

## RMC PROF HELPS CULTIVATE FREE SPEECH

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BILLINGS – Back from a summer in Sarajevo, Shelby Jo Long-Hammond still wakes up in the middle of the night with “Sniper Alley” on her mind.

Even though the infamous killing zone is quiet 15 years after people were routinely gunned down during the siege that pitted ethnic groups against each other in bloody conflict, the echoes from that time made more poignant Long-Hammond’s participation in the International Debate Education Association’s (IDEA) youth forum in Bosnia and Herzogevnia.

“Since 15 years ago, when people were shot down every day and no one, especially from Serbia or Croatia, could visit the Bosnian Parliament building, there has been a lot of progress, but there are still tensions,” said the Rocky Mountain College professor of communication studies, who also coaches the RMC debate team.

“We were able to walk down that street, but thinking about how recently no one could walk where we did safely was pretty moving,” she said.

Long-Hammond was one of a select group of only five debate trainers from the United States chosen to work with the IDEA forum that brought 300 students from 35 different countries to learn about free speech and debate.

“I had students from Serbia working with students from Kosovo and there was huge tension because Kosovo had just separated from Serbia. There was intercultural tension with students from Georgia and Kazakstan, also. There is such intense nationalism in these new democracies in eastern Europe and

the former USSR, that it's easy to see how words turned to actual weapons," she said. "That heat is still there."

But, for Long-Hammond, the entire congregation of students from so many different cultures was an opportunity to instill in them the vital necessity of discourse rather than violence as a way to work on problems.

"While I may have worried some nights, that was not a preoccupation because in the training labs, we made so much progress teaching how reason could prevail in finding solutions to issues," she said.

And, she noted, that former forbidden parliament building was where the final debate competition was held this year.

For the Rocky professor and debate coach this was more than a job to train foreign students; it was also an opportunity to forge relationships that will result in opportunities for prospective high school students from Montana.

"These are all high school students who come to the forum, and my participation will help open doors for high school students from our area who might want this great international experience," she said.

One of Long-Hammond's goals is to assemble a team of three area high school students, with a coach (perhaps one of her college debate team's members) to attend next year's forum in the Netherlands.

"I know from my experience in Ireland when I was in college to now, when I take Rocky students to Ireland, that travel and experiencing other cultures is a wonderful part of education. Exposure to other cultures for Montana high school kids certainly would be an advantage for their future education," she said.

For Long-Hammond the international forums are a professional benefit.

"To be chosen is a professional honor and I hope to be able to go to future forums planned in Rwanda and Guatemala. It always gives me a new perspective with application to what I do at Rocky," she said.

IDEA works to promote debate and discourse in newly developing democratic countries, organizing debate activities around the world. Long-

Hammond was selected as a debate trainer for the 15<sup>th</sup> annual IDEA Youth Forum, held this summer in Bosnia and Herogevenia.

“My lab training partner was from Macedonia, so it was truly intercultural educational experience. Just learning new language, and learning how they use English is an experience,” she said.

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