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Hello,

I am writing to you from Rarotonga, the capital island of the nation of the Cook Islands. The country is made up of 15 small islands spread over a large area of the Pacific West of Tahiti and East of the dateline. Rarotonga has a large central volcanic mountain and a coral reef that rims the island and forms a lagoon. The island is 32 kilometers around and has only 2 roads. There are roughly 10,000 people on the island. The overall population of the Cook Islanders is around 80,000 for the entire country, but the actual population on the islands is much lower. Well under 20,000 live on the islands, with some of them supporting only very small groups of people. Most Cook Islanders live in New Zealand and Australia, where they have moved to find employment. Rarotonga's economy is based on tourism, and the Northern islands support a pearl industry. Some Islanders work long years in order to afford the cost of returning home to see their families.

We start our program here because it is a beautiful place with warm, welcoming people and a rich culture. I also want the students to see this place in preparation for New Zealand. The Maori of New Zealand (Aotearoa) are a part of the Pacific migration of the Polynesian people. Although the climate and land of New Zealand are quite different from small Pacific Islands, the Maori culture has its roots in places like Rarotonga. New Zealand is also a meeting place of many Pacific Islander groups, each with their own cultural identities, mixing in places like Auckland and Wellington.

The students get off the plane and are hit by the heat and humidity, and surrounded by lush vegetation. They arrive at our hotel and find that they will sleep to the sounds of the surf breaking on the reef. Our back deck is right on the lagoon. Flowers, vines, and fruit surround them.

We use Rarotonga to begin our drawing class. The students learned to bind their own sketchbooks before the trip. Here they begin to fill them with drawings that are based in observing people and nature. I feel that you come to understand something differently through the act of drawing. It focuses your thoughts. We will continue this process throughout the trip with their sketchbooks becoming an ongoing record of their experiences.

One of the main things we do here is to begin our observation of nature and ecological issues. Here, that begins with the ocean. Each morning students who wish to may come with me on a sunrise snorkel, seeing the reef in the lagoon as it wakes up. This is a fairly easy place to learn how to snorkel so I try to teach them the skills they will use later when we are on the Great Barrier Reef. I love seeing their excitement as they get comfortable in the water and see the beauty of the reef. They return to the shore saying, "I saw a turtle, a ray...etc." I particularly

enjoy the fact that some of our students were totally new to ocean environments. Some of the students have been certified for diving and they get to go over the reef edge to see the deeper waters, working with experienced divers/teachers.

Here is an overview of students' experiences in Rarotonga:

--They saw a show of Island dancing, giving them some idea of how important traditional dance is in this culture.

--They had an introduction to Island foods-taro, various fish dishes and puddings made from local fruits. They had the best papaya they will ever have.

--They attended a church service where they gained some idea of the importance of religion and spirituality in this community. They saw how the Christian traditions have morphed into Polynesian forms including some beautiful call-and-response songs.

--They walked over the rim of the volcano at the center of the island. On this walk, they were accompanied by a naturalist who explained the plants of the lush forest they were seeing.

--They had a watercolor demonstration from a skilled local artist, Judith Kunzle. They also did figure drawings and portraits of local dancers.

--They met women of the island who make Tivaevae-large beautiful cloth tapestries made for special family occasions. These are rarely seen. The women also taught them how to make their own Tivaevae.

All of this made for a pretty full week. At the same time, they were learning about the sea, and seeing an environment of great beauty. But by far the most important reason to be here is the people of the Island. From the kids to the old folks, to people we met at the Saturday market to the women who work at our hotel or run the nearby corner store-all of them treat us with incredible, genuine kindness and warmth. Kia Orana is the phrase of welcome, but it is much more than words here. I don't describe them in a way that really does them justice. But at home, I would not say that my day-to-day interactions with people leave me feeling any satisfaction or faith in the future. My relationship with people here, both casual and deep, gives me a kind of satisfaction and optimism that means a great deal to me. And, I know that a good deal of this is true for the students as well. Everyone is doing well. My next letter will be from Auckland.

Regards, Fred Hagstrom