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Student reaches academic peak

FSU's Holly Wissler studies music, culture in mountains of Peru

By Diane Hirth

DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER

She's a woman in pursuit of two loves: music and mountains.

Holly Wissler played classical flute at an Iowa high school, earned two master's degrees in music at the University of Idaho and guided treks for years through the Andes and Himalayans.

Today the Florida State University graduate student lives on soaring mountaintops, 14,000- to 15,000-feet above sea level, recording the music and culture of the Q'eros community of the Quechua indigenous people of Peru.

The people perform songs and rituals for llamas, alpacas, sheep and cows, and "Q'eros' music is communal, so when I witness and participate in communal rituals it is the entire population participating from early adulthood on up," Wissler wrote in an e-mail to the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

"It takes me one day on a bus and a day and a half to walk there over two mountain passes," Wissler said of the journey to the place 100 miles east of the ancient Incan capital of Cusco that Peru's National Institute of Culture calls "the last Incan community."

Her days consist of talking to people about music, recording and singing, and herding alpacas and llamas.

It's not an average way to earn a Ph.D., but Wissler just obtained a fellowship of more than \$24,000 to help her complete her doctoral work. She won the Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad award from the U.S. Department of Education.

"The Q'eros community has become the emblematic culture-bearers of indigenous Andean culture in southeast Peru," Wissler said. "They are known to retain indigenous customs (music, textiles, shamanism) that other Andean communities have lost.

"After having spent 25 years living and working in Peru I wanted to understand Andean culture on a deeper level, live with Quechua people and learn from them. This country, and the mountain people in particular, have given me so much over my life. It is time to give back."

Part of Wissler's adventure was her discovery in 1997 of the academic discipline of ethnomusicology, which involves understanding music in its cultural context.

"Holly Wissler is one of our most distinguished doctoral students. She is a wonderful teacher, an accomplished musician and performer of Andean music, and a great intellect," said Dale Olsen, FSU's Distinguished Research Professor of Ethnomusicology. "She has received praise from Peruvian and American scholars alike."

The most extensive previous recording of Peruvian highlands music was done as far back as 1964 by John Cohen, the folklorist who formed the New Lost City Ramblers band. They met last August in Q'eros, and she said he was thrilled to have her picking up his work and taking it to another level.

The Office of National Fellowships at FSU gave Wissler the best advice possible on obtaining the prestigious fellowship. She had applied once before.

"The quality of her work is outstanding, but the Fulbright Hays is incredibly competitive," said Jody Spooner, fellowships office director. "We worked with her from quite a distance, by e-mail. There always are nuances to the application process."

To pay her way in Peru, Wissler had served as a mountain guide. With a fellowship, "I am now going to be able to do my work full-time," she said. "I feel gratitude. Immense gratitude."

Far away from the flat plains of Iowa, where a girl long ago picked up a flute, Wissler plays the bandurra, a 16-string Andes lute.

"A few people from Q'eros themselves have asked me to document their music as they themselves are seeing the changes and they wish their grandchildren to know of their customs. On a personal level, I cannot refuse such a request."
