

LUMOS REPORT: Kate Wurm

I have officially been back in the US for as long as I was living in India. That is incredibly inconceivable and heart breaking. If the Coronavirus ceased to exist, I would have returned at the end of August, but as life goes, I returned in March. Photo reminders keep popping up on my phone - "One year ago today, you were in Goa, India: click here to see the photos from the day!"
No thank you.

I spent almost 2 years preparing for the experience of living abroad. When I was in the midst of my college student years, I dreamt of not just living abroad, but living abroad in **India** - specifically to work with an organization such as International Justice Mission. When the details were finalized for the move, it was pretty spot on to the definition of a dream coming true.

Of course, I assumed not everything would go according to my expectations - nothing ever goes *exactly* how we planned, and that's expected, but Covid-19? That was a whole new level of unexpected.

But enough about what didn't go right. Let me tell you some of my most favorite things about living in India and working with International Justice Mission.

Everyone was always teasing one other like family as they wisped from their desk to the printer. We started every day as a team in prayer and worship. We had a coffee machine on the 3rd floor. There were always snacks being passed around - everyone was always cooking and baking for one another. (Yes - I gained a few pounds, and I don't regret any of them).

Almost every day, I could hear laughter echo through the open-air staircase that wound from the first floor to the rooftop. We celebrated kite day on that roof. We left our desks for an hour to play with kites, and the best part was that our boss was the one who brought us all kites.

My desk partner, Ronny, was like the brother I never had. The brother who tried to teach me two different Indian languages, the brother who was obsessed with the American cookie Chips Ahoy, the brother who snuck street fruit into the office for me when I had a long day. The brother, who to this day, still sends me recipes to my favorite Indian dishes.

Ronny wasn't the only one who went out of his way to make me feel welcome. People were constantly inviting us to events, church services, lunches, etc. We were teased just like the rest of our large office family. I was even invited to lead worship a few times in our morning gathering.

I assumed that I would become close with my co-workers, but I honestly thought that I wouldn't connect well with the other interns. I thought that there would be competition or miscommunication across the four of us, but I could not have been more wrong in this prediction. Whenever people from home would call and ask how things were going, I would almost always say something along the lines of, "if I didn't have the other interns, I would have come home by now." And I still stand by that statement many months later. Jeshua, Kyla, and Emma, endured some incredibly difficult, hilarious, and awkward moments with me.

My girls, Kyla and Emma. My roommates. They took care of me when I got sick. They combed my hair when I got lice. They made food for me. Protected me on the train when I felt small and scared. They encouraged me when work felt overwhelming. They prayed with me when I missed home.

I wouldn't have wanted to be an intern with anyone other than those four individuals.

I went into this year with the expectation of doing "intern" things - all the odd jobs like filing papers, getting coffee, making deliveries, etc. However, I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of responsibility that was entrusted to me, and not only by my boss, but by my teammates and even co-workers on other teams in the office.

Majority of my work involved writing. Writing press releases, writing pre-event releases, writing excerpts for pamphlets, writing entries on Slack, writing stories. I spent a lot of time sitting at my desk in front of my computer writing, organizing, researching, and emailing.

Covid 19 impacted my year in a multitude of ways, as it did for everyone else I'm sure; but the biggest kick in the butt was an opportunity that was given to me in December, that I never had the chance to follow through on.

A big reason that I chose to live in India, was because it has always been one of my favorite places to take photos. The people, the colors, the architecture. Everything is so photogenic and vibrant, and seeped in stories.

I knew that there were restrictions and confidentiality issues when it came to me holding a camera in India, especially as I was representing IJM. I understood that I wouldn't be going on rescues and working with the local newspapers, but I thought maybe I would get to be a part of a few photoshoots here and there, even on the assisting side of things. That wasn't really a reality for the first few months.

Back to Covid 19 kicking my butt: in December, a staff member from our headquarters office in the U.S. came to visit our office. He was from the communications department, so he spent a lot of time with our team. When I first met him, I naturally overshared about who I was and why I came to India. As I hoped, he picked up on the fact that I was a photographer who was presently constricted to a cubicle and a desktop.

He mentioned that once a year, IJM does a large photoshoot for content gathering purposes. IJM normally outsources professional humanitarian photographers, those with years and years of experience. As we were talking, he began to list all the photographers they worked with - and I knew almost every single name. It didn't surprise me, because the content that IJM produces is of extreme quality, thoughtfulness, and beauty.

As he was being called into a meeting, he turned to me and mentioned that I would most likely be able to tag along for the upcoming photoshoot, considering last year the communications team did. I froze. I don't even remember if I said thank you, I was in shock.

The team normally schedules the photoshoot for some time in Spring, and this year it was scheduled for April. I knew I wouldn't be the one with the camera, but I would get to assist on the photoshoot, and that fact alone brought actual tears to my eyes.

Fast forward to the last week of March when we began working from home. Our boss, the same one who flew kites with us on the roof only a few months prior, made the announcement that we would be working from home due to the Coronavirus case numbers rising. At that point, the numbers in India were fairly low, but it was the responsible thing to do. So, we packed up our things and went home for the weekend, anticipating our first "work from home" week the following Monday.

Things escalated quickly and by the following weekend, I was on a plane heading home. At that point, no one knew the extremity of the virus. *How long would it last? How serious was it? And most importantly, when would we be returning to India?*

The answer to the last question was what we all feared - we wouldn't be coming back.

The possibility of the photoshoot being cancelled didn't even cross my mind until I was about 8 hours into my 16-hour flight home.

Even though I missed out on an incredible opportunity, I wouldn't change one thing about my 6 months in India.

I learned so much about their culture, and specifically with my job, I learned about the culture and reality of modern-day slavery.

Even in the short time that I was there, my mind soaked in every bit of conversation, conference, article, video, etc. about the topic. Being on the communications team put me in direct line with the incoming and outgoing conversions. The first task of my every day involved tracking the mention of slavery or sex trafficking in the local, national, and even international news. It was devastating. The amount of cases that were unresolved, forgotten or just dropped.

IJM does all they can to stand by a survivor from the very beginning of their case until the end - which can be up to 10-15 years. Some girls stay in touch with our team even after their case is officially closed simply because of the relationships developed. IJM is an anti-slavery organization, but each office is unique in its case work. Our office worked specifically with cases of sex-trafficking.

The list of take-aways from my time in India will most likely be growing longer each year as I reminisce and remember the details.

I learned how incredibly important the role of the court system is in cases of sex-trafficking. They need to be present, aware, consistent, and timely. Relationships play a huge part in any form of justice. Relationship from client to social worker, social worker to lawyer, lawyer to police official, police official to NGO, NGO to client's family, client's family to client...the list goes on. If one of these is overlooked or bypassed, it will come into play at some point.

Next to the importance of relationships, is the need for education.

One of the most impressive things to me that I observed in IJM's work was their overwhelming amount of group trainings and education courses each year with all who are involved in the pursuit of justice. I was constantly shocked at the amount of police officials who had no idea modern day slavery existed in India, let alone in their very neighborhood.

It takes a community to pursue justice, no matter what it is you're fighting for or against, it cannot be done alone.

I've already overshared, and I could honestly write twice as much as you have just read, but I understand that not everyone needs to know every detail of my time abroad.

Not many people will understand or empathize to my specific experience of being in India. Each abroad experience is unique. Coming home was hard and coming home earlier than scheduled during a global pandemic was even harder, but I wouldn't exchange that experience just because it was difficult.

I'm still processing everything from my experience, but I can't help but just feel grateful. Thank you IJM for hiring me. Thank you Lumos for providing the resources for me to experience living and working in India. Thank you, mom and dad, for supporting me. Thank you, Kyla and Emma, for befriending me. Thank IJM India for welcoming me into the family. Thank you, thank you, thank you.