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New Clinton school has Cornhusker feel

By MATTHEW HANSEN / Lincoln Journal Star

Bill Clinton's new school is doing infinitely better in Nebraska than the politician ever did.

The two-term Democrat nearly finished third in this state's 1992 presidential voting, got his clock cleaned here by Bob Dole in 1996 and waited until his last year in office to actually visit the Cornhusker state.

But the icy relationship hasn't affected the inaugural class of the Bill Clinton School of Public Service set to open at the University of Arkansas this fall.

Much the opposite, in fact. Two students with Cornhusker connections were handpicked to attend the school, making Nebraska the only state besides Arkansas to have more than one student in the 16-person class.

And the two — University of Nebraska-Lincoln law school graduate Alicia Rosales and Creighton University alum Joseph Ballard — will learn public policy basics from Alan Tomkins, a UNL professor and director of the university's public policy center who's taking a leave of absence to teach at the unique school.

"It certainly has a Nebraska influence," says associate dean Tom Bruce of the Clinton school's first class.

The school Rosales and Ballard will attend seeks to train Americans to lead the world into a globally connected future, Bruce says.

It isn't a public administration school that teaches people the ins and outs of governmental bureaucracy, and it isn't a public policy school that breeds wonks, he says.

This school's classroom is in such places as the impoverished Mississippi Delta, where the students will raise money for community improvement projects of their own design.

It's in various Third World countries, where students will travel to work on such issues as housing reform, provide disaster relief or hitch themselves onto one of Clinton's charity projects already underway.

"This isn't a school of politics with Bill Clinton's name over the door, not a finishing school for people who want to become a governor or senator," Bruce says. "It's really a matter of how you direct things in a global society. How do you bring it all together?"

The school's projects demand students with a desire to help others and an ability to comprehend information they may not have learned during undergraduate work, Bruce says.

Students like Rosales, he says.

The Omaha Burke graduate has a law degree, plenty of public service experience and an interest in diversifying the legal profession. She seems unruffled by the fact that working at a nonprofit organization likely will pay less money than she made working for Qwest Communications after earning her bachelor's degree in 1998.

"I knew I wanted to do something more than paper push," she says.

Rosales stumbled into the Clinton school by accident, learning about it while doing an Internet job search last year.

Her resume n she's worked as a law clerk for the Nebraska Commission on Public Advocacy and served as regional president of the Hispanic Bar Association n pushed her past some 250 other applicants and into the 16-person class.

Her new classmates include a filmmaker from Cameroon, a college professor from Tanzania and Ballard, the Creighton graduate who designed, developed and implemented an after-school program for Sudanese children in Omaha.

"I'm excited about being with 15 other people who are excited about the challenge of solving the problems of the world," Rosales says. "People who are committed to being leaders, not just cogs in the wheel."

The students won't be learning leadership from stiffs. Guest lecturers are expected to include Nelson Mandela, Tony Blair and Madeline Albright.

And the school's namesake has been involved in designing the curriculum and plans to meet with students at least once a month, Bruce says.

"We want to bring the world to these students' doorsteps," he says.

And what do the Clinton school's leaders expect from the students in return?

"Perfection."

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