

Owens lands as an Eagle

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NFL, 1, 11C

By Susan Pagan, Reuters

USA TODAY

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 By Robert Hammit, USA TODAY

Education

Graduate makes memorable run for the borders

Author's great escape from Texas took her 'Around the Bloc'

By Tracey Wong Briggs
 USA TODAY

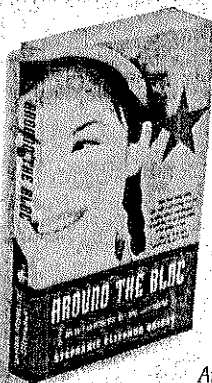
As a high school senior at a student journalism conference in 1992, Stephanie Elizondo Griest asked a globetrotting CNN correspondent how to get a job like his. He had just two words of advice: "Learn Russian."

Half Chicana, half white and all wanderlust, Griest yearned for a way out of Corpus Christi. She took the correspondent's advice and started learning Russian that fall at the University of Texas. She figured that besides fulfilling her foreign language requirement, taking Russian would allow her to avoid Spanish, a language she as-

sociated with all that she wanted to leave behind.

As it turned out, learning Russian did get Griest out of Texas. She was studying Russian at the Moscow Linguistics Institute when she was named to USA TODAY's All-USA College Academic First Team in 1996.

And now Moscow, the first stop in her travels that spanned 21 countries, is also the first section of her new travelogue-memoir, *Around the Bloc: My Life in*



Where are they now?

An occasional feature spotlighting students who were named to USA TODAY's All-USA academic teams in past years.

Moscow, Beijing and Havana, a Villard trade paperback (\$13.95).

Around the Bloc focuses on Griest's year in Moscow, where she fell for a Russian soldier who had escaped Chernobyl cleanup duty by slitting his wrists; on her year fighting Chinese censors as an editor in Beijing; and on her quick jaunt

to Cuba, tagging along with an adventurous friend and dancing with rumba queens.

The book ends with Griest heading back to Texas, understanding that what she really needed to do was work on her Spanish to connect with her Mexican roots.

"The turning point was realizing Stalin, Mao and to a degree Fidel tried to vanquish centuries of religious tradition and ritual by forcing their people to conform to the socialist structure, yet the citizens defied it," says Griest, now 29 and working in New York as spokeswoman for the Youth Free Expression Network, an anti-censorship activist organization.

"I was in a sort of comfortable position, and I just walked away from my culture," she says. "I totally abandoned it to study the

'exotic' world of the East."

Eventually, she came to realize that "knowing Spanish would give me greater intimacy with my people, my family, and ultimately myself."

The book was 11 years in the making, including three years of language study; four years traveling and researching; and four years writing, getting rejected, rewriting and finally selling the manuscript. Griest credits family support and a disciplined work ethic bordering on insanity.

"I completely rewrote the book four times, and wrote nine versions of the proposal. I don't know how many times I was rejected. For whatever reason, rejection doesn't bother me much. I think if someone is willing to put in that much work, things will happen for them."



By Alexander Devola, Villard

iest: Her fears that she'd end up hanging out at the Taco Bell proved unfounded.