Profile of an Outstanding Queens College Graduate

ERICA LEONG: From Playing Violin and Piano to Teaching English in South Korea as a Fulbright Student Scholar

FLUSHING, NY, May 18, 2012 – Erica Leong is just one of the outstanding students from over 2,500 degree candidates expected to attend the 88th Queens College Commencement ceremony on the campus Quad, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, May 31, at 9 am.

On July 4 Erica Leong, who lives in Massapequa Park, Long Island with her Chinese parents, will leave for South Korea, where she’ll spend the next year teaching English through the prestigious Fulbright Student Program. After six weeks of training in Goesan, Chungcheongbuk-do, Leong, who to date has not traveled farther than Canada, will receive her assignment.

A career in international education was not part of Leong’s future when she enrolled at QC as a music education major, a reasonable choice for someone who played piano and violin. A dictation course made her rethink her path, and she decided to change her major to English. For a year she had no idea what to do – “perhaps go into publishing,” she recalls. Then her business and liberal arts professor encouraged her to consider teaching English as a second language (ESL), an idea that held enormous appeal.

“At an info session for certification in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), I met another Chinese-American woman who told me about AmeriCorps,” the national community service organization, Leong says. She got her TESOL certification in April 2011 and began teaching English to Chinese immigrants at a Chinatown YMCA through a program run by Pace University’s AmeriCorps.

That program ended in December, but the YMCA picked it up, and Leong continued teaching. Interested in learning about other Asian cultures, she accepted an internship at South Asian Youth Action, a nonprofit group in Elmhurst. She also took a semester of Korean at QC. Presumably, her varied background and commitment to ESL helped her stand out amid the thousands of Fulbright applicants.

“I’m really excited, but a little scared about the language barrier,” says Leong, who admits to a weakness in learning foreign languages. (She is less than fluent in Cantonese, her parents’ tongue.) Her Korean skills are likely to improve, however. Under the terms of her Fulbright, she will stay with a host family wherever she is assigned, so she will be immersed in the Korean language and culture around the clock.

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