

A New York State of Mind

Though mom and dad may have been a little nervous at first, Gail Agas '00 is gaining a college education in the middle of the Big Apple



by Gail Agas

Although I had always dreamt of traveling to the Big Apple, the reality of leaving the home and family I had never left all my life seemed something short of insane.

“Why don’t you stay on the islands?”
“Mom... Manhattan is an island!”
As clever as I thought my retort to be at the time, it took a few more months before Mom and Dad even began to fathom the idea of allowing their only daughter to pursue a college career in New York City.

I’d say it was a few more months of groveling well spent.

Five thousand miles away, and three years later, I still maintain that their letting me go was an accomplishment deserving of a spotlight on “Oprah.” These are parents who once forbid me to go on any school zoo trips after Mom dreamt of a turtle biting off my finger.

Needless to say, deciding to go to college on the East Coast was just as much of a huge step for my parents as it was for me.

The East Coast might as well be China. That’s what my parents thought when I dropped the “exciting” news on them. That’s what I thought when I realized just how few students from my graduating class opted for the 5,000 plus

mileage away from home.

And I guess it shouldn’t have surprised me.

Although I had always dreamt of traveling to the Big Apple, the reality of leaving the home and family I had never left all my life seemed something short of insane. I wavered between the University of Oregon and the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa during the two months before graduation until the fat envelope from New York University delivered my destiny.

“As soon as she told me, I wanted to faint,” said my mom. “She never left Hawai’i for 17 years and

here she was telling me she wanted to go all the way over there.”

For my friend **Rachel Fujita '00**, who had decided on Fordham University in New York City, convincing the parents went a little smoother, especially since she initially opted to go to London for college. “The majority of Hawai’i kids stay closer to home,” she said, “and I just wanted to be more independent and have a better chance of running away to Europe.”

Being able to escape to other continents fueled the least of my own desire to leap across



Gail Agas at Kamehameha (left) and celebrating her first birthday with mom Sandra and dad Federico.

the nation, but the independence factor I certainly embraced. I just had to break through the New York City stereotypes my parents had looming in their heads.

And oh, what a challenge that turned out to be.

Mistake No. 1: Renting a murder-thriller movie, set in New York City. Mom especially enjoyed the scene where the psychotic cab driver/serial killer kidnapped and beat an NYU student before leaving him for the rats. I cursed the man who made that film for three days.

But then I persevered.

I spent weeks researching whatever I could about the city and NYU in order to fuel my ongoing effort to win my parents' approval. Opportunities galore, I said. Fantastic learning experience, I added. And the kicker – "I am following my heart, like you taught me," I said. A few weeks later, my dear mother and father relented on the condition that they would take me up to the city themselves.

And so they did.

"I'm not going to lie – I was terrified when I saw all those tall buildings and all those people," said my mom, "but I guess it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

In a week, the city experience lulled my parents' worries away as I excitedly led them everywhere I could on foot, by subway, or by cab. From the window of my new room, I watched as my parents turned the corner in the back seat of a cab en route to the airport where a plane would take them back home.

Three years later, I am in my third year of study working toward a B.A. in journalism with a minor in law and society, and I can't get enough of this amazing city.

At the heart of the media industry, I've been able to intern for a number of magazines, some of which have helped me to realize a dream of starting my own kid's magazine in the distant future.

I'm not going to lie either – it wasn't smooth sailing as soon as the parents left. I suffered a minor case of homesickness for a few weeks, it

took a few wrong trains to finally figure out the subway system, and I soon discovered that the closest things to Mother Nature in the neighborhood were the patches of grass at Washington Square Park.

Of course, I had never felt so shaken as I had been on Sept. 11. Being little more than a couple of miles away from the World Trade Center as it fell, and watching grief consume a city in the days that followed, I missed home. And yet, as I remember lighting a candle in the middle of a *lei* I had sewn and laid down during a vigil to remember the victims, I don't regret being here one bit.

Sometimes, it pays to take big steps. For me, it meant traveling 5,000 miles away from home to fulfill a dream and realize another. As for my parents, it meant supporting my decision 100 percent even though I know my mother would rather have me on the islands closer to the family.

P.S., Mom. Manhattan is an island.

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Actor Shane West, star of "A Walk to Remember," and Gail Agas pose for the camera during a cover party at Teen People magazine, one of the magazines that Agas has interned with in New York City.