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CRYSTAL NEILL

College Degree Program: Math Education

Study Abroad Program: Uganda

This past summer, I traveled to Gulu, Uganda with the Colleges of Education, Business and Engineering to work at St. Monica's School for Girls. I expected to learn more about teaching in other cultures, to gain a more nuanced understanding of global issues and to see a new country, but I did not expect the relationships I formed there to change me so fundamentally.

St. Monica's has a vocational school and a school of basic learning for women who missed out on education, either due to displacement by conflict or being taken as child soldiers. We lived on campus and were constantly in contact with the women who attended both schools. The first week, I met a girl named Maya in the catering program at the vocational school. She is 19, the same age as me. We're the same size, both incredibly sassy and love to laugh. We have big dreams, and we work hard. I'm still not sure who's more stubborn, but it's probably her. Maya and I formed a strong relationship in just three weeks. We talked about our lives, our families and our preferences. We shared what it was like to live in our countries, the good things and the problems. We laughed about boys and complained about our parents.

Despite our commonalities, we found differences in our realities. As we became more familiar with each other, she opened up about her struggles. My dad doesn't have a second wife, and I don't have to make huge sacrifices to go to college. If I disagree with an adult who has authority, I will not be struck on the cheek. I don't get malaria twice a year. Although her family is middle class, she has to work much harder than I do. She taught me how to do laundry, and I scarred my hands from scrubbing because I'm so spoiled with my washing machine. When she worked in the restaurant or served us dinner, she had to be quiet and submissive. It felt so strange to see the girl who had been laughing at me just a few hours earlier suddenly keeping her head down and not making eye contact. As similar as we are, societal structures still put up barriers between Maya and me. However, through our friendship, I was able to see her perspective on the obstacles she faced and the mistreatment she bore. We broke down these barriers and replaced them with a foundation of empathy.



*Left: Artwork in Ivan's gallery in Gulu's main market. His work spoke to the strength and resilience of Africa.*

*Above: Teachers, students and OU students at the Women's School of Basic Learning. These women are refugees from South Sudan and survivors of the conflict in Uganda. They are deeply committed to learning.*



*Girls from OU and the vocational school enjoying the afternoon together. They loved doing our hair and laughing at our accents.*

Although I had previously felt sympathy for those struggling in Uganda, who I had learned about from reading books and watching videos, actually forming relationships with Ugandans brought me into the deeper dimension of empathy. Maya showed me that we are all more similar than different, that our humanity defines us more than the color of our skin or the hemisphere we live in. The refugee women I worked with, who were determined to get an education in defiance of those who had stolen their childhoods, put faces and strength to the abstract global crisis I could otherwise so easily ignore. The artist at the market, brimming with new business ideas, showed me on his canvases the complex beauty of his culture, how issues and problems are interwoven with lives and cannot simply be yanked out by a passerby.

The last night we were at St. Monica's, some of the OU students and I went into the girls' dorms to spend time with them and say goodbye. We taught them to play truth or dare, and for a while we were all just young women laughing together and sharing our thoughts, dreams and feelings. When the time came to go, there wasn't a dry eye around. Maya and I talked about visiting each other, but we knew there is no way to tell what life will bring. The next morning, we said, "Bye for now" and hoped it was the truth. Whenever I wear my dress that matches hers, I remember that around the world, no matter our nationality, race or status, people are more similar than we think.