Field Trip to Ghana

As I begin writing about our incredible study tour to Ghana, I must say a few very important things. Having the chance to have been a part of this study is something that I will cherish for many years to come. I have never traveled outside of the country before this, and when I shared my anticipation for the trip, and what my future travel plans to Africa entailed, many seemed very surprised that this trip to Ghana would be my first international experience. I was informed about how difficult the trip was going to be at times, and the culture shock alone would prove to be one of the smaller obstacles we were going to have to overcome. The small talk I came across, and the simple research I had done prior to my trip seemed to be settling enough for me and was an adequate amount of information, or so I thought, to help lure me on my way to Africa. Yet, I am still completely in shock of what I experienced. I learned very early on in the trip that there was no amount of preparation one could do in order to entirely arrange their selves both mentally and physically to travel to a third world country such as Ghana. Most of us see the commercials on the poverty in Africa almost daily, and quite honestly now that I have traveled there, those commercials can’t even do any justice of what you really see and experience in person.

I do not think that I am a changed person though now that I have traveled to Ghana. I know my own personal morals and values were always very high and I have always had a great interest in the different cultures of the world, along with just learning about other people and their customs, practices, and so forth. What intrigues me most in
life, are human beings. How different we all are, how different our daily lives can be by just traveling across the country, and the simple fact that there is always so much to learn about humans, such as, in the ways in which we interact with one another, and how it affects society. This might help to explain my reasoning for being a Sociology major. However, getting back to what I was gearing towards is the fact that this tour opened my eyes to an entirely new world. In order to take part in something that is so intense, one has to have an open mind or at least be willing to keep one for the time being. You are going to see and experience certain practices that ethically, you might not personally condone. You are going to experience a pandemonium of incredibly different emotions along the way because for most people, they have not seen anything like that before. There will be things one will have to do, eat, or take part in, in one way or the other that you typically would not in their daily lives. This is the beauty of traveling, and what determines a person’s character.

As I said earlier, this trip did not change me as a person; it simply made me a better, more knowledgeable and understanding person. I am thankful for all of the things that I was given the chance to experience because they broadened my thoughts and knowledge on specific things, and overall made me feel even more open to new things then I already was. I was given the chance to see the depths of poverty and how disastrous it is, first hand. This is, by a long stretch, one of the toughest battles the world will continue to fight. However this allowed me to understand more and actually gather what the problem is, and how people truly are living and struggling. Seeing all that we did over the course of the two weeks was absolutely incredible. You can only learn and retain so much information in the classroom, yet once you travel and see what you are
studying it just makes everything very logical. This trip was so important for me to be a part of for several reasons. I did not just want to go for bragging purposes. I needed to see and understand the reality of the conditions in Ghana for myself. Trying to figure out ways to somehow help to improve the current standards is one of my priorities. Sharing my experience with others and informing them of all of the realities there is another priority. Learning from the natives and where their values lie, or what is the most important aspect of their lives at the end of the day was important for me to see. It was such an informative and mind opening experience that I wish more people could be a part of. I can genuinely say that I truly enjoyed every minute of every day in Africa.

Journal Entry excerpt:

First couple of days in Ghana. We finally made it! We arrived in Accra at about 8 am this morning, which is the capital of Ghana, and a very interesting city at that. Honestly, words cannot describe my day today and what we have experienced within just a few hours. Beginning with the start of our journey, our arrival at the airport was very neat. We had to fill out immigration forms for when we arrived in Ghana. There were “Ghana Nation” and “Other Nation” lines, where we obviously all waited in line for the other line. After we were put into the system, we headed out to continue on our way to Cape Coast. We were immediately bombarded with locals, asking to take our luggage, many of them not asking and just taking it, asking for e-mail addresses, newspapers, jewelry, etc. It was a little bit overwhelming just because of how strong they came on and how persistent they are in hounding you. It was quite funny because one of the first rules we were taught was to not let a local do something for you, specifically carrying your luggage because they expect something in return. We were literally off of the plane for
10 minutes before Jess was walking besides me without any luggage explaining to me how a nice man just came and asked for our bags! She was initially pulling the baggage cart. It wasn’t seconds until the man stopped Jess dead in her tracks, and demanded her money in our currency. She obviously had no idea what was going on, but it was hysterical.

If I had to put the first few days in one word, I would say chaotic. We visited the W.E.B Dubois museum, Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle all within the first few days. On top of this we had lectures in the morning and afternoon with some of the professors at the University Of Cape Coast. It was difficult trying to complete our daily schedules when a lot of us were still trying to grasp all that was going on. There was a huge culture shock and just so much we needed to learn about the people and what to do/not do all while everything was moving so fast. Respect is one of the most important, highly stressed attributes everyone carries in the country. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous to do something wrong or offend a local because of not knowing their customs. Therefore it was very important for me to sit back and observe a lot in the first few days and get to know their culture more. I wanted to show them that respect, and wanted people to understand that I wasn’t there as any typical tourist. I wanted to get to know the people, and what they stand for, not just tour the country.

Over the course of the two weeks, we traveled to the north and then again back down to Accra. The first week, the poverty I saw was nothing that I ever really believed existed. However, the more we moved to the northern region, if just continuously grew worse. The famine was horrifying, which obviously had a great affect on the locals and the animals. The sanitary level was extremely poor. There were no garbage bins,
recycling bins or an actual practical sewer system. Littering was overlooked; as a matter of fact I do not think there is even a law against it. It was such a horrifying site in general, seeing people and children lying on the side of the roads at all hours of the day, kids walking around constantly begging you for money or even worst, water. It was all of the very simple things in life that we overlook regularly, they were cherished there. As I just said, one of the main things I would be asked for when we were traveling was my water. A few times that we did gather together all of the water bottles we had on the bus and handed them out, fights would literally get started between the children over the bottles. Most of the situations such as these that we witnessed were very saddening and hard to deal with. There were several nights that I lost sleep because I was up just trying to figure out how people are actually living like this.

One of the things I noticed though, and I must say I will forever remember and know about Ghanaians, is the love they share between themselves, and for others. As I said before, this was my first time traveling to another country therefore I am not able to compare this experience to much. But generally speaking, most tourists no matter where they are traveling tend to have a difficult time. Besides the expected, getting ripped off a few times here and there, we were welcomed with open arms by everyone we came across. I have never met anyone in my years of living that were as welcoming and loving as these people are. This gave me great hope for several things in life. What impressed me most is the fact that with all of the hardships they face day in and day out, they carried more faith and happiness then what I have ever seen in the U.S. No matter where you went, they never let the struggles show on their face. This absolutely has something to do with the fact that this is all they know and see daily; therefore they aren’t necessarily
phased by it. But even still, the way we were greeted no matter where we went and how people wanted to show us everything about their culture touched my heart. There were signs everywhere titled “One Africa”. Unity was number one to everyone that lived there; it was like nothing could ever pull them apart. All of this is nothing that the U.S. has ever seen. Due to the so many differing cultures, religions, sexualities and anything else a lot of controversy and hate is stirred up. But they showed me that no matter what, at the end of the day we are all living and it can always be worst. We come from the same country, we are brothers and sisters and we work together. I actually was told something maybe the second day we got there and I fell in love with the quote, and how the situation played out. What I liked most about this however, is from that day on I honestly heard the same quote every single day for the rest of the trip. Anyone who I just gave the time to and listened to their stories was happy. This quote was: “It’s nice to be nice”. I know it seems so simple, but it is so meaningful. They stressed the importance of seeing the light in all situations and always caring for those around you. After seeing this, my views on the actual development aspect of the country changed.

When we first arrived, it was not a very long period of time before I lost all of my faith. From what we were seeing, I told myself everyday there was no way these conditions would ever change and the children there would never have the same chances as we do. It was such a difficult and upsetting thought but I couldn’t see it any differently. As we toured the northern region, the locals were literally living in the “hunter gather” era. There was minimal technology; they lived in huts, or anything that could be made out of sticks or clay. Traveling was difficult at times, due to the lack of paved roads or available food at the restaurants. But what changed my mindset on
everything was the people. Seeing the tight bond, and incredible harmony the people shared, restored the faith I had in the developing worlds. This, I was extremely grateful for. I went home feeling confident about the positive, progressive changes that I know will be made within the years to come.

I will absolutely be traveling back to Ghana at some point in my life, hopefully more then just one more time. I am very interested in touring other counties on the continent of Africa through this, and getting more involved with the third world countries and how I can help. It was a very difficult, tiresome trip. My strength was tested on several occasions. When something was wrong, or when I really wished I had something, it was not at our service just like that. I stepped out of my own comfort zone for a few weeks to get to experience someone else’s lifestyle. This I know is one of the best decisions I would have ever made. I learned so much as a person, and what I can handle. I learned what I truly feel passionately about and what should be my priorities in life, such as kindness, unity, and happiness. Most importantly, I learned that life is filled with many battles, but there is always enough room to be happy.