

Imagine the excitement and anxiety you would feel leaving home for a year to study abroad in a foreign nation where you knew no one and barely spoke the language. Now, compound those feelings when you contemplate bringing along a young child.

Jennifer Hastings and Lisa Stark—two University of Oklahoma students who also are single mothers—have returned to Oklahoma after a year's study at Blaise Pascal University in Clermont-Ferrand, France. Although the women were not in France at the same time, they share similar memories of life-changing experiences and the warmth of the French people. In particular, they remember a couple who made their experiences in France possible: Jacques and Marie Christine Mondou.

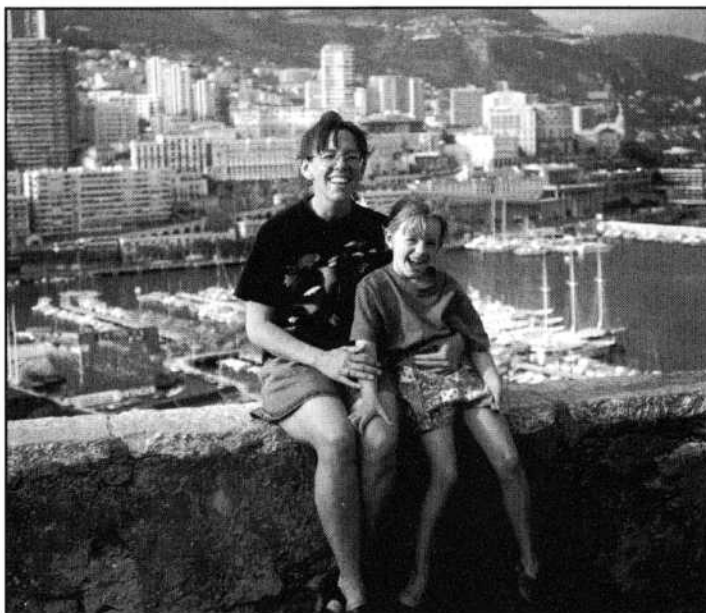
A professor of languages at Blaise Pascal, Jacques Mondou once spent a year teaching the French language to OU students on the Norman campus. He and his wife dedicate a healthy portion of their personal lives to ensuring that OU students venturing across the Atlantic land on their feet.

"I had made up my mind that nothing was keeping me out of France," says Stark, who traveled to Europe with son Kevin Brown, who was then 6. "But the problem with taking a child was that there wasn't anyone to help me find an apartment and get my kid enrolled in school—and you can't get a visa unless your child is enrolled in school.

"If there hadn't been anyone to show me around and help us out, I don't think we could have gone."

OU's Office of International Programs, directed by Millie Audas, prepares students to make the most of their time abroad. The Mondous do their part by easing the transition for students like Hastings and Stark,

welcoming them to Clermont-Ferrand and familiarizing them with the city, which is about three times the size of Norman in metropolitan area population. They also regularly take OU students into their home for weeks at a time, feed them home-cooked meals,



*Jennifer and Elaura Hastings, shown here in Monaco, took advantage of travel opportunities during their study year abroad.*

help them overcome bureaucratic hurdles and find places for them to live, Stark explains.

"They had an itinerary. They woke me up every morning and said something like, 'Today is the day we go to get your phone hooked up.' They were wonderful."

The Mondous helped Stark find an apartment directly across the street from the school where Kevin excelled and came to love his French classmates.

"In the beginning, it was really hard. But by the end, he said, 'You just go back home, and I'm going to live with Alexandre,' his best friend," says Stark, who returned to Oklahoma in June. "Kevin went over there not knowing a word of French. Now, I can hand him any word in French, and he can read it."

When Jennifer Hastings' daughter, Elaura, was told that they would

be moving to France to immerse themselves in intensive French language classes, her response was, "Great. Then we can learn Chinese and Italian."

Hastings remembers that her then-five-year-old child was excited about the new adventure and assumed they would drive to France. Hastings knew the experience would be a bit more complicated—especially for a child—but she, too, was eager to begin.

"Our philosophy has always been that life is an adventure; we always talk about 'beginning new chapters in our book.' There's too much to learn about and explore. If you just sit on your couch and think about it, you're going to miss out. Life is too short to wonder."

When Hastings and her daughter arrived, the Mondous welcomed them to France and made room for the pair in their home. Their hosts taught them French laws, rules and protocol, enrolled Elaura

in school and helped their guests become accustomed to "the whole new concept that you're an American living in France," Hastings says.

"It was a lot of things for a five-year-old to go through," she admits, recalling her daughter's difficulty in adjusting to the French school cuisine, which included veal and rabbit. "But after a month, she just took off and left me behind. The other kids didn't understand what she was saying, but they were like, 'That's okay. Let's go color.' All kids laugh just the same. It's grownups who create language barriers."

Stark, who taught English to junior high and high school students while in France, found French children to be "not the least bit different" from Americans. However, she said, they do have a somewhat skewed perception of American life.

"They think we all have big cars

and are obese. They think we all eat hamburgers every day," she says with a laugh. "I had a student ask me, 'On average, how many times a day do you eat a hamburger?' I thought they were adorable."

Teaching and studying in France gave the Starks a bonus in travel opportunities. Because of the affordability of train passage in Europe, she and Kevin saw parts of England, Spain and Monaco, Nice and Paris.

But both Stark and Hastings most appreciated the chance to know the French people in their daily lives. Hastings adds that every stereotype she had ever heard about French inhospitality "was just wiped away" during her time in Clermont-Ferrand.

"The people in the neighborhood were friendly, helpful and outgoing. Dispelling those myths was a great experience."

Generous and hospitable were the words Stark used to describe her new friends.

"If you're trying to speak French, they'll work with you," she says, adding that the French savor having long-term visitors in their homes and are enthusiastic about exchange students. Stark also observed that the French are a very child-oriented people. She remembers well how touching she found such small gestures as crowds of parents bringing fresh-baked treats for their children at the end of the school day.

The famed French bread also played a central role in one of Hastings' favorite memories: that of frequently racing home with Elaura from the bakery, a baguette, hot from the oven, hugged close under her coat to keep in the warmth. They would charge up the stairs of their apartment, slather the bread with butter and devour it while still standing in the kitchen.

"And the cheese," she remembers longingly. "They say you could eat a



*Marie Christine and Jacques Mondou, left, treat their American visitors, Lisa and Kevin Stark, to a touch of home at a McDonald's in Clermont-Ferrand, France.*

different cheese every day in France. I get nostalgic for cheese."

The French have their own nostalgia for American culture, Stark says, explaining that her students were fascinated with Texas, jazz and American Indians. "The things they want to know about are things that are really authentic American, things that you can't find anywhere else."

Hastings and Stark had numerous opportunities to compare notes on France with fellow Oklahomans and other Americans. The Mondous brought together in their home many of the OU students studying at Blaise Pascal for dinners and to celebrate such holidays as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"Jacques and Marie Christine have a special feeling for OU students," Stark says.

Hastings recalls that the Mondous took a very personal interest in her and Elaura's success in France.

Jacques Mondou took pleasure in monitoring Elaura's progress in French language skills during her time at Clermont-Ferrand and since their return to the United States. "Jacques just gets so proud of her," Hastings said.

Elaura's proficiency came into play on Bastille Day in 1994, as mother and daughter were leaving France. While they were checking in at the airport, a porter caught one of Hastings' bags against the open toe of her sandal, tearing off a toenail. The excruciating pain immobilized Hastings for several moments.

"Elaura took charge," Hastings recounts. Because time was of the essence, the self-confident five-year-old began issuing orders in French to the airline staff for a wheelchair and assistance to the airport medical office.

"I remember being in the doctor's office and the doctor saying about me, 'Does

she speak French?' The porter said, 'No, but the little one speaks it really well.'"

The Hastingses were wished a unique bon voyage from France, with Elaura being lauded as a young hero and Hastings waving to the now-familiar staff from a wheelchair.

Someday, both Stark and Hastings hope to cross the Atlantic again to rediscover France. They also hope that their experiences, coupled with the willingness of people like the Mondous, will encourage other single parents who always have dreamed of studying abroad to seize this chance of a lifetime—both for themselves and their children.

"You're going to have problems and worries wherever you go, whether you stay in Norman or go to another country to learn a language," Hastings insists. "But there are lots of nice people out there, willing to help."

—Anne Barajas