An Incredible Journey
by
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On May 21, 1990, I embarked on a trip to Kenya with a group of Emory and Oxford students, faculty, and staff. This trip "broadened my horizons" in countless ways. I was seventeen years old and had just completed my freshman year of college at Oxford. Having been born and raised in a small town in South Georgia, my Kenya experience was eye-opening, to say the least. I developed a new consciousness of myself and others through the four main aspects of the trip: work, learning, friendship, and fun.

Our group was the first of several to work on building a new parsonage for the Kongowea Methodist Church in Mombasa. Since we were the first to work on the site, our responsibility was digging the foundation. With shovels, sledge hammers, and pickaxes, we dug and dug and dug... At the time, progress seemed really slow. When I look back at the photographs, however, I see that we accomplished quite a lot.

Our encounters with the Kenyan people taught us all so much about them and about ourselves. The people in the Kongowea community worked along with us. Accompanied by the rhythmic pounding of sledge hammers, we got to know each other in English and Swahili (mostly English, as the Kenyan people were a lot better at our language than we were at theirs!). There was a small school on the site, and being around the children was incredible. They were very warm and curious and full of spirit. One of the Kenyans commented that they had never seen white folks, especially white women, work so hard. Because of my naiveté and sheltered past, that was really my first insight into how people in developing countries perceive Americans. And in becoming aware of their perceptions of me, my own perceptions of myself were changed.

The friendships that were cultivated in Kenya remain my fondest memory of the trip. Many of us knew each other before the trip. (As you Oxfordians can imagine, all of the Oxford group knew each other!) Our relationships with each other were radically altered during our time in Kenya. In fact, two of the participants in the trip are now married to each other! The new friends we made in the community made the work easier and more worthwhile. I kept in touch with one of the young women I met for several years. I think that most of the people on the trip met at least one person, child or adult, with whom they really "clicked." Leaving the site was a tearful occasion for many of us.

Finally, we had FUN, and lots of it. At the beginning of the trip, we took the overnight train from Nairobi to Mombasa. Leaning out of the train window at about midnight, I was able to "see the Southern Cross for the first time." Most of us stayed up until the wee hours of the morning and then woke up in time to see the sun rise. During the trip, we snorkeled in the Indian Ocean and also had lots of fun while we were working. At the end of the trip, we were able to go on a photo safari in the Masai Mara National Park. This area of Kenya is breathtakingly beautiful. We saw incredible wildlife, including elephants, lions, giraffes, zebras, Cape buffalo, hippos, warthogs, hyenas, and gazelles.

I cannot recommend Emory's Service Learning Trip to South Africa highly enough. There are no words that will express the experiences involved in these trips. At this point in my life, as a graduate student at Emory, I look back at my time in Kenya and am filled with gratitude that I was able to participate in this incredible journey.

There will be an interest meeting for anyone who would like to find out more about the South Africa Service Learning Trip on Tuesday, December 10 at 4:00 p.m. in room 220 of the DUC.