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# Studying Outside Your Comfort Zone

FOR A YOUNG TEXAN, A UNIVERSITY SEMESTER IN NAMIBIA HAS ITS MOMENTS.

BY DARCY WHEELER

“My host dad sold me into marriage for two cattle,” declares Jenna Cantwell. With a smile, she adds, “Apparently that’s what I’m worth.”

Though it turned out her host family was just kidding about the arranged marriage, the experience was one of many challenges that awaited the 20-year-old Texan in Namibia.

“My family drank sour milk for breakfast,” Cantwell recalls. “I remember thinking ‘I’m going to vomit,’ but I drank it anyway.”

After warming up to the idea of studying abroad during an exchange in Germany, Cantwell left the comforts of her dorm room

at Trinity University in San Antonio for a second time to spend a semester in Namibia. Of the many programmes offered by the Minnesota-based Center for Global Education, Cantwell chose the southern African country because of its German colonial history. Her goal was to continue learning the language of her grandparents while earning credits in political science, history and development. She was also looking for a challenge.

Located on the southwest coast of Africa and bordered by Angola, Botswana and South Africa, Namibia is an uncommon destination for students to choose when going

abroad; the country hosts fewer than 1,000 foreign students each year.

Cantwell’s programme emphasized experiential learning, and included field trips and homestays, as well as courses.

“We didn’t have class very much, but when we did, we would go on field trips to different governmental buildings and museums,” Cantwell explains.

To fill part of her time in Namibia, the center also helped Cantwell arrange an internship with the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia (DRFN), a local environmental non-profit that creates and manages sustainable projects in the areas of energy, land and water.

Driven by an interest in water management issues, Cantwell ended up spending more time on her internship in the capital of Windhoek than as a student. And it was time well spent; while working at the water desk with the foundation, Cantwell had the opportunity to contribute to a national water policy for Namibia, which is now being used





My host sister handed me a machete, put the chicken's head in my hand and said, 'There's going to be a lot of blood.'

by regional governments in the country. Groundwater issues are of great interest to Cantwell, who aspires to continue influencing sustainable water policies when she graduates.

Cantwell and her classmates had an opportunity to see even more of the country by travelling for three weeks in northern Namibia, staying in homestay accommodation and visiting rural villages.

"I think it's more beneficial than classroom learning," she says. "Instead of reading texts about environmental and political issues, we got to experience the situations hands on." During this time, Cantwell says the greatest lesson she learned was how to live without the many conveniences, including electricity, that we consider necessary in the West.

After spending a week with a family in a series of huts in the rural town of Tsandi, she describes being given an unusual present by her host dad—the one who nearly had her married off.

"They gave me a chicken and said, 'We have to give you this chicken.' I asked them why and they responded, 'Because it is a gift from God that you come here. No one in America cares about our culture and what we do and how people live here. People don't care. The fact that you care is a gift from God,'" Cantwell explains.

"Then I had to kill it. My host sister handed me a machete, put the chicken's head

in my hand and said, 'There's going to be a lot of blood,'"

Learning how people live in Namibia was definitely an important aspect of Cantwell's experience as a student in the country. In particular, one of the many field trips organized by the programme included visiting a public hospital, as well as a private one, to observe the differences in health care.

"We were in the public hospital and there were dead bodies lying around. It smelled bad and there were around 20 to 30 people per room. The public hospital is what about 95 per cent of people in Namibia have—this unsanitary health care," Cantwell explains.

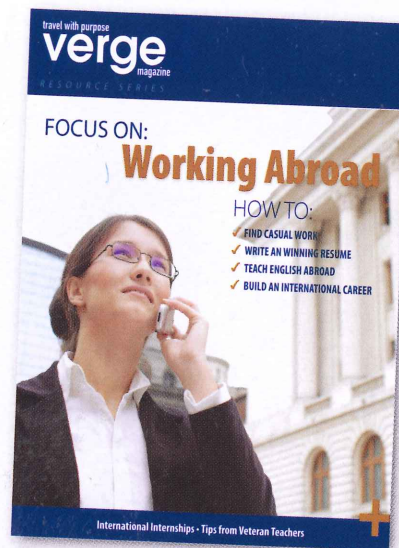
"Then we got to the private hospital and it was like a five-star hotel, nicer than any hospital I've ever seen in America. People got to live like this, while there were people down the street dying. It made me physically ill," she says.

Reflecting on her experience in Namibia, Cantwell says she believes it made her a better person.

"Having the chance to see something bigger than myself and the safety net I had created for myself was eye-opening. [...] I grew as a person because I was challenged."

And her advice for students studying abroad? "Take advantage of everything. Never say no," she says. "Well, sometimes say no, in obvious circumstances."

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