Suzanne Banowsky’s trip to Sierra Leone, West Africa

Interview conducted by NIU sociology graduate student, Kristina Hendriks

Summary:
Suzanne is a graduate student in the NIU Sociology program. Her area of interest is restorative justice. Suzanne participated in the Sierra Leone Study Abroad 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?
SB: Sierra Leone, which is in West Africa.

KH: What was the purpose of your trip?
SB: It was a Study Abroad led by Dr. Abu Bah from the Sociology Department. I went because I wanted to study the process of truth and reconciliation in a post-conflict country and Sierra Leone had been in a civil war for many years. I’m interested in restorative justice and the process of democracy building in post-conflict countries.

KH: How have you personally been impacted by the experiences you had on the trip?
SB: It defined the topic of my master’s thesis for me. The country is in the beginning stages of democracy and recovery from civil war. A lot of money was spent on building a court to try war criminals instead of toward the infrastructure. I saw poverty like I’ve never seen anywhere else in my life. There are schools that don’t have bathrooms or wells and there are no roads. There are no buses so children are walking hours just to get an education. Education for girls is not valued although this is changing. I think it really gave me a passion for policy issues and for fighting discrimination and inequality because it was just so apparent there.

KH: How important was your study abroad in your learning experience here at NIU?
SB: I think it has been very important because I have learned so much about myself, my interests and what we take for granted in this country. We take simple things like peace for granted. It motivated me to start educating other people about these issues. You still see the effects of war everywhere there and it’s very shocking and very powerful when you see it. The amount of devastation and poverty you can see all over the place, you see it reflected in the buildings also, for instance the small size of their national archives. We can’t even comprehend this because we do not have that type of suffering or pain that’s rooted for generations as a country.

KH: What were some of the memorable experiences you had on your trip?
SB: We had four students with us from Freetown, and we learned a lot from them and their experiences, the things that were important to them. It was amazing to me that you could form such a bond with four people in such a short period of time. It’s been close to a year later and I’m still in contact with all four of them.
KH: How did your sociology classes connect to your experience and vice versa?
SB: When I first went over to Sierra Leone my focus was truth and reconciliation based upon people who had committed these atrocious war crimes. And I wanted to learn how that might shape or facilitate democracy. There were classes on this during the Study Abroad trip. I began realizing that every society is different and through my conversations with people there they wanted the truth and reconciliation process, they wanted to know the truth and receive an apology so they could move on and get past it. I want to compare societies and see if this could work with our own atrocities that we have not been held accountable for during the civil war and the violence and discrimination afterwards. I think the concept of restorative justice is pivotal in society and in helping a society to heal.

KH: How can you apply your experiences on this trip to your future career plans or goals?
SB: I’m looking into getting a job at the Southern Poverty Law Center in San Antonio. I want to try to start working on a truth and reconciliation panel, there are different panels across the U.S. I think it needs to start somewhere and I think that you can get recognition and public awareness through truth and reconciliation even without legal accountability. I think that is important for history to never repeat itself.

KH: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your Study Abroad to Sierra Leone?
SB: I think everybody should do it. I think you should have to go somewhere where you can really learn something, especially if you’re in sociology and going as a student. And I loved it, I mean I loved this country I fell in love with the people, I want to go back. I came back here a very grateful and changed person and I think that’s what a class like that should do for you, I think it should change you. I think that the Study Abroad to Sierra Leone did that for me.