

# Why I Want To Be An Economist

BY ANDREA WADDLE

My interest in economics was born from my family's involvement in international development projects. My dad is an electrical engineer. His firm builds energy projects in third-world countries, providing electricity to rural areas. When I was 8 years old we moved to La Paz, Bolivia. Part of the reason why my parents wanted to take the family overseas was so my brothers and I would understand what it means to be truly poor. Poverty is intense in Bolivia. Homelessness is pervasive; children are living on each street corner. Poor in Bolivia means you're probably not going to eat today, and you'll be lucky if you eat tomorrow. We came back to Oak Ridge, Tenn., when I was 12. I returned to Bolivia about every other year, including spending a month working in an orphanage in Caranavi.

Because we grew up overseas, my brothers and I all have an interest in effecting some sort of change. My dad goes out and he really changes people's lives.

Because of his work, households will enjoy electric lighting; shops will have the opportunity to buy and use electric appliances; workshops will be able to use power tools. Because of the disparity I saw firsthand between the lifestyles led in the developed world versus those led in the developing world, I wanted to have an effect on an international scale.

My first economics course at the University of South Carolina was in microeconomics, and it was very tough. Dr. Blackburn, my teacher, is known for being "a weed-out professor." But he held my interest because he kept pushing this idea that all we're doing with economics is trying to understand the world. I love math, but I could never be a pure mathematician because it lacks a human element. Economics uses mathematical tools that I've always liked to explain things about the way people interact and make decisions. Microeconomics was the first class where I really felt challenged in college.

What I came to find here at the Richmond Fed Research Department is a really great intellectual community. People here are making strides toward answering questions that are important. I've been fortunate to work with some people who see it as part of their job to teach me. I've benefited immensely from my work with economist Kartik Athreya. I work hard for him, but I'm repaid for that work because he takes an interest in teaching me to understand the models that we work with, which contributes to my general knowledge in the field. What being

here has taught me is that I can be interested in almost any subfield of economics. I'll probably end up doing something in the growth and development literature because that's where my passion is. But now I'm prepared to look at almost any question that can be addressed by an economist because I can grasp more of the concepts.

That said, there's a lot in economic theory that I don't understand right now. General equilibrium theory, game theory stuff – I don't know much about any of it. But to seriously think through any economic question, I need to. Why is it that the government of Bolivia has decided to expropriate everything and send the nation into chaos? To understand that, as well as the effects of it, I need

to know models of political economy, and to understand political economy I need to have a grasp on game theory. The politicians are making decisions knowing that in some period in the future they are going to have to interact with countries like the United States.

They should know they are hurting their citizenry in some way, so how do they benefit from this decision? I can't make headway into that question until I get my micro-theory shored up.

Economics is mostly a system of approaching problems, a way to think. There is a danger in thinking like an economist, always putting everything in a little box, a model. But to a certain extent, to fully explore questions you need a systematic approach. What I'm excited about in entering a Ph.D. program is getting to figure out how theory shapes our understanding of how things work. I'd like to understand why certain theories seem to pan out while others don't, and right now I don't have all the tools to make that possible. That's what I'm excited about.

A part of me worries that I'll never have the same job satisfaction that I would have if I became an engineer. In economic research, it's a very rare person who gets to make a huge discovery. I know I'm not going to be the next person who comes up with the reason why countries like Bolivia completely stagnate economically. I tell myself not to get discouraged with just adding a piece to that puzzle. Solving the whole puzzle is very hard. But making a contribution, that's also important. **RF**

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**Andrea Waddle** worked the past two years as a research associate at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. This fall she begins graduate studies in economics at the University of Pennsylvania.