

WAB Alumna Teacher Profile: Jo Sargent

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Jo Sargent in classroom with student

sabbatical breaks to travel and/or teach in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria, Zambia and Yemen.

Eighteen months ago, Jo came to Erbil, Kurdistan in north Iraq to teach at the start up of the Ihsan Dogramci (*phon.:* Doramachi) Bilkent Erbil College. “Another start-up was a very attractive proposition. It’s the same thing we did at WAB,” she said. “Literally, we did the same thing as we did at the beginning of WAB: unloading the lorries and taking out all the boxes. But the 55 degrees Celsius blistering desert heat with no air conditioning, and no San Li Tun around the corner for evening escape, was unfortunately not like WAB at all!”

I met with Jo in her Pre-K classroom of four-year old Kurdish children without a word of English between them. In amazing quietude, obviously content children built towers, colored, read and generally interacted. This period was followed by circle time in which children were encouraged to count the number present and write that number of the board in Roman numbering. “We communicate by doing ‘genuine’ activities such as building, building/constructing, cooking, going outside for walks looking at flowers and bugs – an inquiry based PYP approach with a lot of emphasis on language input.”

The children are not used to problem solving nor explaining their thinking. “The single hardest thing, we teachers all agree on,” says Jo, “is how to help the children with enquiry, to get the wondering out. What are they thinking about when they are unused to explaining themselves?”

The children are attending this school because their parents want something different than the Kurdish National System. “To be honest, the parents don’t know quite what we are doing. We need to work harder with the parent community so they have a clearer understanding, but they do know that their children absolutely love coming to school every day,” she says.

This not-for-profit IB school of 250 students implements PYP with extra emphasis on developing language and teaches Kurdish, Turkish and English with Arabic introduced for the next G3 class. The program is driven from the bottom up with year groups added sequentially in the same way as WAB did in its early days.

Jo Sargent does not require any introduction to many at WAB. She was one of the founding teachers way back in 1994 when the school opened its doors on September 1, 1994 at the factory site.

Ms. Sargent took a multi-year break from WAB, during which time she went to Tanga, Tanzania, as teaching Head and snake catcher, and then on to a school in Maturin, Venezuela. At the Tanga school, she recalled, “There were so many snakes that over time we all became experts, though I never told my colleague that two huge brown and black house snakes were spotted coiling their way through the walls of her house!”

She returned to WAB when we moved to the new campus in 1998. “I guess I’m a change addict with a low boredom threshold,” laughed Jo. This time she stayed for several years teaching Early Childhood and Grade 2, with



Having the luxury of funding from Erbil-born businessman and philanthropist, Ihsan Dogramaci, and sponsored by Bilkent University, this school has already built the space for future students up to High School. WAB most certainly did not have this!

Future plans? “It’s my second year, and I’ll stay another – next year building up a language support department,” says Jo. Given her demonstrated love of a challenge, it perhaps comes as no surprise that her dream is another start-up: a children’s bookshop, using The Bookworm in SanLiTun, Beijing as the model, either in Turkey or in Erbil.

Home for Jo is “Uzumlu” (*eng*: grapes), 20 km north of Fethiye, Turkey. A traditional village cottage she renovated over five years with garden, grapes and fruit trees facing the mountains and next to 2000 year old Lycian tombs. It sounds as if it will be some time before she continues her hobbies of music, jazz, yoga and photography there though.

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