

Abstract

During the five-week winter break between the fall and spring semesters (from December 2015 to January 2016), I had the opportunity to travel to Africa to teach mathematics and English as a foreign language. I spent nearly four weeks living in a remote village in Tanzania teaching elementary school and helping the community with building cleanup and planting, since I was there during the main planting season of the year. I arrived in Tanzania with no knowledge of the local language (Swahili) and little knowledge of the culture. I was welcomed into the small village of Pommern (less than four thousand residents) and lived and worked side-by-side with the local people.

Teaching in Tanzania as a Volunteer

Travelling across the world is often a once-in-a-lifetime experience for many, so when I had the opportunity to go to Africa for nearly a month to teach elementary school as a volunteer, I knew that I wanted to share my experience. I found the opportunity to take this life-changing trip from a fellow Millersville student. My hope was that, in sharing my experience, I would motivate someone to go as much as he had motivated me to go. This experience was so meaningful to me because it taught me one lesson above all: perspective. I learned how privileged I was to have a good education and go to college, which so many people across the world are unable to do.

Creative Commentary

I was already giving a talk for the mathematics department about my experience, so knowing that I could share it with even more people at Made in Millersville was wonderful. For my presentation, I gave background about the country and what it took to get there, since it did require forty-eight hours of travel each way, and it is a developing country. Because Tanzania is a developing country, I faced a great deal of culture shock because of the immediate lack of resources at my disposal; Tanzania was ranked at the end of 2015 as the twenty-fifth poorest country in the world, out of 185 ranked countries (Pasquali, 2015). It was important to me that my presentation acknowledged the difficulties that children and families face in such poor conditions. For example, I had to provide all the learning materials, including paper and pencils; students showed up each day to school with no supplies. Prizes for getting perfect scores on quizzes and tests were often a pen or pencil; something at which nearly all students in the United States would scoff. When not in school, children were needed for strenuous work at home, especially at that time of year, because December and January are the planting months. Classrooms in Tanzania are often “standing room only,” because the average student to teacher ratio is 54:1. Each and every child wants to learn, but many do not have the resources or the financial stability to do so. Though part of me expected this, I was still shocked at the number of uneducated children and adults. This was something that resonated with me and I wanted to share with my audience at Made in Millersville.

This trip to Africa was life-changing for me, and demonstrated how fortunate I am in all aspects of life. I learned so much about Tanzania, its culture, and its people, but I also learned about myself. I lived without consistent electricity and no contact with the outside world for four weeks, in a village in which no one knew my name. I had minimal knowledge of the local languages, but I flourished, and I cannot wait to return again soon.