

9 [RESPECT]

TAYLOR JOHNSON

College Degree Program: Regional and City Planning

Study Abroad Program: Uganda



Elephants blocking a vehicle path on the way to Murchison Falls National Park in Uganda. Photo Credit Chris Lê

Shortly after starting my graduate studies in the fall of 2015 at OU in Regional and City Planning, I came across the opportunity to study abroad in Uganda during the summer of 2016. This would be my first trip out of the United States and I am not typically adventurous, so I was nervous for a whole host of reasons. *What if I do not like the food?* I wondered. *Will things be sanitary?* *What if I see or hear things I do not agree with?* I convinced myself, however, that it was at least worth the credits toward my graduate degree, and before I knew it I was in the air on my way to Uganda.

When I landed in Uganda, I quickly became homesick and lonely—did I mention I accidentally scheduled my flight a full day ahead of my professors and classmates? I thought I had made the biggest mistake of my life those first few days, but as my classmates and I got more involved in our project and immersed in the culture, I fell in love with the people, their way of life and what I was learning.

Our project while there was to go to different communities in Northern Uganda and interview them about their water situation. This included where their water source was, how much their household used per day, the negative and positive aspects of their water situation and any improvements that could be made. After the interviews, we walked with people of the communities to locations they felt were important and linked to water. Then, we gave them a camera and asked them to take a picture of what was important about that location. Once we conducted all of our interviews, we took what we heard back to the communities to ensure we got it right, then wrote a report to share with organizations that might be able to help their situations.

Throughout the project, I gained a great deal of respect for Ugandans and their way of life. Most communities were located a fair walking distance (anywhere from 100 feet to half a mile) from the nearest water source—for many, gathering enough water for all their needs could take half



Posing with a hand painted Ugandan flag in Gulu



OU students walking a path to a community's water source in northern Uganda

a day or all day. Walking on their paths and learning about their living situations helped me gain a small understanding of their lives. You would expect someone in this situation to be bitter and angry, but most people were happy with their lives and just loved the opportunity to talk with us. I was blown away with how nice and generous the communities were to me and my classmates.

My respect grew as I listened intently to every word said by a villager. I began to appreciate that what they shared was about their lives, and every word was real and precious. I wanted

those communities to know that their words were not falling on deaf ears. Also, their way of life may not be what I was used to, but I respected them and their outlooks on life. I began to understand and respect how Ugandans lived, realizing that their way of life was not wrong, but just different from what I had previously been exposed to in my bubble in the United States. I would challenge anyone reading this to take a step out of your comfort zone to experience something different, especially other cultures. You will gain a great respect for the diversity you find in those cultures across the globe.