Before leaving the United States, I attended a seminar required by Cornell to help inform me about the stages of culture shock. I believed the phenomenon existed, but brushed it off. I thought to myself that I could handle it. I expected the possibility of getting some strange sickness or being robbed. Sure I got sick a lot and felt unsafe at times, but in no way did this compare to the psychological journey I happened upon. Initially I felt overwhelmed and confused, partially attributed to the confusion over roles and expectations of the NGO I chose to work with. As time passed, I was fully immersed in the intimate lives of families and local tendencies. I explored the depths of my surroundings and the minds of my new friends. My anxiety morphed into a constant excitement, and a deep appreciation for the beautiful effort of a meaningful life in Tanzania. I have grown to deeply love everything about Tanzania, its people and its physical beauty. When I close my eyes I can still picture the smiles on little children’s faces as they chased our truck through the village waving and greeting us, the smell of mahindi choma or fire corn as I was walking through the streets of Arusha, and the small pathway that led to my home-stay lined with rows of maize and avocado trees. My summer spent in Tanzania will surely remain engrained in my heart for the rest of my years as an experience that taught me more than I could have ever expected.

I arrived in Arusha, Tanzania welcomed by staff members of Global Service Corps, the NGO for whom I worked for nine weeks. The program combined public health and sustainable agriculture, two topics that are closely related and in dire need of
positive change in the region. For the first five weeks, I served as an HIV/AIDS education trainer for a wide array of students, including those in a vocational school, community members of Maasai villages, and children at a secondary school. We taught the basic biology of HIV/AIDS and how it can be transmitted. The curriculum focused on preventative measures such as abstinence, condom use and being faithful. A portion of our lessons also dealt with life skills, particularly for the younger students, with a goal of reducing stigma surrounding the issue as well as increasing positive decision making abilities. During this time we had counterparts that translated for us from English to Swahili so that the students could understand the material more easily.

It certainly seemed to me that different students had different learning experiences. I believe that the students in the vocational school who were aged 15-22 were both very interested in the subject of HIV/AIDS and were well focused in class because they are at an age where sexuality is becoming more prominent, and they are currently in a schooling system, respectively. The community members of a Maasai village Olmolong seemed to have more difficulty in the classroom because many of them have not been formally educated, and because their culture does not support speaking of such a private subject such as sex. The greater gender inequality seen in the village compared to the vocational school in the city of Arusha most likely had to do with the dichotomy of AIDS education between students.

I feel that the most positive experience for the health education aspect was when I served as a counselor and teacher for a two week long HIV/AIDS and Life Skills day camp. Spending more time with the children compared to other one week long seminars
of the previous health education weeks allowed me to really get to know the students. We spent entire days with them where we played interactive games, did arts and crafts and taught each other songs and dances from our cultures. It was a wonderful learning experience for both myself and the students, and we all enjoyed spending our days together. I felt very connected to the students and could tell that they looked up to me and the other volunteers as teachers and friends. I believe that the students will remember their time in day camp and apply it to their lives, and have tools they need to avoid transmitting HIV/AIDS.

The last four weeks of the program focused on sustainable agriculture. I served as a trainer for bio-intensive agriculture, a type of organic agriculture created in Southern California that uses tools such as compost making, double dug beds to aerate the soil, natural pest management solutions and nursery management. This form of agriculture uses no chemicals and is meant to provide farmers with an organic and cost free way of improving their farm and the natural environment. I really liked the idea of what we were teaching, and could see the actual benefits before my eyes in the demonstration plots at our office in Arusha and on farms of people who had adopted the methods. The methods were quite small scale, which might have been at a disadvantage to the larger farmers. A possible improvement would be to look at methods that could increase yields for farmers who are part of larger markets.

It should be considered that soil tillage done in double-digging a bed has often been seen as harmful to the soil. To address this issue, an analysis of the bio-intensive agriculture program should be done in comparison to no till farming. Similarly, the
method of bio-intensive agriculture was originated in California, so it might be wise to tailor an organic farming program to the regional specifics of Tanzania. I would have liked to see more of the local farms of the students who we were teaching to give them more applicable information. We taught community members in another village Olchorovus, where the agriculture staff served as our translators. This did not feel effective because the staff had more knowledge than we did and it felt like we were adding an unnecessary step into the process. However, attendance was great and the community members were very interested, involved and welcoming. It might be more beneficial for the staff members to teach the lessons, and the volunteers to serve in a more hands on way through the physical work.

Before we taught in the mornings, we woke up bright and early to vaccinate chickens for New Castle’s Disease, a disease that is responsible for up to 90 percent of chicken deaths in Tanzania. The greatest difficulty was that many chickens were already let out for the day before we arrived and we did not have enough time to chase and catch each chicken. Walking from boma to boma was the perfect way to see the intimate settings of every individual nestled in this hillside community. The afternoons consisted of hands on work such as digging hafirs or, rain water catchments, digging double-dug beds, making compost piles, and building grain storage units. The afternoons felt particularly productive, and I really felt like I was contributing by supplying something that the villagers could use. It was another great way to socialize with the locals since we would build on their property. They were appreciative of our efforts to enhance agricultural productivity.
The most amazing part of teaching in villages was feeling so close and connected to the Tanzanian culture. Apart from the remarkable days spent with those who lived in the village, we spent our nights getting to know the staff with whom we worked all summer. We would sit surrounding a campfire talking for hours about details of our respective lives and cultures. I felt ridiculous explaining the concept of halloween and the widespread belief in ghosts, and we laughed on end at the fact that most one year old children can already use a squat toilet in Tanzania. I never anticipated how such simple cultural comparisons could seem so shocking. I believe that sharing ideas about our lives from different parts of the world was one of the most life changing experiences for me. It opened my eyes to the differences and similarities that I was blind to beforehand.

One of the best parts of my trip was staying with my home-stay family. They took me in like I was a daughter, and were friendly and loving. Living with the family gave me a chance to learn and practice Swahili, try to cook Tanzanian food with my Mama, eat Tanzanian candy with my Dada, or sister and talk about Tanzanian National Parks with my Kaka, or brother. I looked forward to returning to my home-stay at the end of my work day and was welcomed home to great conversations and a delicious meal without fail. It was certainly my favorite way to become immersed in the culture. Similar to my happiness with my home-stay family was my love for my fellow volunteers. Each person brought something unique to the group, and there were many positive dynamics and great friendships. I am confident that I will remain good friends with everyone who experienced Tanzania with me.
The downside to my trip was the miscommunication between the organization and the volunteers. There was a great amount of confusion based on what the expectations of the volunteers were. The consensus of the volunteers was that most frustrations came from the inability to offer suggestions that could have been put into use like anything from the volunteers hand-making posters to the agricultural staff teaching agriculture instead of the volunteers. Although it would be difficult to give a positive recommendation for Global Service Corps at this time, I absolutely recommend an international experience in Tanzania. My time abroad gave me first-hand experience in learning how often times the results of development work are not seen directly, and can be quite slow. This challenge is certainly one that will remain in the process of development work, but can be addressed through a commitment to making positive changes where help is needed. After this trip, my goal for the future is to focus on natural resource management in communities that need guidance. I hope to make changes that can be felt in those communities; whether it be at the time of implementation or years into the future.