Alexander Sobecki’s trip to Sierra Leone, West Africa

Interview with Alexander Sobecki conducted by NIU sociology graduate student, Shay Galto

Summary:
Alex, “Guide” Sobecki is an undergraduate student with majors in Sociology and Communications Organizational/Corporate Emphasis and minors in Chinese Japanese Studies and Southeast Asian Studies. Guide plans to graduate in Fall 2013, and hopes to enter the sociology graduate department at NIU in Spring 2013. Guide went on the study abroad trip to Sierra Leone with Dr. Abu Bah in 2010. The trip consisted of two weeks in Sierra Leone and one week of classes on democracy and socioeconomic development with a focus on Africa. The trip also included field trips, guest lectures, museums and school visits.

Interview:
Where did you go for your trip?
I was one of the first NIU students to travel to Sierra Leone, a small country in Western Africa. It was ranked as the most impoverished country in the United Nations in 1990; it’s currently rebuilding itself after a decade-long civil war. Most people only know of it because it was the setting of the film ‘Blood Diamond’, which resulted in many of my friends and family having the wrong impression and trying to talk me out of going. In reality, I remember Sierra Leone as one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen, and look back at the people within it as some of the most inspiring characters in my life. Sierra Leone is an extremely unique country, one that stands out to even the most experienced travelers. I did not go to ‘Africa’, I went to Sierra Leone. I still miss it.

What was the purpose of your trip? (Study Abroad/Internship/Other)
The trip was designed to be a versatile and immersive experience that allowed us to observe and study the various organizations attempting to aid Sierra Leone in its attempts to rebuild and improve lives. We would be shown humanitarian sociology in action, and learn first-hand what challenges third-world countries face every day. We interviewed various high-ranking officials, visited hospitals and schools, and were visited by numerous speakers representing a diverse array of NGOs and government programs. Each day was a drastically new experience; by the time we left we’d analyzed and witnessed almost every type of organization at work throughout the country.

Why did you decide to go to Sierra Leone for your (Study Abroad/Internship/Other)?
Many of my peers and instructors will agree that I was the wild card of the trip. I was a nineteen year old freshman who had never left the country, whose only knowledge of sociology was the SOCI 170 intro course. All it took was a professor announcing in class that there was a trip to Africa being planned, I simply walked up and asked where to sign. It was the most intense opportunity I’d ever been offered, and I never thought twice about it. I’m still grateful towards my colleagues and the faculty who not only tolerated ‘the freshman’ who tagged along, but helped make the experience something that pushed me farther than I’d ever gone. Sometimes I wonder who I would be if I hadn’t walked up and asked my professor about the trip.
Who else from NIU went on this trip with you, including faculty?
There were seven of us total, led by Dr. Abu Bah. Dr. Bah is himself a Sierra Leonean with an inspiring passion for his home, as well as an extremely esteemed scholar specializing in African development. I’m proud to say I studied under such a prestigious figure, but prouder to say I grew to know him as a man possessing both a deep heart and a sharp sense of humor.

How have you personally been affected by your decision to go on this trip and the experiences you had on the trip?
I’m not embellishing or exaggerating when I say that trip changed my life. Many people ‘find themselves’ during their college years, but I found myself in a world most people can’t imagine. I came back with a new appreciation for what I have, and a drive to give back to mankind however I could. Once I saw how radically narrow my view of the world was, all I could think of was getting out there and seeing the rest of it.

How important do you think (Study Abroad/Internship/Other) is in your learning experience here at NIU?
I believe studying abroad, working abroad, or simply traveling is absolutely essential regardless of who you are or what you study. Seeing how people live in cultures outside your own shows you where you stand in the grander scope of things, and you begin to understand concepts that many Americans may never fully grasp. There’s something truly deeper about a person when they see the rest of the world, at some point these people naturally find each other because we understand each other better. The world is getting smaller every day, get out there and see it.

What were some of the memorable experiences you had on your trip?
There was no such thing as a slow day in Sierra Leone. Our first day in the country, our van broke down which required us to simply walk to our destination. That ‘walk’ was the most surreal moment of my short life. I was a nineteen year old kid who cleaned movie theaters for minimum wages, who was now trekking along the cliffs of a staggering mountain and staring down at the horizon of a teeming city that had been founded by freed slaves over two centuries ago. That was a start of many experiences that I still can’t believe happened. I shook hands with many politicians and critical figures throughout the country, but was most honored to hold the hand of a child in a one-room schoolhouse who wandered in from the surrounding slums to learn how to read. Every day I’d see something that was more beautiful than anything I’d ever seen, and each day I’d see something that was more haunting than anything I’d ever imagined. I still wear a hand-made necklace that was given to me by the friends I had to leave behind, but it’s the memories themselves keep me going some days when I’m waiting for a bus or walking to my next class.

How can you apply your experiences on this trip to sociology?
As someone completely new to the field, the trip was a baptism by fire which forced me to learn and apply concepts years ahead of my academic level. Looking back much later, I’ve since studied Sociology knowing what it’s truly capable of and how I can use it to improve the world. I’m not learning theories because they’re on my next exam, I’m honing a skill set that can do the amazing things I’d seen while in Sierra Leone. Once you’ve seen sociology in action, you begin thinking and analyzing how people interact on a higher level. Theory and history are the fundamentals, but sociologists belong among the people
learning how to help them. I learned this in a third-world country, but sociology is needed in every failing school, every high crime area, and in every discriminated population. I don’t leave it behind in the lecture hall, I take it with me wherever I go.

**How can you apply your experiences on this trip to your future career plans/goals?**
When an employer looks at my study abroad experience, they see that I’m capable of adapting to different cultures and have a perspective that other college graduates don’t have. They know I embrace travel and learning new things, with no boundaries or comfort zones holding me back. I love to see the world and everyone in it, and my experiences abroad will help me find an employer who will allow me to do just that and even receive a paycheck for it.

**Would you recommend international experiences (Peace Corp, Study Abroad, general travel) to other sociology students?**
Sociology is an ideal major for nonprofits, government jobs, NGOs, and aid agencies. There are countless opportunities to intern, study, or serve in these roles while expanding cultural horizons and receiving academic credit. NIU is a cutting edge institution with one of the largest study abroad programs in the state, the Sociology department in particular never fails to find new opportunities for its students and make them happen. It’s possible to travel almost anywhere and conduct research for an independent study, sociology is that universal. There are scholarships, grants, service programs, all just waiting for someone to apply.

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your (Study Abroad/Internship/Other)?
I would like to thank the Dr. Bah, my traveling companions, the Sociology Department, and Northern Illinois University in its entirety for allowing me to do the things that have made me what I am. I’m proud to represent this university, and will always wear the red and black.