

BLACK WOMAN IN ZAMBIA

This past summer, I participate in the Davidson faculty-led program in Mwandu, Zambia. This month-long opportunity allowed me to learn a lot about health care issues in this country and about its culture. This experience also encouraged me to reflect more on my own identity as a black American. Living in Mwandu transplanted me from being a racial minority, like I am in Davidson, to being part of the racial majority, causing me to really think about race relations in Zambia as well as race relations in the United States. As an Africana Studies major and having a concentration in Ethnic Studies, the topic of race relations in the U.S. has come up in discussions in classes I have taken, but before my travels abroad, I never really thought heavily about my personal viewpoints on race relations in the U.S. or articulated them in a formal fashion.

Before going overseas, I always viewed race relations in the U.S. and issues surrounding race as being heavily tied to the history of the country. The part of our country's history when all non-whites who came to the U.S., whether by choice or force, were made subservient and inferior to white people. As a country, a lot has been done to improve race relations in the U.S., but there is still a lot more to do.

Living in Zambia for a month did not necessarily change these views I held about race relations in the U.S. but rather enforced what I previously believed before I went abroad. Learning about this country, its history and demographics, it is clear that the same issues surrounding race do not exist in Zambia as they do in the U.S. This, I believe, has a lot to do with its history, in regard to governing power and also the fact that the majority of people living in Zambia are black Africans. Being in Zambia allowed me to better understand a concept I learned in my Ethnic Relations class at Davidson about the "costs" that are associated with one's race. In Zambia, there are no "costs" of being black because it is the "norm" and the racial majority in the country. In Mwandu, there are more divisions amongst people based on their ethnic background, like which tribe they belong to or their socio-economic status. I think the importance of being identified by one's tribe in Mwandu highlights how a lot of people in the U.S. over-simplify individuals' identities based on the color of their skin. They neglect to dig deeper and understand the cultural differences between groups of people that may look alike.

I think the way race relations in the U.S. and my position as a racial minority at school made me even more excited to go to Zambia. I was very excited because I knew I would be living amongst black Africans and would be in the racial majority. I was looking forward to this experience because when I was living in South Africa and when I visited countries in West Africa, I was warmly welcomed and often referred to as "sister" because I was a black American. Even though I am black, in some instances while in Zambia, I was still grouped as white along with the other Davidson students because I am American. The Lozi people in the village would refer to all of us as "Makua," which to them signifies a white person but really translates to English as "English-speaker." So, to many of the Lozi, I was white because I was American. This shows how race is viewed differently among this group of people compared to views of race in [the U.S.]. Toward the end of the program, it was interesting how some of the younger children in the village would point to everyone else saying "Makua" and then smile and point to me and say, "you're a black American." This distinction between being a "Makua" and black American shows a type of affinity between us. I would even have some people tell me "you are home" [and] "you are from here." This was a very humbling experience.

I am so glad I studied abroad in Zambia this past summer because I came away from the experience with a better understanding of another culture and who I am as a person. These experiences really forced me to re-evaluate my identity, what it meant to be black, what it means to be a black American, etc.

I would advise any student, especially one of color, who is interested in study abroad to not let your race hinder you from pursuing it. I would definitely do some research before about how different groups of people are received in your host country so you know what you are getting yourself into. I

believe that study abroad for anybody is a positive experience that allows you to discover new territories and peoples but also new things about yourself. It is a time for academic and personal growth, no matter where you go or who you are. If a student experiences a negative situation because of their racial makeup, I would encourage them to remain positive and just remember that the same thing could have happened to them at home in the U.S.