In late January, Joanna Lewis was given 72 hours to make the biggest decision of her life, whether or not to commit the next two years working as a Water and Sanitation Extensionist for the Peace Corps in Panama. Just three years earlier, Jo began working to bring safe drinking water to a mountain village in Peru as a member and later a project lead for Students Without Borders. After the successes and failures of three site visits to San Pedro de Casta, she clearly recognized the value of sustained integration within a community in order to have the greatest impact. Despite delaying the start to a promising professional career in environmental engineering, she accepted the position, driven by a sense of duty to share her knowledge and experience to make a difference in the world. According to Jo, “It just felt right. I knew I would regret it if I didn’t go for it.”

Coming from Maryland, it was UNH’s differentiated environmental and civil engineering programs that led Jo north to New Hampshire. Her interest in STEM was fostered by family; her mother is a science teacher and her father a systems engineer. In fact, it was her brother who encouraged her to participate in Envirothon, the hands-on environmentally-themed academic competition for high school students. Attending college so far from home, Jo immediately began seeking out opportunities to shape her educational experience at UNH. During her sophomore year, she joined Professor Nancy Kinner’s renowned Coastal Response Research Center (CRRC). Looking back, Jo admits there was some initial hesitation and fear around joining. Luckily she said yes, with Professor Kinner quickly becoming a role model and mentor who currently serves as her academic and senior capstone project advisor. Jo’s advice for other Wildcats is simple, “Say yes! Don’t be afraid to take a risk…just let it happen.”

From the hours spent collecting data on oil spill samples from the Mississippi River in Dr. Kinner’s lab to the weeks spent replacing a water pipeline on her first site visit to Peru, it is the practical and actionable side of engineering that connects deeply with Jo’s desire to make a contribution. However, it was during her third and final site visit to Peru that Jo learned one of the most valuable lessons from her time at UNH. After helping to design a water chlorination system here on campus that could operate without power using Clorox bleach, they returned to San Pedro to install the system only to discover the pipeline they had previously installed had been altered by representatives from the national government. Their water chlorination design would have to be scrapped and a new way forward identified. From this challenging experience, Jo and her team learned a great deal about patience and adapting on the fly. While things may not always proceed as planned, it is important to remain focused on the long-term objective and help ensure the project continues forward in a manner that best serves the local community.

As a member of the UNH Honors Program, a Tau Beta Pi member, and Hamel Scholar with a 3.98 GPA, Jo has clearly excelled in the classroom. Yet beyond all of the academic accolades and awards, it is Jo’s passion for the arts that helps set her apart. A ballet dancer since the age of three, she soon realized there was something missing during her freshman year — time to dance. Despite not being a dance major, Jo developed a special relationship with Professor Assaf Benchetrit from the Theatre and Dance Department, allowing her to continue training and performing whenever possible. For Jo, dancing provides a much needed escape. “Everything else I do is so cerebral. It feels good to move and not think about anything else…I truly feel like I belong in both worlds.”

Professor Kinner recognizes the rarity of a ballet-dancing engineer and admires Jo’s advocacy for both STEM and the arts, “It makes her peers ‘stop and think’ and attend arts functions thereby making their lives richer too!” In the community, Jo serves as a STEMbassador for the College of Engineering & Physical Sciences (CEPS). In this role she travels to schools throughout New Hampshire planning, organizing, and teaching STEM related activities to K-12 students. Serving as a role model for young girls and getting students excited about engineering allows Jo to simply share what she loves to do.

Upon graduation, Jo will begin her Peace Corps service by traveling to Panama to complete an intensive 3-month training program. After her 2-year commitment to the Peace Corps ends, Jo plans to pursue a career as a consulting engineer in water resources that will allow her to continue studying natural systems that have been impaired and how they can be rehabilitated. Jo’s experiences at UNH have taught her a great deal about remaining open to new ideas and opportunities, going with the flow, resilience and community. These lessons will continue to serve her well as her story at UNH comes to a close and the next exciting chapter in her life begins.