

Anna Swanson  
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“Sooo what do you do with an Africana Studies major?” Without fail, I am confronted with this question almost every time I meet someone new. My go-to answer these days: “well, I’m planning on moving to Africa and saving the world.” A bit sarcastic, but effective. The honest answer is, I don’t really know. All I know is I’ve been really lucky to find something I love studying; Africa and South Africa in particular, and I went with it. I should be a senior this year, graduating in May, but my path has been a bit different.

It started back in my own days in this fine academy. I was one of the exchange students to Australia summer after sophomore year and went to Tanzania with my mom and the other EA kids summer after my junior year. By senior year, to all of the language department’s horror I am sure, I was apparently not content with the regular 3-year single language commitment, but instead was taking French, Spanish, and Mandarin. I had stumbled upon something new and intriguing-traveling and other cultures. My summer’s abroad had broadened my horizons significantly but if anything, left me wanting more. And so I did something a bit unusual, something that almost everyone questioned. But, being my stubborn self, I was convinced it would be worthwhile.

The year after I graduated Episcopal, two of my fellow EA alums, Quinn Libson and Mia Kent, and I decided to travel and volunteer for a year before heading to college. We all went slightly different places, but with a common goal: to learn something about and to experience a larger world. My adventures took me into the jungle of Peru where I worked on a reserve in conservation. Then to a small village near Machu Picchu, where I taught English to middle and high schoolers. Then across the Atlantic into the bush of Botswanan wilderness for another conservation project. To the streets of Cape Town, South Africa, where I worked in a daycare. And, finally, throughout Senegal in West Africa where I taught English to adult learners and French to kindergartners.

In each of these places my situation was a bit different. In the wilderness, working on conservation projects, I lived in volunteer-made cabins, tents, and little

stone shelters with other volunteers from around the globe. In the towns and cities I lived with host families of incredible diversity. They were Christian, Muslim, Peruvian, Senegalese, Cape Tonian, “colored,” African, Andean, French speaking, Spanish speaking and Afrikaans speaking. I met people from all over the world with different stories, backgrounds, and goals. I skydived over Table Mountain, hiked Winu Picchu, swam in piranha-infested water, drove for over 42 hrs total in a 7-person car with no air-conditioning in 106 degree heat. I got my hair braided into 142 braids down to my butt, ate a whole guinea pig, dove with great white sharks, and walked by moonlight only through the African bush. It was an experience of a lifetime.

But most importantly, I learned. Some learning was obvious- nature walks with our leader in the jungle taught me all the complexities about the jungle’s species and how they worked. Cab drivers, host families, and the kids I worked with all helped me improve my Spanish and French constantly correcting me and developing my vocabulary. Tours of historical sites and museums in Cape Town taught me about the nation’s horrifying history of Apartheid and the Civil-rights like movements against it.

But some of the learning was a bit less direct and only evident upon reflection. I had to learn how to be responsible; navigate airports, trains, work assignments, and tricky situations by myself. “Africa time” forced me to learn patience. Being a two hr boat ride from the nearest village with no electricity taught me to enjoy simplicity. In Senegal, where 90% were Muslim and 100% were African, I learned what it felt like to be a minority, constantly being picked out, treated differently, and taken advantage of. It wasn’t always fun and easy. Handling a room full of screaming kids who don’t speak your language by yourself can be a bit intimidating. Having to be picked up and driven from a chosen location because your walking path to work suddenly transitions to an unsafe area can be a bit scary. But I can’t tell you how rewarding it feels to be absolutely exhausted mentally and physically at the end of the day from working and speaking with other people in another language all day. Or the sheer pride you feel when you’ve returned home to

a host mother's approval finally on a price you've bargained down in the market from the "white person price" to the "locals price".

Living with all those different host families and meeting so many people from all over the world constantly forced me to challenge previous ideas. Everyday I learned something about a place, a person, or a part of society I didn't know before. Every day something pushed me out of my comfort zone and forced me to learn something new about myself or about others.

I began to learn and understand parts of the world I never knew and was hooked. I fell in love particularly with South Africa. Its complexities challenged me, its beautiful façade but deep seeded sadness and inequality perplexed me. I wanted to know more, to know the country and its people better. So I vowed to go back.

But first, I returned home and started at the College of William and Mary in Virginia. My first semester I took a Modern History of South Africa class and by the time second semester had come around I was planning my study abroad and had declared myself an Africana Studies major. I dove into South Africa's history, reading novels, Nelson Mandela's biography (which is not short), watched movies, read the news. I wanted my second experience in South Africa to be even more meaningful.

This past semester, as I promised myself, I began at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. By the time I returned, South Africa had earned a very special place in my heart as the most beautiful, inspirational country in Africa. My memories of anything negative from my gap year were quickly shaded over by the images of the "rainbow nation," a place where people had moved so swiftly from the utmost challenge of oppression to freedom, change, democracy and happiness. Of course there were problems, but everyone was so positive! How could it matter?

As soon as I started university I realized how untrue this was. I decided I wanted to get to know the community, or at least a part of it, better than just from a book. I went in search of a volunteer position or internship that would place me in the heart of somewhere different and stumbled upon one through a program called SAEP. There, I met a woman named Indra who asked me if I'd like to help start up a photography program. I jumped on the idea, even though the last time I formally

took photography was in this very school with Mr. Collins. But I thought, hey, how hard can it be?

The first Monday I was driven deep into a township called Phillippi and dropped in a classroom of 7 students with just myself, my camera, and a list of photography vocabulary. The students were all Xhosa speaking (yes, the language with the clicks), but could understand a bit of my English if I spoke slowly. They were between the ages of 17 and 20 and all but one had never worked a camera. They lived in what is called a “township;” what most would call a shanty town or slum consisting of scrap iron houses, dirt roads, stolen electricity, and the occasional port-o-potty. These townships are the remnants of Apartheid. They are the informal housing outside the city where thousands of blacks and “coloureds” were made to live, often by forced removal from their homes closer to the city, by Apartheid laws laying racial claims over certain areas. They went to a school with not a single white person nor anyone of any other tribe or race for that matter, and I was the first American they’d met.

A particular incident stands out in my mind where I realized the importance of our interactions. My students and a bunch of the other art program students had taken a field trip to the National Art Museum in Cape Town to see a photography exhibit. We were waiting outside for the other van to come pick us up afterwards and I started chatting with one of the girls. She asked me what I was doing that weekend and I said I was probably going to Mzoli’s, a restaurant in a black township where you bought your meat at the deli next store, they grilled it, and you ate it with your hands and danced the afternoon away with the DJ. She was amazed that I would be going into a township to eat. She asked me why? I said it was fun. She then asked me, shocked, so you have black friends? Assuming I would only be going to a township with black people. I said yes, I have black and white friends and friends from all over. She then got really quiet for a moment then said, I wish I had a white friend. I don’t know any, except you. Will you be mine? This struck me.

It was interactions like these with my photography students and in my classes at UCT when South Africa crept up on me and began testing my faith in its success. Was it possible for a country with a history of such violence to proceed out

of it with no consequences? How could the country move past the racism when students like my own never even had contact with whites? Why were the students at UCT still so vocal about Apartheid and racism when they hadn't experienced it firsthand and currently lived in a democratic nation? I came home crying more than once feeling ashamed and heart broken at the violence and oppression that was attached with my skin color and the ignorance that was attached with my accent and nationality. I began to question my ability to teach the students photography when what they saw and what I saw in their community were so different. I was frustrated that the country wasn't the positive rainbow nation it once seemed and pessimistic about my ability to change anything.

But always, just when I thought I would give up there were moments of hope. Moments when I bonded with a South African classmate over similar book taste. Times when I was goofing off with my students dancing and laughing even though they could hardly understand the lyrics of my choices and I had no idea what theirs were saying. I know this is going to sound really cliché, but I realized that one of the most important things I could do was exactly as Ghandi said, and be the change I wanted to see in South Africa. It was the little exchanges that showed my students that I was as much their teacher as their equal, the comments and discussions in class where I challenged South African students stereotypes of me as a white American. I may not have solved all the problems of their community, but I did make a change in their world. And that's the thing about creating change- its not always huge, its not always "saving the world" as I say. Sometimes it is just making a positive difference in a few people lives.

There is a quote by Jane Goodall I really like that I think goes along perfectly with the chapel theme. She says, "only if we understand can we care, only if we care will we help, only if we help shall we all be saved." The whole point of me telling you all this is that these experiences in South Africa and on my gap year helped me do this- understand, care, help.

According to Jane's quote the first part of "being a change" and ultimately, helping, is understanding. For some, this is years and years of school, books, lectures, speeches, conferences, and research. For me, this means experiencing and

exploring. It means taking every opportunity you have to challenge yourself, branch out, expand your mind. To leave behind your expectations and biases and look at something in a new way. For me, it meant traveling around the globe learning and experiencing other cultures. However, it also meant beginning to understand myself. Understanding and learning my interests, fears, stereotypes, areas where I needed to improve, and areas where I had developed.

By doing this I have begun and you will begin to care. Beginning to understand the country of South Africa and the situation of most of its population a bit more inspired me. I developed a passion for this place that constantly confused, frustrated and inspired me. This passion was the only way I could help. It drove me to learn more, do more, and not give up. Because I wanted so badly to understand and be a part of the community, I kept working even after I would come home crying feeling judged and belittled just for the color of my skin and accent. And I'd like to think I helped a little. In the end, I did set up a very successful photography program at the school, which will hopefully be working with the Cape Town School of Photography students next year. But, to me, the biggest positive change I made was with the students. I developed a friendship and relationship with them that helped them unravel many stereotypes of race, nationality, and class they had never had to confront before.

If I leave you with one thing today, I want to encourage you to not just "be the change" but first, find it. Learn and experience. This school has so many opportunities available to you all- take advantage of them. Keep searching, don't settle for something you feel average about, find something you're passionate about. If you keep exploring, as I have, your passion may just find you. It's something that challenges you and forces you out of your comfort zone. But at the same time, something that is rewarding and that you feel good about. It's taken me a long time and many experiences to even start to begin to know where my future lies, and trust me, I'm still barely there. But for now, I know where that passion lies and that's enough for me to feel hopeful that I'll make a change somewhere, sometime.