Cheyenne Cook knows that classrooms can be unpredictable environments. “You can’t rely on a lesson plan,” she says, “you have to gauge where they’re at and meet their needs.” That philosophy serves Cheyenne well in the Russell Elementary classroom where she volunteers through the Office for Civic Engagement’s K-5 Tutoring Program, but it also sums up her approach to all service, whether at an orphanage in Swaziland, at a hospice in Missoula, or at a Head Start in San Francisco.

Cheyenne fast-tracked her education by completing her first year of college at Flathead Valley Community College while also finishing high school. On a mission trip to Africa in 2010, she witnessed a country ravaged by AIDS and poverty but also discovered her passion for serving others. Once she realized that there’s a major for people who want to help people, she began her bachelor’s in social work at UM.

While Cheyenne has her sights set on returning to Swaziland professionally, she also enjoys travelling wherever service will take her. During her 2014 spring break, she joined the Office for Civic Engagement’s Alternative Breaks trip to San Francisco, where she and 10 other UM students volunteered in early childhood education through the Boys and Girls Club and Head Start.

Currently, Cheyenne is serving her social work practicum at Rocky Mountain Hospice, where she says she enjoys working with a collaborative, interdisciplinary team made up of nurses, counselors, nutritionists, chaplains, and volunteers. “A social worker’s job is to bridge gaps between systems,” she explains; her practicum, like so many of her service experiences, have prepared her well.