

Jeanette Morelan Lumos Traveler Project Report

Project Development and Application

My Lumos journey began with two important words: “why not?” I was sitting in a Social Entrepreneurship session as a Bruin Recruiter on Preview Day and listening for the dozenth time to Dr. Turner’s explanation of the program and the various opportunities available. As he mentioned the Lumos program, something in me prompted to ask him about the possibility of applying as a junior. The deadline for the first round of applications was in two weeks, but he told me that it was worth giving a shot. I had no idea where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do, but I trusted my gut. The result of the next two weeks of extensive research was a somewhat tenuous plan to work in community development in South Africa. Although I had studied the concept of community development in my time here at Belmont, I wanted to see it in action, especially in a country with such a rich and diverse cultural history. I was unsure of my plan and less sure of my ability to accomplish it, but somehow, the selection committee had faith in my dream. I was notified of my award in January, and the next few months were focused on making that dream a reality.

Organization and Trip Goals

Two weeks before my trip, I learn the organization I was volunteering with, a UK based charity called United Through Sport. The goal of United Through Sport is to empower the youth of impoverished nations by providing them with educational opportunities and sports coaching. The program reaches over 56,000 children per year in Thailand, Ghana, South Africa, St. Lucia, and Argentina. Although I was unfamiliar

with sport coaching, I was excited to get to know my host organization and see their unique take on addressing socioeconomic issues.

After learning more about my organization and speaking with staff, I developed a few goals for my trip. The most significant was to help develop a art program as part of the curriculum for the Junior and Senior School of Excellence. The second goal was to use my blog and writing skills to help bring awareness of the mission and goals of United Through Sport to the rest of the world.

Expectations and Responsibilities

I honestly had no idea what to expect when I arrived in South Africa. I wasn't sure where I would be staying, who I would be volunteering with, or what my actual job would be. I also wasn't sure what South Africa would be like, despite my efforts to learn more about the culture and history. Upon arrival, I was immediately surprised at how close the "regular" city and the "townships" were. I was under the impression that most of the people that South Africa who lived in poverty were remote and isolated, but the reality is, they live in close proximity to some of South Africa's wealthiest, not unlike how certain neighborhoods in Nashville can have huge disparities of wealth. I also didn't expect to be in the minority of American volunteers. Most of the volunteers with United Through Sport were from Europe and had practiced a sport most of their lives. Not only was I exploring a new country, I was also doing so with people who were totally different than I was. This multi-layered cultural experience proved to be one of the most distinct features of my trip.

I coached soccer while I was in South Africa on Wednesdays and Fridays, and taught the remainder of the days. Learning to coach a sport I had hardly played before was quite the learning curve, but I relied on my past leadership experience to help

guide and mentor my students even in an area I didn't know well. I also worked with the other volunteers to make up for my lack of experience. We often coached in pairs, which was really helpful. I had also never taught before, but it's where I fit most naturally. South Africa's education system is incredibly poor, with 80% of high school students unable to pass their matriculation exams. There was also a significant language barrier, especially with the younger students. In order to teach, I had to become a student. Learning parts of the language, what were effective motivators, and how to provide effective discipline were essential lessons I learned as a teacher.

Experiences and Reflection

Even after six months from having been in South Africa, the experience continues to shape and mold me in ways that I never imagined. One of the hardest things about preparing my presentation was being able to verbalize just how much this experience meant to me. Although one of the biggest things I realized is that you don't have to go much further than the next neighborhood over to realize that some of the same issues exist here as they do in South Africa, it gave me new eyes to see issues of poverty and justice. I also realized that the "American Dream" supposedly isn't everything, as many of the people I met were filled with joy and intentionality despite having so little. It caused me to take a hard look at some of my so-called "problems" through a different lens. It also taught me to appreciate the importance of sports—for someone who is a self-proclaimed non-athlete, I really enjoyed coming together around something as simple as a soccer ball.

Being in South Africa has only further inspired my dream to work in community development. I've realized that it is going to take a combined effort from many organizations like United Through Sport and others to overcome the systematic

oppression and barriers to opportunity that are present in so many developing countries. I have decided to someday pursue a joint master's degree in Business Administration and International Development, and look forward to returning to South Africa with even bigger dreams in mind.

Even though I've returned from my trip, I continue to be involved with United Through Sport. They are starting an office in Chicago which I am assisting with, and was even offered a future position working in South Africa as either a teaching coordinator or outreach coordinator. I could not be more grateful to the Lumos Foundation for providing me with an opportunity that will continue to impact my life.