

Lumos Final Project: Alexis Sweeney

13 January 2021. The day I set off to begin a journey to work and live in a foreign country all on my own, filled with excitement, wonder, a dash of nerves, and a whole lot of curiosity. When I left the States that cold winter day, I had no idea what would be in store for me for the next 6 months in Cape Town, South Africa. Sure, I knew where I would be working and where I would be living, but I had no idea the depth in which I would change, shift, and grow while there.

The original plan for my project was that I would be splitting my time. I would work with both School of Hope, a school for at-risk and vulnerable youth, and at another organization that was a home for women who have aged out of foster care. Like many times in life, situations arose that led to me being encouraged to spend 100% of my time with School of Hope. At first, I was upset about not being able to work at the other organization because that was where I felt my passion lied. However, I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason, and with the help of some of my incredible housemates, I was able to dive fully into school social work at School of Hope with a humble and eager heart.

Since I have a professional degree in social work, my internship at School of Hope looked much different than other past volunteers/ interns. Every day I worked side by side with the school social worker, Aby. A woman who is filled with endless kindness and grace, and who pours into her students with everything she has. Together, we held individual therapy sessions with learners, led group therapy sessions, presented educational programs, carried out a mentorship program for matric students (similar to American “senior class”), and supported staff. I also got to help support the school with our daily learner check-in process, lunch break duties, and other needs.

During my project I hoped to learn how to be a better social worker; how to hold therapy sessions for individuals who lived differently than I, how to be truly empathetic even though I had not experienced many of the things my learners had, how to practice bias suspension, how to help individuals even when there is a language barrier, and how to deeply care for clients/learners while holding appropriate boundaries. I was excited to learn all of these things while also learning what social work looks like in another country that functions very differently from the States. While I learned many of those things during my 6 months working in South Africa, most of what taught me to be a better social worker existed outside of those things.

The days I learned the most, seemed to also be the hardest days. It is an interesting position to be in, to be a social worker from the States in a school for at-risk and vulnerable youth in a developing nation. I was constantly checking myself and unpacking complex situations with Aby because I wanted to ensure that I was not participating in white saviorism. White saviorism is something in which many people do not intentionally participate in, but even with a good heart, many white people who serve in non-white, underprivileged areas (especially in developing nations) end up helping individuals for their own personal or emotional gain as opposed to truly asking those they are serving what it is that they need help with. As I intentionally tried to combat this white savior complex, I found it hard to advocate for myself and for social work in general. The biggest lesson I learned while working in South Africa was how to respectfully advocate for the need of social work interventions in situations where many either do not see a

need, or do not see a value in social work. I thankfully had the most amazing coworker, friend, and mentor to help me find that balance of using my skills, knowledge, and gifts to help educate others on the benefits social work brings to the table, and letting them teach me how that can best be used in their current situation, in their community, and in their culture. The most important part to this? Sitting, asking questions, and listening. Letting yourself be wrong and being vulnerable enough to apologize when you accidentally cause hurt. Learning from your mistakes. Constantly being curious as to how you can best help someone in the way THEY need/ want to be helped, not the way you think they need to be helped.

Another major thing I learned was how to not “bring things home.” This is something that many helping professionals struggle with. Before going to South Africa, I thought I was pretty good at this, not perfect, but in the normal range of ability to leave the hard things at work. Well, I learned pretty quickly that I did not have that skill down as much as I wished. Day in and day out I would listen to my learners share their pain, grief, dark moments, and suffering. However, hearing these things in the South African context is very different than hearing them in the American context. Something that was hard for me to hold is that sometimes, there is nothing that can be done to help, because that is sometimes the reality of life in a township in South Africa. Sometimes the government and laws work so hard against a group of people that no matter how much strength, resilience, and determination a person may have, sometimes they are stuck in that place with no way out. And truthfully, the thing people really need in that situation is for someone to help them feel seen and heard, to truly sit with them in their hurt. I could not help but take some of that home at the end of the day. I could not stop myself from constantly brainstorming what we as a social work team could do to help our learners more. Taking every heavy, hard thing and emotion home with me every day led me to being almost emotionless with my housemates and friends, but it seemed almost unfair for me to not take everything with me, it felt like a disservice to my learners. However, one of my housemates helped me realize how much more I could help and empathize with my learners if I practiced separating myself from work once I stepped out the door. He helped me see that I actually will have a greater emotional capacity during the day to care for my learners if I find a way to leave work at work. While it was a hard lesson to learn, it truly changed me for the better both in my professional life and my personal life.

If I am being honest, I learned the most from my community. I lived in an area that had both xpats (people from other countries who relocated to South Africa) and people who were born and raised in South Africa. My neighborhood was called Observatory, or affectionately referred to as Obs. The house I lived in consisted of guys from South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Germany, Palestine, Belgium, and Dominican Republic. Living in a space with not only 8 men (me being the only woman), but 8 men from all different countries taught me more than I could have ever imagined. My favorite part of the entire 6 months was getting to learn from my housemates and other friends by how they live life. What was absolutely incredible was that we were able to dive into conversations together about what different social issues look like in the context of our home countries, and the beauty came in the way we all truly wanted to hear one another and learn what life was like from one another’s perspective. We talked about things from poverty, to women empowerment, to genocide, to healthcare. We also talked about less heavy things like what each person’s home country’s traditional food is like, to what schooling looks like, to how sports and the arts are perceived, to how people celebrate.

One powerful thing that a group of us realized one day was that every single one of our grandfathers had served in WWII. One friend and I even looked at our grandfather's journals/ notes from WWII and realized that our grandfathers had fought on the exact same battlefield on the same day, my grandfather on the Allied Forces and my friend's grandfather on the Axis Alliance. What a heavy thing to realize, but also what an incredible thing to realize. We both sat in amazement at how we got to where we are. We could not stop talking about how far we as a world have come, and even though there is still so much divide, look at us now. Two people from two different countries who in many places have more than a reason to be against each other, living together in community, in Cape Town, South Africa to serve at-risk and vulnerable youth. Absolutely incredible.

To me, those are the moments I learned the most. As I mentioned above, I learned countless things professionally throughout my Lumos Project. But I believe the places where I truly grew and genuinely learned were in those conversations with friends, housemates, and coworkers where we were intentionally curious of what the other person's thoughts, beliefs, and experiences were. I grew into a person who valued connection over productivity, vulnerability over influence, and empathy over image. I fell deeply in love with Ubuntu culture, the idea that I am who I am because of everyone I have interacted with and our community is whole because of who each and every single person is. I learned how valuable conversations are, and how intentional we can be about having authentic connection with everyone we meet, not just our closest friends. Those lessons, those ways of being, have helped change me for the better, which has directly made me a better social worker.

The worth of my time in Cape Town, South Africa cannot be expressed in words. I am endlessly thankful for Lumos providing me the resources to be able to go on a journey to become a better version of myself and help others along the way. A piece of my heart will always be at School of Hope and in Obs. Transitioning back to living in America may be difficult, but I am walking down these sidewalks with a transformed heart and mind, and I cannot wait to see what this next season holds for me.