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“How a Conversation in an Adobe Hut Primary School in Kenya Changed My Life”

Study Abroad Scholarship Essay

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In a place with few actual walls, my proverbial ones crumbled and fell. I was in Africa.

Over the summer I spent 5 weeks touring Kenya learning to speak Kiswahili and adopting new home stay families in different socioeconomic regions of the country. My second stay was in the agricultural region of Kenya in Kakamega which after the national park of the Amboseli was a stark contrast. The difference was like moving from the opening sequence of the Lion King with bounding zebra and stomping elephants, to the commercials on television asking for cents a day to support underprivileged children. Poverty resided here. It couldn't even survive my imagination and here it was reality.

One afternoon there we were invited to be guests of a primary school called KMQ. I didn't know what to expect and upon my arrival it was something I could barely handle. Nothing will unsettle you more than 300 pairs of children's eyes staring from every corner, nook and cranny at the *mzungus* that had walked onto the school grounds and invaded their world. They never stopped staring whether in disbelief, curiosity, confusion, hope, or hate. They simply remained unblinking and unmoving. For the first time you understand what the lone orangutan at the zoo feels like with his back turned to the glass and the stares burning into his back. I was uncomfortable in my own pale skin and so self-conscious I didn't know what to do with myself or how to act normally.

We were escorted into an upperschool classroom where the 300 eyes were condensed to 15 pairs of eyes from the equivalent of our 8th graders. Instead of being blank, the stares were even more intense. These children were intrigued. We introduced ourselves in our most broken Kiswahili and they answered back in perfect English smiling ear to ear with our lame attempts to do as the Romans would do. Nevertheless we continued and joined the class for their lesson that day. I chose to sit next to a girl who had been the most eager to answer all of our questions and when I got up to leave that day I was a different person. How can one conversation change the course of your life? How can one person across the world you would never even know existed if you didn't happen to end up their influence a lifetime of belief systems in one short half an hour?

I was scared at first to talk to Nasha. Like I said, I didn't feel at home here where I was the minority and I was the foreign animal being observed. I was nervous and fumbling for my Kiswahili words. Nasha didn't care if I didn't speak perfect Kiswahili for she spoke better English than I probably do on my best days. She was wearing her school uniform, a red checkered dress, Keds which have seen better days on the old recess field, and had her hair shaved close to her head. She was pinched behind a small wooden desk in this dark mud room and it didn't matter for she was still the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. The school didn't need windows because her smile lit up the room. Her eyes were bright with intelligence and sparkled with humor, something I was totally unprepared for. I consider myself an anthropologist in the making and I was still completely surprised to discover the stereotypes was still holding onto even though here I was in a different world proving them wrong at every turn. Nasha was the embodiment of the pinnacle of that epiphany. She buzzed with excitement and questions, soaking up knowledge of the unknown like a thirsty sponge, dry from containment. She

was never afraid to ask for information she didn't have or hear the answers she may or may not understand. She wanted it all. She ached to educate herself and told me over and over again what she would give to have school supplies, and pass her tests to continue on to their equivalent of a high school. I couldn't believe that I used to really think all Africans were uneducated and satisfied to be so. Nasha was anything but. I got the impression that even if school was not mandatory, these children would still be here with stubs of pencil lead, bare feet, and hungry for more. They will never give up on themselves. How could I be so ignorant? How could I believe those commercials and those archetypes that my western culture had subconsciously embedded in what I thought was my open mind? I expected better of myself and was disappointed at how uncultured I truly was. I learned more in that half hour of school in an African primary class, than I have in my entire educational career.

The best part was, she wasn't even afraid to care. I could never come back, and never write, but she loved me anyway. In that short amount of time she reached out to me and gave me everything she had. She taught me, and loved me and when we left we hugged with tears in our eyes and addresses in hand promising to write as soon as we got home. Currently I am using my position as the president of the greek honor society Order of Omega, to run a school supply drive. Along with the pictures we took that day I will send the package with the supplies back to Nasha and KMQ like I promised. Inside will also be a self addressed stamped envelope containing a disposable camera. My dream is that I will receive it back full of captured surprise and elation that I can record in a scrapbook and pass on to the next president. Hopefully they can make it an annual project and learn from Nasha all that I did that afternoon in Kenya my life changed for all times.

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