What now?

For the autumn 2000 edition of Arches, Linda Hunt wrote a story called “A Terrible Beauty” about how her daughter, Krista Hunt-Ausland ’95, and Krista’s husband, Aaron Ausland ’95, had volunteered to work on community development in Bolivia. Their efforts were cut short when the couple was in a bus accident and Krista was killed. In Krista’s memory, the family established The Krista Foundation for Global Citizenship. Linda’s article won a prize for feature writing and is one of the most-read stories we’ve ever published. Here, Aaron updates us on his life and what The Krista Foundation is accomplishing.
Last March, as workers tamped the earth over his wife’s casket, a light rain began to fall on Geoff Chackel ’94 and me. The seven-year battle with a brain tumor had reduced Colleen’s body to a ruined version of the beauty I remembered from her wedding 12 years earlier. As the heavy thud of sod and shovel diffused in the laden air, it occurred to me that, counting today, Geoff and I had seen each other just four times since graduation: two weddings, two funerals. We’d exchanged the privilege of standing beside one another as we each committed our lives to honor and love two amazing and beautiful women. I’d married Krista Hunt-Ausland ’95 just weeks after her graduation, and Geoff had married Colleen the year after that. Two years later he was by my side to mourn Krista’s death.

Krista and I had gone to Bolivia as service volunteers with the Mennonite Central Committee (MMC). We lived and worked in a remote village of farmer families. Although our one-room house of mud and straw had no water or electricity, it was our first home together, and we loved it. On May 20, 1998, we rode our motorcycle out of the village to a town 30 minutes away, where we boarded a night bus to Santa Cruz, Bolivia’s second-largest city, eight hours away. As it navigated the winding bends of a mountain road, the bus suddenly lurched off the roadway and crashed into a 1,000-foot-deep ravine. Moments later I began a new, mysterious, and most unexpected life without Krista.

Geoff and I turned to walk away from the dismal scene, arms over each other’s shoulders. He asked, “What now?” There is a bleak loneliness in that question. What is simply “tomorrow” for everyone else is to the bereaved a world irrevocably altered by absence. How does one walk forward in a changed world when all he wants is what is irretrievable? I had no immediate answer for him.

For me and Krista’s family and many of our friends, a large part of our answer to “What now?” came in the creation and nurturing of The Krista Foundation for Global Citizenship, which since 1999 has supported 150 young adults in extended volunteer service as “Krista Colleagues.” It has been our way to enrich a world left poorer by Krista’s death, encouraging in others the values and energy that defined her.

The Krista Foundation resists the notion that service is a holding pattern for idealistic young adults unsure of what they want to do next, or something one does in the naïve days before entering the “real” world. If we seldom travel or rarely serve others, it is easier to keep our concept of community small and our circle of empathy drawn tightly around us.

Krista Foundation seeks to enlarge and nurture “habits of the heart” in young people so that hope, service, and community become dominant expressions in their lives. Our work helps them to integrate their service experience into a lifelong ethic of service, civic engagement, and global understanding.

The foundation continues to have strong ties to Puget Sound, which is one of three dozen nominating institutions for the Krista Colleague program in the Western United States. Fifteen of the 150 Krista Colleagues have been UPS graduates, and three of our board members are UPS grads. The interim executive director was Krista’s best friend at Puget Sound, Valerie Campbell Norwood ’95.

When Krista and I decided to commit three years to serving in rural Bolivia, we had a long-term goal in mind. We were both interested in how international economic and social development policy could be applied to increase justice for those who were marginalized and poor. We had been brought up with opportunities that are denied to so many others in the world, and we wanted to use that privilege to give voice to the concerns of the unheard and influence policy on behalf of their interests. But we could not pretend to speak on behalf of those we had not yet truly heard ourselves, so we sold our few possessions and left our families and friends 6,000 miles behind to create our first home in a land we’d never before seen.

“If we seldom travel or rarely serve others, it is easier to keep our concept of community small and our circle of empathy drawn tightly around us.”

Aaron interviews an entrepreneur in Guatemala in the Summer of 2004.
Aaron married Gabriela Moreno Cuéllar in 2002. Their son, Thiago Montana Ausland, was born in 2005.

Although that decision ended tragically for us, I can’t judge it a wrong decision. It was based on principles that she and I believed in deeply, and that hasn’t changed. After Krista’s death I returned to Bolivia to honor the commitments we’d made together. I set up a microfinance program, based on my thesis from UPS on microeconomics and microfinance design for development, that continues today. During the five years I lived in Bolivia, I became mutually indebted with the people my program served, as they participated in my transformation as well. I met Gabriela Moreno Cuéllar, a young woman volunteering in an MCC program serving children who work on the streets of Santa Cruz. She and I were married in 2002. In 2003 we moved to Cambridge, Mass., where I began studies at Harvard’s Kennedy School and received my master’s in public administration in international development. In October 2005 our son, Thiago Montana Ausland, was born.

It is amazing to me how closely and yet how differently my life has followed the original trajectory set out over a decade ago by Krista and me. Our purpose for going to Bolivia has proven enduringly relevant to my life. As I write this, suitcases lie packed next to me. I leave tomorrow for a three-week trip to Ethiopia, where I’ll help a $60 million development program assess its operations. My work has taken me to dozens of countries on five continents. Each time I kiss my family goodbye, we are forced to reassess the purpose of my leaving. We are all too aware of the dangers of working in places like Sri Lanka, Chad, or Colombia. But it is the richness of my life, complete with its pain and loss, the sense of purpose and meaning, and the enduring belief in the principles of global citizenship, that permit me to choose again to engage the world despite what it has cost me in the past. And it is this enduring belief that compels Krista’s family and friends to proactively encourage other young adults to do the same.

Puget Sound and The Krista Foundation for Global Citizenship

Puget Sound graduates helped shape the foundation’s leadership—three board members are UPS grads and the interim executive director, Valerie Campbell Norwood ’95, was Krista’s best friend at the college. Although Puget Sound is just one of three dozen nominating institutions in the Western United Stae, 10 percent of Krista Colleagues have been Puget Sound graduates:

Wake Gregg ’94, Krista Project, Tacoma
Valerie Campbell Norwood ’95, Presbyterian Church USA, Kenya
Jack Brace ’96, Presbyterian Church USA, Kenya
Aaron Ausland ’95, MCC and World Concern, Bolivia
Courtney Hill Cossey ’01, Peace Corps, Senegal
Dede King Knapp ’01, Mercy Ship, Honduras
Seth Farber ’03, AmeriCorps, Tacoma
Kendra Slack Kelley ’01, Peace Corps, Ecuador
Cleo Peterson ’05, AmeriCorps, Seattle
Noah Baskett ’05, AmeriCorps, Tacoma
Trevor Kagochi ’05, AmeriCorps, Tacoma
Nick Bryant ’05, Tierra Nueva, Burlington
Brandon Forester ’07, Peace Corps, Mauritania
Jenny Yu ’07, AmeriCorps, Tacoma
Sarah Jackson ’07, Presbyterian Church, South Africa