Growing up in the United States affords us, as citizens, great opportunity. While it is by no means a perfect or an equal country, it offers its people something that so many other countries around the world seem to lack: hope for a truly better tomorrow. Whether that hope is for getting a good education, finding an engaging career, or simply the ability to provide for one’s family, the United States is a country that is universally driven by hope for the future. However, today there is great civil unrest throughout the country that causes citizens to lose sight of that hope. Heightened racial tensions, increasingly popularized hate rhetoric, and overarching frustration with the American system of government are but a few examples of the things that recurrently plague news headlines. As a political science major deeply impassioned by my studies, I arrived at my senior year feeling utterly extinguished. Despite having strong aspirations toward public service, I was no longer certain how to pursue my goals in service when it constantly seemed that the government was consistently failing its citizens. But then, I moved to Morocco. Anyone who lives abroad for longer than a month can attest to both the challenge and the beauty of embracing culture shock. Particularly in a country like Morocco, where the language, religion, and dress cause a Westerner to stand out like a sore thumb. I could not escape my purpose in Morocco, and thankfully, that was exactly how I was able to find it again.
I built my Lumos project around women’s empowerment as a necessary tenet of sustainable development, and in doing so I had the chance to connect with multiple communities in the city. Alongside my students, I explored significant challenges in gender, generation, and socioeconomic entitlement by creating an open, conversation-driven classroom environment where my students not only exercised their English, but also their abilities in critical thinking as we discussed how change happens. In Morocco, unemployment rates are staggering and the opportunity cost for going to school often means forgoing extra income to help put food on the family table. Needless to say, not all school-age children are able to commit to finishing school when their family needs to eat. Moreover, even college graduates with impressive degrees in engineering and economics were forced to take jobs in manual labor just to work. These were complicated subject matters to begin with, and at the beginning, many of my students felt that things were inevitably going to remain the same, no matter what they did. But by the end, I was able to convince my students that they could change their world both in big ways and in small ways to make a difference.

For example, before going to Morocco, I was asked many questions about my project, but by far the most popular was whether or not Islam oppresses women. In the US, there is a lot of ongoing confusion about Islamic culture. Therefore, finding a way to answer this question truthfully and responsibly became a priority. To do so, I had extensive discussions with both devout and non-religious Moroccan women. And through those conversations, it became clear that while Islam itself is not oppressive, some of the cultural and societal norms it facilitates in an Islamist country like Morocco are. Take for example the hijab, the headscarf a devout Muslim woman wears. She can choose when she wants to start wearing it, but she is obligated by the Quran to commit to wearing it at some point in her life. The hijab represents a woman's commitment to her relationship with God, somewhat akin to wearing a crucifix or a Star of David on a necklace. The hijab itself is not oppressive: it is a religious choice that women are given the freedom to make at any point in their life. Furthermore, Islam as a religion is not particularly discipline-oriented. Therefore, if a woman never wears a hijab, that is simply
between her and God, and not for anyone else to judge. The problem, though, arises when that choice is taken away... Such as a parent deciding for their daughter when they will wear the hijab (despite their daughter's objections) to save face, or a husband demanding that his new wife start wearing a hijab to honor her new marriage, despite never mentioning it before. Or, even more dismal, a woman who only chooses to begin wearing the hijab because she knows it will superficially protect her from the unsettling and incessant jeers she gets from men whenever she is out by herself. All three of these scenarios (all real reasons given from Moroccan women) demonstrate societal pressures that circumvent the beauty of what the hijab is supposed to symbolize in a way that manipulates the woman's choice into questions of honor, loyalty, fidelity, and demand for respect. But that's not all. In a country that enjoys the luxury of close proximity to Europe, the hijab can also pose a problem in reverse. For example, there was a devout woman who has committed to wearing the hijab who was asked to remove it as a condition of her being hired to be seen as "more modern". With unemployment as it is, the woman could not afford to turn down the job. But why must it come at the cost of her religious freedom? The woman in this scenario did take the job, but confessed to feeling so utterly ashamed whenever she saw her friends and family, she did not want to leave her house. It is one thing to never wear the hijab, but it is quite another to remove it after wearing it, which is why she felt so humiliated by the choice her job forced her to make. Though this is but one example, I felt that in initiating these discussions more and more of the women I was talking with were able to recognize aspects of their own culture that needed to change. And who better to change them than themselves?

Inevitably, the conversation often turned toward me with questions about the US. Are Americans really afraid of Muslims? What does Black Lives matter really mean? Do people support Trump because they believe what he believes or because he has a lot of money? As the
only American in the room, and at times the only American my students had experienced, I felt a great deal of pressure to represent my country honestly. I gave transparent answers, distinguished my opinions from fact, and talked about my own frustrations. In doing so, I rediscovered my own passion for pursuing political and societal change, something I had struggled so much with as I fought to finish my studies. This, in turn, revitalized my commitment toward pursuing the Foreign Service, where I can continue to demonstrate the values of empowerment, transparency, and creating dialogue in an international sphere.

Another experience from my travels that was particularly profound for me was deciding to participate in Ramadan. In Islam, Ramadan is a religious holiday where Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset for one whole month. The holiday honors the Islamic principle of fasting, which is intended to help Muslims keep perspective of their own good fortune. As a non-Muslim, Ramadan held a slightly different significance for me than my students. But the unending support and sense of respect I earned in their eyes for participating in Ramadan as a foreigner made the commitment absolutely worth it. By doing this, I became a much more authentic part of the community. One of my students, who describes himself as not particularly religious, wrote a wonderful essay on the importance of the principle of Ramadan for class, and it's all too appropriate to share an excerpt of his interpretation as part of my own justification for participating in Ramadan:

“Because I am hungry and thirsty, I remember my brothers in humanity in Somalia, Djibouti, and everywhere else in the world. I invoke the suffering of these people with my fast. Ramadan is not just a principle of the Islamic religion. Ramadan is like a school to teach the great values of humanity: patience, tolerance, empathy, solidarity, kinship, respect, and forgiveness for our false assumptions about the lives of others.”
I could write pages upon pages detailing out the many epiphanies that characterized my three-month journey in Morocco. But I believe that these two revelations in particular best represent my overall experience as one of constant challenge, learning, and critical but constructively self-evaluation. I am forever grateful for this experience, as it continues to shape my next steps toward further community empowerment. It has given me the confidence to move to China employed as an English teacher in the public school system with another US-based nonprofit, where I will work to improve my abilities in both the Mandarin language and in sustainable development within education. I can only hope that future Lumos travelers also commit to pursuing their projects openly and intentionally, because that is what truly allowed me to be so successful in putting my knowledge, as well as my questions, into action.