accept the Fulbright Fellowship to Greece. If not for the guidance and support I've received at UIC in the Special Scholarships Program, especially from Beth Powers, this amazing experience would not be possible. Although nothing compares to sweet home Chicago, the thought of leaving Greece soon saddens me. I have made friendships, contacts, and gained knowledge that will last a lifetime and guide my future.

*For more information about Fulbright: [www.iie.org/fulbright](http://www.iie.org/fulbright). The Fulbright Foundation - Greece awards grants to both Greek and U.S. citizens to enable them to study, teach or conduct research in either the U.S. or Greece. For more information see: [www.fulbright.gr](http://www.fulbright.gr). Photos courtesy of Jessica Harper.*