

Culture Across Continents

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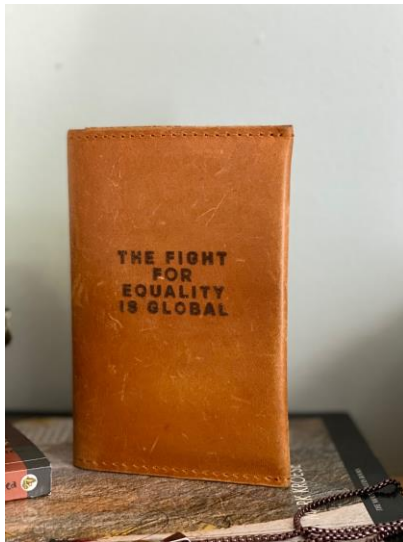
Lumos Travel Award Recipient 2021

Abstract

My social work internship with Lawrence House allowed me the opportunity to experience child and youth care work through the perspective of South African culture. I internalized this professionally by learning to observe and practice the intersection of culture and child welfare policy through intervention procedures practiced within the group facility. Most meaningfully, I engaged in a practice known as Lifespace Intervention, which is a mindful therapeutic practice of using everyday moments as teachable moments and requires the helping professional to often provide a more consistent and guidant role in the youth's life. One of my professional intentions in pursuing this internship was the opportunity to study the implications of culture on the child welfare policies in place. Through conversations and interviews I was able to affirm some of the research that I walked into the internship knowing.

Keywords: Social work, child and youth care work, South Africa, international work

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Initially I hesitated to purchase a passport holder that ruined a perfectly lovely piece of leather with a cheesy quote on it, but the more I internalized it's message the more I was reminded of how similar the work I was doing was to the quote and how, by simply doing what I was doing, I was inevitably reinforcing and advocating for its very message.

Now this passport and this quote serve in tandem as a reminder that I am allowed to advocate for international justice and child care work, even if my home country is also struggling. Professionally, I was able to learn to serve children in a holistic and meaningful way and I'm now able to serve children in America that much better with this experience. I was on a mission to serve, but I was also on a mission to learn- and sometimes that means uprooting where you are, ending up somewhere you never thought you'd be, and experiencing things you never thought you would.

I first heard about the Lumos Travel Award when I was a sophomore at Belmont. I remember sitting at Centennial Park with senior friends who were like mentors to me, and hearing about this grant and the places it could and was taking people. As I began to explore it further, it was then that a desire to work abroad started to emerge. My heart and professional goal had always resided in child and family work, but I never thought it could and would eventually take me out of the country. This wasn't ministry, this wasn't mission work, this was a professional opportunity to help with an innate byproduct of personal growth and development.

My mission felt simple: work with immigrant and refugee children in a therapeutic and familial environment- both, simultaneously. I found however, that there were a few obstacles and they were as follows:

1. I had never worked directly with immigrants and refugees, let alone children.
2. I had never worked in residential child and youth care work, and
3. I had never been to South Africa, let alone the surrounding countries in which these children were from.

I prepared for the culture in South Africa that I would interact with the most. I didn't prepare for having Italian supervisors, an Italian, Catholic overarching NGO and their ideology, children from Zimbabwe, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), et al, and the extent to which the children's trauma would truly impair their functioning when escalated.

To continue a career at home following my graduation could have easily bred complacency and I've always believed that complacency is not conducive to growth and progress, rather the antithesis: to stagnancy and cyclical patterns and routines. In South Africa, I was not allowed to be "stuck" and is one of the many reasons that I will always be grateful and indebted to the Lumos Travel Award for the opportunity it gave me.

Reflection

Anticipatory Thoughts

Choosing to move amidst a global pandemic, political unrest, and period of (attempted) racial reconciliation felt like an obstacle in and of itself- and those were just the current events happening in the United States at the time. I don't believe one can ever fully anticipate the experience of moving and immersing oneself in an entirely new culture, continent, and lifestyle.

I found that it was also often hard to adequately distinguish the difference between missionary work and the Lumos Travel Award when prefacing my travels with "I'm moving to South Africa." What I found subsequently even harder, was the act of actively attempting to justify the meaning of my work outside of a religious context and processing the surge of guilt that inevitably followed. As I prepared logistically for the transition I was making, I was also emotionally and spiritually preparing my personal self and heart of the change that was about to occur.

Experience

Implications of practice across cultures. What was reinforced to me over and over again (and still took so long to internalize and implement into my practice) was that personal wellbeing and advocating for boundaries and space to tend to my person *was* professional. What I learned growing up was that you went to school, to work, to obligations and commitments, regardless of how you were feeling. I remember days when I went to work, not feeling great, and my supervisors would immediately send me home to rest because they wanted the best, most present and engaged parts of me at work, and they knew that wouldn't happen unless I took the time my body needed to rest. I remember days when I would wake up not feeling well, and what was worse than this, was the feeling buried in the pit of my stomach because of the thought of telling

my supervisor I didn't feel well enough to come into work that morning. Each time this occurred, I was met with grace and patience- and very lovingly aggressive aunties telling me to take care of myself. I learned that caring about your teammates' lives only enriched the work environment, teamwork, and joy in relationships with one another.

Daily Professional Experience. My everyday role with the children looks different everyday. Some days I would be developing an educational intervention curriculum and creating an implementation schedule for individual children. Some days I provided supervision while full time staff were in meetings or training (those days were hard). Some days we swam in the swimming pool and played "on" and "Maria cuckoo" until the sun went down. There were days or weeks that maybe felt a little more mundane or stagnant, but most days, something was always different.

What I admired so deeply about the community in Cape Town was their commitment to caring for vulnerable youth to the best of their ability in so many unique ways. Raising a child up at the basic level does mean food, shelter, and clothing- but raising a child should also mean providing children the ability to express themselves, to find something they love to do and to let them explore until they find it. It can also mean signing them up for activities just to get them out of the house and give them space to make friends or a space to process whatever they're feeling. I've witnessed first hand the excitement on the children's faces when they remember that they have an activity that day or that they have to get ready for soccer. I loved the time I got to spend with the children when I walked them to soccer or to a fitness class. I loved greeting our children when they came home from surfing and telling me that they stood on their board and how happy it made them.

Hindsight

The Lumos Travel Award aided in enabling me to experience a culture so different from where I was personally raised and professionally educated and trained. This opportunity allowed

me to practice alternate intervention methods that were rooted in relationships, community, and more often than not, void of the art of "hurry". I believe that I internalized foundational skills of presence and mindfulness both professionally and personally that will allow me to become more present to my clients, deepen the ways in which I relate to my clients while also respecting professional boundaries, and enrich the lives of every person around me. Because of this experience, I am a better listener, relater, empath, and friend and I feel empowered to model these traits to the people around me at work and home to widen the reach of goodness that can emerge when we pause to remind ourselves that we do not have to find goodness to give it and receive, we can simply, be it.