Interview with Kathryn Panger conducted by NIU sociology graduate student, Kristina Hendriks

Summary:
Kathryn was a NIU Sociology undergraduate major, and graduated in Spring 2011. She is now in the sociology graduate program at NIU. Kathryn 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, museum and school visits.

Interview:

KH: Where did you go for your international experience?
KP: I went to Sierra Leone for Study Abroad with sociology professor Dr. Bah.

KH: Why did you decide to go to Sierra Leone for your study abroad?
KP: I really wanted to study abroad and learn about some other country and I looked at a lot of different options. When I was making my decision the Sierra Leone trip looked really interesting to me because of the focus on democracy and migration issues in the country. In addition to that it was a two week trip which meant that it was much more doable for me over the summer than some of the other options.

KH: How have you been personally impacted by the experiences you had on the trip?
KP: This trip got me thinking about a lot of different ideas. I knew when I was going to Sierra Leone that I would see a place that was a less industrialized nation and they would be struggling economically and I knew that I would see people lacking basic facilities. But, this trip really fuelled my interest in how world powers interact. Before it was something I peripherally thought about, I knew about the globalization of capitalism but when I went to Sierra Leone I actually saw the influence of it. I taught in the Study Abroad classes about Sierra Leone’s view of democracy. I definitely understand how this country is dependent on powerful world nations. They are not getting help that they need to become industrialized and to become independent. Learning about this issue of constant dependence has fuelled my interest in globalization.

KH: How important do you think study abroad was in your learning experience here at NIU?
KP: It definitely has played a role. I was only there for two weeks so it wasn’t a comprehensive summation of all the things I have learned at NIU. It sparked my interest in global power, which is a huge part of my interest in sociology. It did play a role in how I see political philosophies and how those philosophies have an impact on people on a large scale.

KH: What were some of the memorable experiences you had on your trip?
KP: We went to the special court where they explained to us how prisoners of, or victims of war were being kept in these facilities. That was interesting to me because it’s the sort of thing that I might have known about but actually seeing it makes it more real in your mind. It is this structure that needs to be watched over. People are put in protection because of civil wars, with one group taking over the government in a coup and military leaders having all this power. It was seeing this mark of the aftermath of war and realizing that these things needed to be taken care because it is not just over [when the war ends].
KH: So how can you apply your experiences on this trip to sociology?
KP: The discourse there really intrigued me, the religious discourse but also the political discourse. I noticed in the class I had there was an emphasis on the importance of democracy but also how the leaders there don’t have enough accountability. Political opinion was split between having democracy in the future or going back to the dictatorships of the past. There were interesting arguments for glorified leaders of the past because there was central decision making and they were kind of voted in one way or another. The alternative argument was always the system of democracy and implicitly capitalism. That was really fascinating to me because I’m used to being in the U.S. where capitalism is within a democracy and taken for granted. There is political discourse about all kinds of other options but they’re looked down upon. People here [in the U.S.] will talk about socialism, but socialism was never mentioned over there, there was no talk of socialism or communism, nobody mentioned either. The only thing that was talked about was democracy and capitalism.

Also their religious discourse was interesting to me as well. Basically the country was split between Christianity and Islam however, they were pretty much living in harmony. Whenever political leaders were going to take office it was assumed that his vice president would be another religion, for instance, if one were Christian the other would be Muslim. The people in the country knew each other’s prayers, they went to each other’s churches and mosques. I wasn’t there long but I didn’t see any kind of tensions or undercurrents of tension between the groups, which was a surprise. I always just assumed that different religious ideologies were more or less naturally at odds, so to see Christianity and Islam being there together, I didn’t expect that.

KH: How did your soc classes that you’ve taken before the trip connect to your experience there or vice versa?
KP: The things that I thought of the most actually, despite the fact that I’m speaking about all the religious ideology, was more in applying micro theories and interactionism. I was trying to figure out how social norms were different. I noticed there were posters up like how to protect yourself against AIDS and trying to advance the women’s movement. But there were people there that I knew didn’t really take women’s rights seriously. They thought that was something the West has introduced. I wanted to be there longer to understand the social norms and to try and understand how that particular country constructs their own social reality but also how is influenced by the West. The other thing that helped me a lot from the soc classes at NIU, more than any classes at NIU, were probably classes with some history, the history of soc, contemporary and classical theory because those give you an overview of the various sociological scientists and philosophers. Everything that we learn in soc is based on those theories, which gave structure to my thoughts. It influenced all of the things I was thinking when I went there, and I ended up asking myself, “oh I wonder what this theorist or that theorist would have to say about various topics here.”

KH: So, how will you apply your experiences on this trip to your future career plans or goals?
KP: Well I would like to eventually become a professor. And when I am a professor I would like to organize trips myself. If I could organize a trip and get a bunch of students to go and explore another region sociologically that would be amazing. Besides that it influenced my entire perspective and obviously that is going to have an impact on me for the rest of my life and in my career.