ALUMNA EARS DEGREE IN WAR-TORN BEIRUT

BY DAVID C. HENLEY
FOR THE REGISTER

BEIRUT, LEBANON - "It's difficult to comprehend the hazards and dangers that Chapman University alumna Jeanne D'Agostino has encountered here the past two years while pursuing a graduate degree at American University of Beirut.

Beirut is fraught with insecurity and peril from the escalating civil war spilling over into Lebanon from neighboring Syria, according to D'Agostino, who this summer was awarded a master's degree from the school.

The Syrian conflict, which has brought bloody warfare between supporters and enemies of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, throughout Lebanon, has forced this nation's capital city "almost to its knees," says D'Agostino, 25.

Along with internal violence perpetrated by the Lebanese-based Hezbollah terrorist organization, Beirut faces chaos from citywide battles between Sunni and Shiite Muslim religious sects, the nation's political instability and a devastating economic crisis created by a decrease in foreign investments and a total lack of tourists.

Although the university campus is "a comparatively safe haven," it is "always on edge ... an explosion can take place anywhere and anytime," adds D'Agostino.

Stephen Dockey, her American friend and theater reporter for the daily Daily Star, agrees. He said all those studying and working at the university "always have on their mind" the ongoing civil war and theatri- cal activities of a university president, two deans, 20 students and staff members, the kidnapping of another president and 30 faculty (eventually freed) and the bombing and destruction of the university's administration building during the nation's 1975-90 civil war.

Today, residents of Beirut once again are seeing horses and buggies driving along the city's streets. D'Agostino, who lives in a rented apartment near the university, "I am awakened nearly every night by gunfire and the roar of tanks and moved cars and ambulances racing to scenes of violence." The situation has become "impossible," she said. "There is a frequent presence in the streets of Hezbollah and of heavily armed civil- ian gangs.

"Beirut also is plagued with power outages and electricity surges, and with flashlights in hand I often must climb five flights of stairs to reach my room because the elevator and lights aren't working."

Despite these challenges, D'Agostino said, "I must admit I like living in the fast lane. What an exciting life I've been having in Beirut!"

She and her two sisters are the daughters of career Army officers who served together at nearly a dozen posts overseas and in the states.

Her mother and father, retired lieutenant colonels, had several assignments in Europe, including at NATO headquarters in Brussels. The sisters attended public schools in Belgium, learning French and traveling throughout eastern and western Europe.

After high school, D'Agostino enrolled as an undeclared major at Chapman University "because of its national reputation as a quality, small liberal arts school."

D'Agostino then double-majored in peace studies and French with a minor in political science. She spent the summer before her senior year studying Arabic and Mid- dle Eastern and North African history and cultures at the Chapman-affiliated Center for Cross Cultural Learning in Rabat and traveled extensively in North and sub-Saharan Africa.

By the time D'Agostino graduated from Chapman in 2010, she had won several honors such as the Delp Award in Peace Studies and a $20,000 scholarship from Rotary Foundation.

Despite U.S. warnings that Americans "should avoid all travel to Lebanon," D'Agostino's parents and grandmother were here in mid-June when she received her master's degree. Her thesis was titled "Opening a Dialogue about Lebanon's Missing and Disappeared: Victims' Voices in a Post-Civilian Society."

In the days surrounding her commencement ceremony, a half-dozen Shiite men were killed in Beirut street fighting, five people were injured when rockets were fired into the city's south, religious prophets set up roadblocks throughout the city, and the Lebanese military erected razor wire fences and metal barricades around intersections, government buildings and military posts (guarding against the mobs objecting to the cancellation of scheduled summer elections.

D'Agostino's immediate plans include travel to Jor- dan and Africa, followed by a long stay in Brussels, Bel- gium, where her parents live and her father is em- ployed by NATO in a civil- ian administrative post.

She then will return to the U.S. and seek a position at an international "think tank" or nongovernmental organization that specializ- es in peace and conflict is- sues.

"I certainly will visit Chapman when I return to the United States. I have so many wonderful memories of Chapman University ... it is where my interest in Middle Eastern studies began and were nurtured," she said.

David Henley, a Newport Beach resident, is a foreign correspondent and a member of Chapman University's board of trustees.