Spring 2016 semester I had the wonderful opportunity of studying abroad in Stellenbosch, South Africa through one of the Cornell Abroad partners, CIEE. Before I left I was told many times that studying abroad would change my life and to be honest, I was slightly skeptical about how one place and experience could potentially change my entire life. Yet, as I sit here and reflect on my experience, I can confidently say that my one decision to go abroad has changed me forever. It was a semester full of unpredictability, life lessons, bold moves, laughter, self-growth, and wanderlust.

In terms of academics, I was enrolled in 3 courses, which equated to 16 credits. These courses were: Learning for Sustainable Community Engagement, otherwise known as LSCE, Beginner Afrikaans, and Aquaculture. While LSCE and Afrikaans were courses that were limited to only international students, aquaculture was a mainstream course at Stellenbosch University.
I’m thankful I had the opportunity to take courses with international students as well as full-degree, South African students because it allowed me to further immerse myself into the culture and student life at Stellenbosch.

My favorite class, and the biggest reason why I decided to study at Stellenbosch, was my LSCE course. This course had two components, this first being a class seminar with the 27 other international students enrolled and the second being a fieldwork component at Vlottenburg Primary School. Through discussions about community development, racism, sexism, engagement, social mobility, and social constructs, the seminar gave me the opportunity to hear global perspectives about these tough issues. As for the fieldwork component of the course, I had the opportunity to gain hands-on experience working in a classroom and understanding South Africa’s immense amounts of social, economic, and political issues.

All the children at Vlottenburg Primary School live on wine farms and their parents are farm workers. This is not a well-paid profession and most of their parents are only paid 800 Rand per month, which equates to 50 US dollars. Furthermore, in the past, many of the children’s grandparents and parents were paid in wine; as a result, Vlottenburg Primary has one of the largest occurrences of Fetal Alcohol Disorder. FAD impacts student’s development as well as learning abilities. While our LSCE class cannot fix every issue, it was our goal to make a tiny chip in the larger structural issues of inequality and poverty within South Africa by instilling confidence and hope within our students.
Overall, LSCE has given me the opportunity to reflect about myself, my major, and my future. More importantly, it reaffirmed my passion to make a difference in this world. At times it is easy to get caught in the “me” or the “look what I have done” within community development, but community development workers must remember it is never about the “me” but rather the people. In general, development can be many things but for me development is reciprocal, dynamic, authentic, grassroots, and sustainable. Development is not something that is done to someone, but rather an engagement as well as a restoration of an individual’s sense of human dignity. In terms of development, LSCE taught me that a teacher or community development worker doesn’t need to make huge, grand-gestures to make a difference in a child’s life. Rather, it is more influential to take the time to appreciate the child for who they are and let them know they are loved, appreciated, and supported. LSCE was more than a course; it was a life experience that I will never forget.

To this day some of my main takeaways from LSCE are:

- *People are always more important than projects or processes. PEOPLE MATTER.*
- *Sophisticated societies are not defined by posture or politics. How we treat the most vulnerable groups within society is what proves how sophisticated our society is.*
- *Everyone is waiting superman, be your own superman.*
- *Ubuntu: “I am because you are.”*
- *Behind the clouds the sun always shines. Stay positive.*
Yet, beyond the academics and student culture, one of the most impactful moments of my entire time abroad was a program activity where myself and the other four girls in my program had the opportunity to do a homestay in Enkanini, which is an illegal, informal township. These settlements are a result of the huge housing issue in South Africa. Every person not living in his or her own home is signed up for governmental housing, which is a component of the post-apartheid reconstruction and development program. However, there is a huge backlog and people have to wait many years to receive a home. In order to compensate for a lack of housing, townships are built. Enkanini is informal and illegal townships because people have built shacks on land that has yet to be recognized by the government and does not have proper governmental sanitation, water, or housing plans.
During my time in a township I stayed with a single mother and her 2 children. The shack was one room with one bed and one light bulb. This experience was far from easy and though it was merely a glimpse, it opened my eyes to the living conditions for millions of South Africans. Aside from the physical discomforts of a lack of running water, small living quarters, and informal sanitation, I also experienced emotional discomforts. These discomforts far exceeded the physical, including the evident language barrier, guilt associated with having the privilege to leave an inopportune situation, and witnessing detrimental socialized gender roles. However, it was my kind-hearted homestay mom, my neighbor who showed me how to dump the pee bucket, and the genuinely happy children running through the shacks that resulted in such a personally transformative experience. Enkanini showed me that culture is not defined by its material possessions, but rather the love, sense of community, and hope that is abundant within.

In the end, studying abroad gave me a tremendous amount of reflection, adventure, and discovery. Before I went to South Africa I had the tendency of experiencing life without reflecting on anything too deeply. However, while my time abroad, I felt as though I was in this constant state of reflection about my courses, my friends, and my experiences pushing myself beyond my comfort zone. As for the adventure, if you were to tell January Sydney that by June she would have master the art of driving on the left side of the road, jumped off the world’s highest bridge bungee, surfed in the Indian Ocean, have the ability to have a very brief conversations in Afrikaans, or free climbed the side of Table Mountain, she would have been extremely skeptical and confused about your sanity. Nevertheless, I am glad the unpredictable became the norm. Finally, as for discovery, my LSCE professor always told us that a mind once expanded can never go back to its original size. There is no doubt that Stellenbosch expanded my mind to discover more about the world, other people, and myself. There isn’t a day that goes by
where I don’t think about the wonderful places, people, and opportunities that I experienced.

Baie Dankie (thank you very much in Afrikaans), South Africa for every laugh, smile, adventure, and reflection.

Pictured: Spring 2016 CIEE Stellenbosch—
Zoe Tan, Me, Meadow Noonan, Maria Jamison, Katie LaScaleia