

BEN KELCEY, B.S.'01: JUST CALL HIM "THANKS"

By CAROL FLAX

Ben Kelcey, B.S.'01, was the first white person in more than 100 years to come to the remote South African village of Masia, located about 12 hours from Johannesburg near the borders of Mozambique and Zimbabwe. When Kelcey arrived two years ago as a Peace Corps volunteer, the children cried when they saw him or patted him like a dog, trying to decide if he were real or a ghost.

They know now that he is real. In fact, he is an accepted member of the community, speaking their language and participating in their customs. His local name, "Livhuwani," means "thanks"—a tribute to his hard work and dedication to improving the lives of the people of the area in the former republic of Venda.

At UAlbany, Kelcey was an honors math major (with minors in business and teacher education) who earned a 3.54 grade point average while also

winning accolades on the gridiron. In 2000, his senior year, he was the team's most valuable player and also the special teams MVP for the second straight year, earning his fourth varsity letter. Primarily a fullback, the 5-foot-8, 195-pound Kelcey finished his career among the school's top 10 scorers with 120 points. He rushed for 1,103 yards, scored 20 touchdowns, and totaled 54 career tackles and nine blocked kicks. He twice was named to the CoSIDA District I Academic All-America Team.

His math teacher, academic advisor and friend, Professor Ed Thomas, remembers Kelcey as "a real pleasure to have in class...kind of laid back, but always ready to tackle a challenge and see it through to completion."

Kelcey's education provided a foundation to help him meet the many challenges he confronted in his work in South Africa. "UAlbany opened up

worlds that I never knew existed, and expanded my mind to realize that I had potential and ability," he said.

He had plans to go into Marine flight school after graduation. Somehow they got waylaid. "I just wasn't ready to commit, I guess. I still needed time to explore and learn about myself." Many people questioned his motives, wondering if he was running away from something. "I just laughed at that," he says. "I'm not afraid. I just think I've dared to see what's on the other side of the mountain."

The challenges in Venda, a drought-ridden area where poverty is a way of life, were monumental. For the 25-year-old Kelcey, it meant a lifestyle change, devoid of some basics and any luxuries. His diet consisted of worms; spinach; chicken heads and feet; and Pap, a kind of starchy mush, which he admits he learned to like.

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Photo: Courtesy of Ben Kelcey

Ben Kelcey with village children in Masia, South Africa.

He lived with a host family — a "mother" and two "brothers," nine and ten years old. "My South African mom reminded me so much of my mother at home in the U.S.," he says. "Both are wonderful and inspiring, work hard and love their kids."

His South African mother consoled him through the homesickness, helped to put things in perspective and treated him like her own son. His "brothers" are up and coming computer gurus, who learned English and who were generous with their hugs when they knew Kelcey needed them.

Kelcey, from the Buffalo suburb of West Seneca, came to the community to be a teacher trainer, specifically for student-centered education in math and science. When the government came through with electricity, he took it upon himself to bring the village into the computer age. He went after grants and local businesses, writing business plans, proposals, applying to the South African board of education for permission to teach computer technology and rallying the locals to help construct a building to house the computer lab once the project was funded.

Soon the money came in and the building went up. As he began teaching teachers how to use computers, he realized there was a natural spin-off in the making, so he developed an initiative that teaches teachers how to use computers, video, television, VCRs and interactive software. The program teaches student-centered education and computer literacy, something Kelcey is now looking into as a possible next career venture. He recently applied to a Ph.D. program at Northwestern University in instructional media design, and is planning to conclude his stay in Masia later this spring.