

Living the high life

MSU grads use talents to help develop
community in mountainous Morocco

BY CAROL SCHMIDT

Local craftsmen employ traditional rammed earth techniques to renovate a 400-year-old igherm, or Moroccan fortified granary. When complete, the igherm will house a library, computer room and community center that will serve a cluster of five villages and 10,000 people in Morocco's remote Central High Atlas region of Zawiya Ahansal.



Just as **Cloe Medina Erickson**, '00 M Arch., has always known that it was her destiny to work in Morocco, **Kris Erickson**, '97 Photo, has known that he was made to climb mountains. The two have found a way to combine their passions by helping villagers restore an ancient building located in a remote and mountainous area of Morocco.

Cloe and Kris Erickson are the principals of Erickson Creative Group, a community development organization based in Livingston, Mont. Erickson Creative is organizing efforts to renovate a very large 400-year-old Moroccan fortified granary, or igherm, into a library and community center for a cluster of five Berber villages.

Last year six MSU architecture students traveled to Morocco to work with Cloe on the renovation of the igherm in Zawiya Ahansal, a remote area of Morocco's central High Atlas Mountains. This year, she hopes to take 10 students to help villagers complete the project.

The Ericksons first saw the igherm in 2003 while on their honeymoon in Moroc-

co. The two had met while students at MSU, she an architecture student from Bigfork, Mont., and he a photography student from Havre, Mont. They didn't start dating until after both had graduated. By then Kris had already made a name for himself as a world-class ski-mountaineer and alpinist and photographer, and Cloe had a successful business.

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For both, coming to MSU was natural.

Kris had lived in Bozeman for a time growing up while his mother, **Joanne Erickson**, '89 EdD, got a doctorate in education at MSU. She is currently interim head of the MSU Department of Education and

program leader of the MSU Ed Leadership Graduate Program.

"I was always an athlete," he said. "I played sports and climbed and skied all my life."

He started out as a landscape design major, but "I was always the one taking photographs, so photography was a natural fit." While in college he became acquainted with Gordon Wiltsie, an adventure photographer based in Bozeman, as well as the late **Alex Lowe**, '88 Math, the MSU graduate who was considered one of the finest climbers of his time.

"Having a guy like Alex Lowe call you by name when you are a 19-year-old climber was a little like having Michael Jordan know your name when you are a playground basketball player," Kris said. The two became colleagues and Erickson was on the expedition in Tibet where Lowe was killed by an avalanche in 1999.

Erickson said at the time he started there weren't a lot of alpinists who were also photographers, so he served a niche. Since then, he has criss-crossed the globe many times, compiling an enviable list of first

Kristoffer Erickson rests at a belay during the first ascent of "La Bas," a 700-meter route in the Taghia Cirque. "La Bas" was the first American route pioneered in the region.



Below left: Cloe Erickson (right) and The North Face athlete Heidi Wirtz (left) enjoy a laugh with local children in the village of Taghia.

Below: Mustapha Jini runs to school with fellow classmates. The Moroccan government only provides a sixth grade education in remote regions such as Zawiya Ahansal.



PHOTOS BY KRISTOFFER ERICKSON

ascents that can be found on his Web site: www.kristoffererickson.com, as well as an impressive portfolio of expedition-based photography. Kris is a sponsored athlete for The North Face, and his photographs are now a staple in adventure magazines including *National Geographic Adventure*, *Climbing*, *Powder* and *Skiing*, among others. Known in mountaineering circles as "the invisible man" because he is usually behind the camera during noted alpine adventures, he is now considered one of the world's finest climbers and alpinists.

Cloe has also had an adventure developing her chosen career as an architectural preservationist. She came to MSU knowing she wanted to be an architect. However, within two years of working for an architecture firm in Bozeman following graduation, Cloe decided she "didn't want to spend the rest of my life designing trophy homes." She quit and built up a successful business making architectural models for area firms. Her new business provided her enough flexibility for her to return to MSU to take classes

in Arabic at the university's prize-winning Arabic language program.

"I wanted to do something...larger," she said. "And, I always knew Morocco was in my destiny. My parents fell in love there, and my middle name, Medina, is a tribute to the country."

She traveled to the Middle East periodically to study Arabic in Morocco, Egypt and Yemen and is now nearly fluent in Modern Standard Arabic. When she and Kris decided to marry, the mountains of Morocco seemed a natural destination for their honeymoon. Before departing they learned about Zawiya Ahansal and the phenomenal climbing in the area from a French climber who had visited the region several times.

"We just fell in love with it," Cloe recalls. "The climbing was amazing, and we were the first Americans to ever climb there." It was on that visit that they first saw the igherm, which looks nothing like Montana granaries.

"It's just such a great building," Kris said. "It's like the castle for the area."

Cloe said the 300-400-year-old fortified granary is located in what is considered a

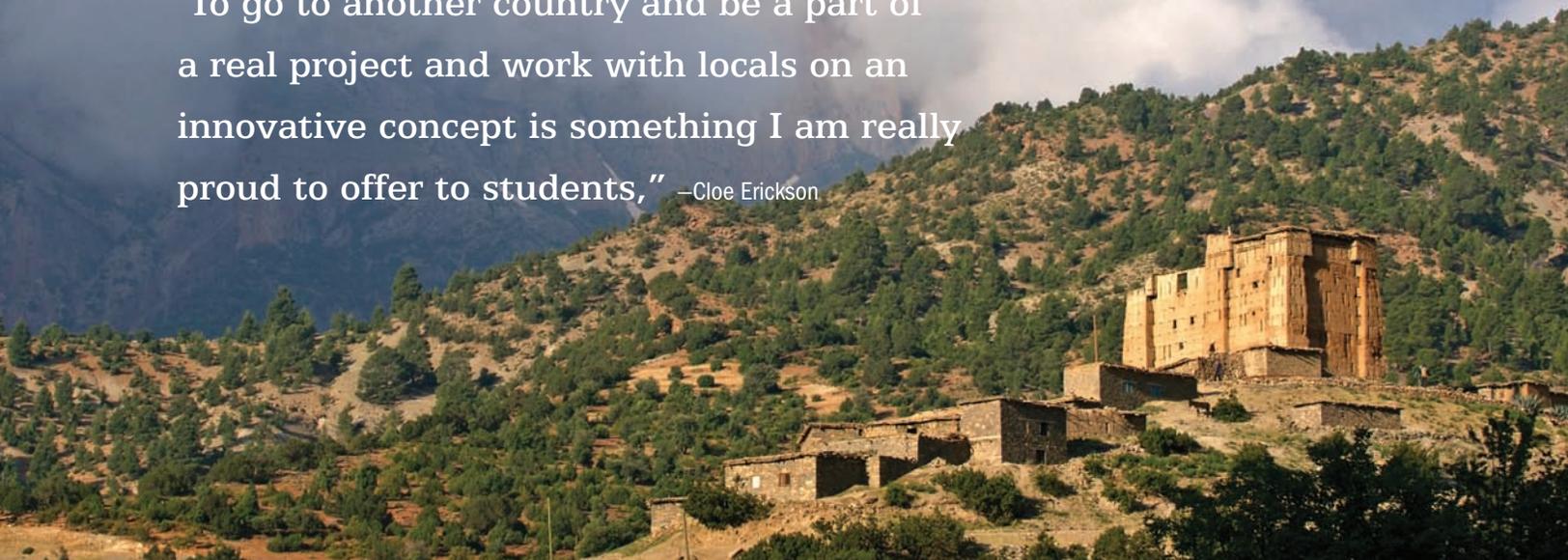
holy village in Morocco. Founded centuries ago by a Muslim saint, the village is on a historic pilgrimage route between Marrakesh and Timbuktu and populated by descendants of the saint. Caravans pass near the remote Berber villages in the area, which are poor and agrarian based.

The Ericksons couldn't get the people, the place or the building out of their minds. Four years ago, from her base in Livingston, Cloe began organizing the Igherm Restoration and Library Project, www.igherm.wordpress.com, working with the people in the villages to develop a project of most benefit to them.

"We decided that we were going to keep going to this place, we needed to do more than just enjoy the natural surroundings there," she said. "Plus, the building had this amazing architecture, and that's my number one passion."

In 2006 Kris convinced The North Face, which supports service projects in mountainous areas, to fund a climbing/social service expedition to the area. Climbers Conrad Anker (a close friend of Kris' who

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The igherm stands as a sentry on the landscape in the village of Amzrai and reflects the region's history, traditions and way of life.

Below: A young woman in the village of Taghia walks home after a day of working in the fields.



The Ericksons, Kris, Cloe and daughter Noor at home in Livingston.

now lives in Bozeman), Heidi Wirtz, Renan Ozturk and Kevin Thaw and Erickson made a first ascent in the Taghia Cirque of Morocco, which is near the igherm, then helped build trails for the herders and helped rebuild the village's school roof. “La Bas: Climbing and Philanthropy in the Enchanted Taghia Cirque, Morocco,” a film by The North Face and Rush HD, is a documentary of that trip. The North Face has hosted benefit showings of the film to fund scholarships for students who wish to accompany the Ericksons.

Last summer Bill Rea, an MSU architecture professor, and six MSU students, and another from Colorado State, worked with Erickson and the villagers on the renovation and lived with local families. Erickson and Rea hope to take another 10 students to work on the project this summer. “To go to another country and be a part of a real project and work with locals on an innovative concept is something I am really proud to offer to students,” Cloe said.

“Working with Cloe has been a pure joy for me,” Rea said. “As a faculty member, she is the type of alum that inspires. She is able to blend her passions into a career while having a positive impact on a community. She is also an eternal optimist, always ready with ‘It’s going to be good’ and you know what she’s always been right.”

Cloe hopes that the renovation of the rammed-earth building will largely be complete this year. Erickson is now helping the community to outfit the library with books

and computers and training the villagers to operate them. The library, which Erickson estimates will be used by about 10,000 Berbers, will be a source of money for the community and for future maintenance of the igherm as travelers will pay a small fee to use the computers and Internet.

“You don’t want to go and just do something for a community,” Erickson said. “It’s important that it becomes their responsibility and the people there really have ownership of the project.”

Recently, there has been another Erickson on the Moroccan project. Year-old Noor, whose name reflects her parents’ love for Morocco, has accompanied Cloe to work on the igherm. “The people there are so family oriented that they just love having Noor there,” Cloe said.

“She is the door that opens for us when we are there,” Kris adds.

Both Ericksons say it is definitely a challenge to schedule time together with two dynamic, globally based careers. But they are careers they both feel fortunate to have developed.

“The work is extremely rewarding,” she said. “You feel like you are living life and just not going through the motions.” 🐾

To learn more about the Ericksons and the work of the Erickson Creative Group, see: www.ericksoncreativegroup.com