



WISER

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I was standing with a group of Form 1 (first year) WISER girls during games one afternoon. We were talking about boys, and about school, and about our families. Then one girl looked at me and said, “Savannah, your people are so bright. Why is God making your people rich and my people poor?”

I would love to sit and have coffee with someone who has a good answer to this question. I know at twenty-two, my spiritual and personal development had not equipped me with an answer. There are various scopes that one can look at this question through—of course, a spiritual perspective, or even a question of privilege, but even through a lens of international development. In that moment, while I looked into her big, brown, questioning eyes, and I had nothing to say. There was not answer I could come up with that made sense for her worldview or for mine. This moment haunts me. I think about it daily, and I am begging myself not to stop thinking about it.

I think back and know that I did it. I completed my project and my trip. Anyone who is close to me knows that finally placing my feet on the soil of the African continent is something I have desired.

I am not sure why I so desperately desired to go, but I spent years researching, asking questions, and figuring out how I could make it happen. I am not sure why a part of me hoped to be made whole by this place, by this experience. I am home now, still feeling as though I am in culture shock at times, and am still not sure what the experience means for me. It is difficult to thread together my time in Kenya into a coherent series of events. In my mind, I think back on my time in themes of things I learned about gender issues, global health, and international development.

Writing the psychosocial program evaluation at WISER gave me a deep insight into the lives of the WISER girls. By conducting interviews, doing home visits, and observing

their everyday lives, I felt as though I became acutely aware of the challenges and obstacles they face. While there are so many things that WISER is doing well to meet the needs of their students, it was also difficult to realize that there are weaknesses that the school will have to improve upon in the future.

During the course of my project, I also began to realize the interconnectedness of global development issues. From education, to health, to infrastructure—the issues and



solutions are all intertwined. It is an important lesson for those interested in international development work. Our generation often has the mindset of taking on and “changing” the world. I come back valuing that passion and desire. However, it is clear to me how complex the worlds’ problems are and always will be. It is not a one person or even one nation task. It requires partnership and creativity and relentless effort.

My area of interest is related to gender issues and female empowerment. This is a tricky area of focus because gender roles and gender identity are culture-specific. Coming into a community with a Western understanding of what female empowerment looks like can be dangerous. I learned about measurable, more universal indicators of how empowerment can be observed. While these indicators give us a loose framework of what empowerment is, it is hard to apply this framework to a community that still values girls less than boys. Another focus of my report on the psychosocial support system was to evaluate whether or not WISER was creating an environment that enables female empowerment. Again, the discussions surrounding empowerment and about what a “gender-safe” and “gender-responsive” environment should look like can be difficult. However, these conversations and efforts are important for the population of students at WISER.

While I was in Kenya the UN adopted the new Sustainable Development Goals. I was able to look at WISER as an organization and identify how it’s already working to meet many of the goals. Again and again, girls and women are central to sustainable development. Empowering and educating girls is the fundamental approach to a better future for developing communities. Living at WISER and seeing these efforts played out first hand was inspiring and eye-opening.

Outside of WISER, I got connected with Senye Primary school. It is a local mixed-gender public primary school whose students feed into WISER. It has the only special education classroom in the entire county. Because my mom teaches special education and I did some diverse learners practicums, I have a deep concern for the students with diverse needs. Unfortunately, there are limited resources and funds to provide proper supports for the students at Senye. There were three students in particular that needed intensive remediation. I worked along side Teacher Johnson, the only trained special education teacher in the county, to try and provide as much support for these students as I could while I was in Muhuru. I had not planned on or prepared for this experience, but it fell into place and worked with my schedule at WISER.



I learned how to be flexible when teaching in a low-resource setting. I understand now that it requires flexibility, creativity, and patience. The special education students at Senye each have specific, differing needs. It is impossible for their teacher to meet them all, as he also has a full day of teaching students without disabilities. Observing this situation made me realize the stark difference in the quality of education between the United States and Kenya. Many students in Kenya need people advocating for them, but students with disabilities often go unseen and unheard.



Some of the greatest experiences of my trip were those that were unplanned (like teaching special education students). I also had the opportunity to be hosted by a family in Kisii, Kenya for one week. I did not know that the WISER girls would go on a two-week holiday half way through my trip. I was not sure what I was going to do with that time until one of the WISER teacher's offered for me to go home with her. For one week of the holiday, I lived with her family in

their village. I felt much more immersed in Kenyan culture as her family took me in as their own. I had never anticipated feeling so welcome and so “at home” during my trip, but this week changed my understanding of what home means. Home can find us, wherever we end up, if we are open to it.

The four months I spent in Kenya are easily the most important months of my personal development. I feel stretched, molded, broken, and rebuilt. However, I would argue that the most critical moment in my Lumos experience is right now. What does this experience mean for my present and for my future? How can I be an agent of change? What do I do with the memories I made, relationships I built, and perspectives I tried on? I am still developing answers to these questions.

