

Lisa Tallin
South Africa Exchange Program-Henry Mitchell Scholarship Recipient
Fall 2000

Lisa Tallin studied at UWC July 17-December 2000, and is now completing her Masters in Social Work at UM-St. Louis. She will graduate in May of 2001. In her graduate work she is primarily concerned with families, youth and children and she has a special interest in working with victims of trauma and violent conflict. Prior to going to South Africa, she interned at the International Institute of St. Louis, worked on a special project in Washington D.C. related to victims of the Angolan conflict and was an AFS exchange student in Portugal during her undergraduate education.

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When people ask me about my experience in South Africa, I usually tell them that I had a nice time or that it was interesting. Honestly, I can not even imagine what their idea of my experience could possibly be. I know that some people have said that they can not help but to visualize a stereotypical underdeveloped country, lacking in the all the electronic devices that make this country so darn convenient. It must be noted that I had my own expectations based on my previous experience in Ghana, and other less urbanized areas. Prior to my departure, I labored to dull my fantastic and uneducated ideas. I reached out to my friends and acquaintances that had lived in South Africa. I told and retold myself small mantras, such as "I am going to South Africa, not Ghana" and "South Africa is different from West Africa," to clear my memory pallet. Though I was able to diminish my expectations to a reasonable and human level, they did accompany me on my journey.

Most of my expectations, as mentioned above, were based on my previous six-month stint in Ghana, West Africa. These expectations included the lack of infrastructure, including but not limited to poor quality roads, open sewers, an unstable supply of electricity and water. In Ghana (as well as areas outside the US and rural areas within the US that I have visited), I became used to a certain disorganization that served to slow processes down and heighten the

likelihood of casual conversation between strangers on various topics concerning one's family, friends, and country. In addition, I am used to a certain type of politeness and courtesy that appears to be linked to a culture's maintenance of male dominance. Lastly, my shallow research into the current state of South African society gave me the impression that the majority of the citizenship would be angry and full of grief. I thought I would see poverty, crime, and family disintegration, which is apt to follow extreme desolation and oppression.

The reality* was that in South Africa many people suffer and survive the harsh poverty and oppression. Many people are not able to find work. Drug abuse, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, rape, and murder are more common in South Africa than any other place I have been. South Africa ranks highest in the world, according to what I heard there, in terms of violence against women. I, along with my South African roommate and many other foreign students, experienced an elevated sense of awareness one must maintain to protect oneself from the random violence that occurred daily in Cape Town. I was scared and mistrustful. This part of reality was exhausting.

The other part of the reality of my time in South Africa was that people were kind. The overwhelming majority of the people that I met were open, trusting, and willing to converse with or help out this stranger. Also, I was totally in awe in the fact that the whole country did not collapse in complete chaos. The social upheaval seemed to be progressing, not in a predictable manner, but in its very own evolution, of which people seem to be willing to be a part. I witnessed excitement, wonder, and patience along with the tension and conflict. My hope is that the reality of a strong infrastructure, though limited to certain privileged areas, will give a good basis for future investment into undeveloped areas.

* *My experiences were uniquely mine and therefore be termed "reality" in this the "reality" section.*

In conclusion, I spent my summer talking to myself so that I could have a relatively open mind upon my arrival in South Africa to minimize my period of adjustment and allow for a greater enjoyment of the reality of the experience. I was relatively successful. South Africa is a very complicated place with a diverse past and present. I am glad to have had my experience there and look forward to the South African evolution of governance and civil society.