Perhaps the most influential reason I chose Cornell University was the exceptionally wide range of opportunities I knew the school and its wrestling program would provide for me. My hard work and persistence as an underclassman placed me in both finance and technology internships with highly structured job descriptions and demanding and stressful work environments. Upon entering my senior year, I knew it was time to travel abroad for both personal growth and of course, major requirements. I was ready to follow my desired career path of a position exempt of cubicles and paperwork and rich in agricultural experience and foreign culture. My coach put me in contact with an international businessman who led me in the direction of either the Yucatán Peninsula or Western Bahia, Brazil. After months of deliberation and countless pros and cons lists, my family and life-long mentors helped me come to the decision that Carroll Farms Brazil LLC in Western Bahia would be my ultimate destination.

Having only traveled for wrestling tournaments and to my homeland Poland as a young teen, traveling internationally (and alone) was foreign and to be honest, rather daunting. I was overwhelmed with my unpreparedness, even though it had ironically seemed that my entire life’s
efforts had led me to those two next months. I knew that whatever expectations I could conjure up would either fall short of reality or be completely off-track, so I set two simple goals for myself: gain independence and learn the native language of Portuguese.

... 

I was hot, tired, sticky and alone when I landed in San Paolo. After sixteen hours of traveling, I was greeted by a man who spoke no English but was responsible for taking me on a tour of the country’s capital and my eventual transportation to the farm six hours away by [an overcrowded] bus. The commute exposed me to miles of dirt roads and slums as it quickly became evident that the current dry season placed the entire community within a state of emergency. Distant fires and unparalleled drought set the stage for my first few weeks on the farm.

My initially anticipated challenges during the first few weeks on the farm were nothing compared to the harsh reality of loneliness, danger and culture shock. I lived with my boss and his girlfriend in a small apartment 45 minutes from the farm for the first month of my stay. As one of the first interns on the farm, there was no true structure to my roles and responsibilities, which meant most of my workday was comprised of personal research and exploration. Without a car, my days were contingent upon the erratic schedule of my boss, his girlfriend, and work colleagues. The gin was hard on my lungs and my looming future became more of a concern with each passing day.

Halfway through the summer, everything seemed to change overnight. I was moved to my own bungalow across from the farm’s cafeteria; I was right in the middle of everything and loved every minute of it. I started training and eventually coaching Brazilians at the local Jiu
Jitsu gym, and my workouts slowly transformed into five-mile runs as I soaked in the atmosphere and culture of the farm. I wasn’t sure if the armed guard immediately outside my door each night was comforting or utterly frightening, but my newly developed Brazilian instincts helped me overlook his presence and appreciate the newfound and previously forgotten feeling of safety and protection.

During the latter half of the Internship, I created a new system for tracking the cotton gin’s inefficiencies. I had finally established relationships and even friendships with my co-workers, which gave me the opportunity to travel the country and learn the language through conversations with natives and farm workers. Upon my gained responsibilities and duties within the company, I quickly began to appreciate the fundamental duties of the farm ranging from spreading fertilizer to harvesting tons of cotton. Festivals, concerts and farm shows became staples of my weekends. After saving my wages for close to three weeks, six of the farm managers invited me to join them on what would later be defined as the most incredible experience of my life. After six hours of off-roading in the purest and most literal sense, I found myself in a tropical jungle encompassing native monkeys, anacondas and jungle cats. The following time spent in this hidden paradise was dominated by fishing for Pacu and Peacock Bass. I was at ease with the land, my peers and myself for the first time in what seemed like forever.

To the surprise of both my family and myself, the two weeks prior to my departure were filled with sadness and reluctance. I had become accustomed to waking up and picking fresh coconuts from the nearby trees. Waking up with the freedom to either help Brazilian laborers or work closely with the company’s CEO became my lifestyle – one which proved itself hard to let go of.
I landed in America in a haze of exhaustion masked by the unparalleled feelings of true satisfaction and pride. As I debarked the plane, fellow passengers and personnel misunderstood me for a Brazilian, instilling the sense of accomplishment I had hoped for upon my internship’s completion. I am thankful to Brazil and its people for quite possibly the most meaningful personal experience of my life. The two goals I had initially hoped to accomplish became an unconditional part of me; Portuguese was second nature and I knew I would be able to not only survive but also thrive in any uncomfortable situation I put myself in. As I look forward to my next visit to Brazil, I remain grateful for the opportunity and the incomparable life lessons it provided for me.

*Please see other document for personal pictures.*