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Cape Town, South Africa

To Seeing the World— My Time in Cape Town

Summing up my experience...

My experience in South Africa was heavy to say the least— heavy with joy, heartbreak, frustration, sometimes fear and defeat, but nevertheless an experience that will never leave my mind and heart. I have been back for about 4 months now, and there truly isn't a day that goes by here in America that the repercussions of my experience in Cape Town don't come rushing back into my mind and my heart in one way or another. I am much more emotional now— quick to cry and laugh, at times slow to speak, sometimes quick to anger. The things I saw and experienced, the people, sounds, smells, and images imprinted on the walls of my mind have changed my irrevocably. There is no way to un-remember the grief and joy that so simultaneously flood my soul when I think about my experience in Africa.

I've said to many people since my arrival back in the states, "I had seen poverty before." But this was something totally new. Before this trip to South Africa, I had already been to Kenya and Uganda, Mexico and the Dominican Republic for mission work. I'd seen the poor and needy; however, this was something entirely new to me. I thought I understood it. I thought if people were given opportunities, then they will find a way to make a better life for themselves— "All people need is opportunities." And when I thought about how countries got into situations of such abject poverty, I could rationalize and say "Ah, well I guess that's just the way it is." This reasoning changed for me during my time in South Africa. I began to realize that NOTHING in this world is bad or good, proper or improper, poor or rich, right or wrong JUST because "that's just the way it is." There are incalculable reasons as to why things are the way they are, good or bad, but things are never the way they are JUST because "that's the way it is."

Trying to understand the system in South Africa— explaining the way things are because of the way they were— never resonated with me. Once I understood that nothing simply got to be how it is just because, I began to focus less on cause and effects in the system and more on the individuals that make up the system. The complication I faced in that approach tended to be that I was more apt to discount the individual if I continually attempted to understand the system. The more I focused my work on helping people, and meeting the needs of the individual, the more meaningful my work became for me. Although I had an organized outlet to help people through, being the legal office, I found that I was often times able to be more impactful in the lives of people outside of the legal setting.

The Experiences...

In the time I spent there, I was able to check quite a few things off of my bucket list: Petting an adult cheetah, diving with great white sharks, jump from the highest bungee in the world, feed grown elephants, go on a safari, take pictures with lions, surf, go sandboarding, ride an ostrich, climb table mountain and parasail down, eat three pounds of sushi in one sitting for less than 10 bucks, and drive on the left side of the road.

The people I was able to interact with there expanded my entire worldview. I roomed with a total one Swiss girl, a Norwegian, three Brits, two Mexicans, one American, a guy from Germany, five Dutch girls, and one Greek man. The stories and experiences everyone brought with them from their own life and country were shared with one another— perspectives changed and our worlds got just a bit bigger. There were always disagreements, but everyone seemed to have a mutual respect and understanding for one another. Among all the people I lived with, my house mom is the one I will remember most.

As well as many other natives of Cape Town, my host mom, Eleanor, grew up in abject poverty. She had few opportunities and lived in government housing. She worked her way through high school and eventually paid the government in full for her subsidized home. Once she had ownership of the home, she added onto it, building a second room. She began renting out the second room, and with that money she took classes at a local professional school for banking in hopes of getting a real job— making her “a successful woman.” After getting a job at the bank, Eleanor eventually saved up enough money to move out of the subsidized area and into a new home that she believed she could fix up. She held onto the home in the subsidized area and began renting the larger part out to another family. Eleanor retired from the bank 10 years ago and is currently studying to be a teacher with hopes of teaching English in Thailand. Eleanor turned 69 in my time there, and still has great dreams. I spent so many hours staying up late on the porch talking to her about how she did it, how she stuck with it and continued to believe, and how amazing it was that she made a life for herself from nothing. The reason I tell Eleanor’s story now is because she made it. She is an individual who beat the system. She inspired me to recognize that we can’t simply view the world, or parts of it, as just countries, or nations, races or groups, but rather all unique individuals with thoughts and dreams and idiosyncrasies all of their own.

Eleanor, through her story and her influence in my life, as well as so many other volunteers who had come before me, allowed me to see how important one single individual’s life can be. How much influence one person can have simply by being defined by more than just circumstance, and rising above their situation. Because of Eleanor’s hard work, determination, and passion for a better life, she was able to do exactly that for herself, and even pass on some of that blessing to me.

If I were to do another project like this again, my advice would be to not try to change the world— don’t try to overcome the system— simply value every single person you come into contact with. No country is any more meaningful than the individuals that it is made up of. While you can’t necessarily change the world for all, you can certainly change someone’s world.

Pictures from the Trip



One of the amazing schools for young children in the township of Khayelitcha







The originals of Eleanor's volunteers during my stay



Rocking the Daisies 2015 music festival



Such an amazing experience to pet a live cheetah!