

University of Dayton

eCommons

Proceedings: 2020 Global Voices on the
University of Dayton Campus

Alumni Chair in Humanities

4-21-2020

Alumni Voices of the African Immersion Experience

Mary Niebler
University of Dayton

Jessica Saunders
Dayton Children's Hospital

Hayley Ryckman Ruland
Jorgenson Associates

Adanna M. Smith

Frances Albanese

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/global_voices_3



Part of the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Niebler, Mary; Saunders, Jessica; Ruland, Hayley Ryckman; Smith, Adanna M.; Albanese, Frances; and Kolber, Benedict J., "Alumni Voices of the African Immersion Experience" (2020). *Proceedings: 2020 Global Voices on the University of Dayton Campus*. 9.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/global_voices_3/9

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Chair in Humanities at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings: 2020 Global Voices on the University of Dayton Campus by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Author(s)

Mary Niebler, Jessica Saunders, Hayley Ryckman Ruland, Adanna M. Smith, Frances Albanese, and Benedict J. Kolber

Alumni Voices of the African Immersion Experience

*Mary Niebler (chair); Jessica Saunders; Hayley Ryckman Ruland;
Adanna M. Smith; Frances Albanese; Benedict J. Kolber*

In this session, alumni were invited to share their experiences of African immersion while they were students at UD and of how that experience has carried with them in their careers and personal lives.

Mary Niebler

Introduction

The University of Dayton's Center for Social Concern, partnering with Dr. Julius Amin, had a more than 20-year history of running a cross-cultural immersion to Kumba, Cameroon. This immersion provided students with home stays in Kumba, job shadowing experiences related to their fields of study, meetings with government officials, tours of various industries, and meetings at universities. The ETHOS (Engineers in Technical Humanitarian Opportunities of Service Learning) Program also provided opportunities for students to travel to Cameroon and work on local engineering-based projects. Although the panelists all experienced their African immersions in different years and specifics, some as long as 20 years ago, a common thread seemed to have been woven through their encounters and take-aways. This common thread has

carried through to their current careers, providing a greater connection to the world as global citizens, which can be manifested through skills and awareness when working across differences in one's hometown to taking the initiative to reach across borders in research on a global scale.

Jessica Saunders

I chose to do the Cameroon immersion in summer 2000 for several reasons. First, I wanted to fulfill a lifelong interest or desire to travel to “Africa.” I had always dreamed of going there, since I was a child, and the opportunity to go with the University of Dayton group was something I didn't want to pass up. Second, I wanted the opportunity to truly learn about a new culture. I had recognized that my life experience to that point was so American-centric and that being immersed in a culture was an opportunity to truly learn about a culture. Finally, the University of Dayton Cameroon Immersion was such a unique program which combined the opportunity not only to travel throughout the country, but also to live with a host family and experience a daily “job” that reflected my interests. I was able to be a part of the “community development” project, which was and continues to be a passion of mine.

A lot to process

While in Cameroon, I realized it was a constant processing of new experiences, feelings, and reflections. It is an intense experience being thrown into such a foreign culture. I was thankful that those in my host family—more specifically, my host brothers, who were about my age—were wonderful in helping me process. I remember constantly processing similarities and differences between the American and Cameroonian cultures: finding common ground but also respecting the value of what makes the various cultures different and unique. I remember thinking more about the United States in the world vs. being better than or against the rest of the world. And there was continuous sensory overload—from new foods to differences in

gender roles—every interaction could have lent itself to deep reflection. Journaling and processing with peers was essential during this time to truly get the most out of the experience.

Truly transformative

The immersion experience truly transformed the trajectory of my career and college experience. I was entering my junior year and took several different classes that were not in my communication major but were of interest after the experience, including courses addressing African history, international politics, and globalization. I wanted to continue to learn and take these classes now with a new perspective of having traveled to a new country. I had a much greater world view, realizing that there was so much more to learn and that each culture is so different. I then spent time between my junior year and senior year in London to gain another experience and with a focus on community voice, which I had really been exposed to when traveling to the various villages and seeing the role that women played in improving the community. To this day, I work to engage the community recognizing unique perspectives of different cultures.

Hayley Ryckman Ruland

Thank you, Dr. Amin and the University of Dayton, for reuniting this UD Cameroonian group. It is nice to meet everyone and learn how everyone's trips to Cameroon have been impactful. I always wanted to travel to Africa growing up because of the mysteriousness of it, and then I had the opportunity through the Engineers in Technical Humanitarian Opportunities of Service Learning program. When I first told my parents that I was going to Cameroon, my dad called the embassy to make sure it was safe—I was one of the first in my family traveling to Africa.

I traveled to Cameroon with three civil engineering friends, and we lived in Kumba Town. I lived with my friend Liz with the Mbanya family. We did laundry, cooked, and really got to know the people around us. With the ETHOS program, the local government

helped line us up with projects. We were somewhat upset by what we were doing, and people were nervous with having us on the job. We felt as if we were wasting our time, that we were probably more in the way than helping. We had ideas of ways to make construction easier—such as build a concrete mixer—but people weren't behind it.

About halfway through the trip, we visited Barombi Village. To get there you had to take a motorbike to the lake and hike for at least a couple miles around the lake. It was so beautiful, the most beautiful and peaceful place I had ever been. But we noticed that the villages in Barombi did not have clean water. While Barombi Lake supplied Kumba town with water, Barombi was not included. When we were at the village we realized that we could help bring water to the community from a nearby spring. The chief expressed to us how his people were dying because of not having clean water. We conducted a feasibility study and were determined to return to Cameroon the next summer to construct the water system with the villagers' help. We were surrounded by great people, but saw both the poverty and happiness of those who live without the clutter we live with.

During the following school year we designed the water system, raised funds, and returned to Cameroon the next summer. This trip we lived in the village at the schoolhouse. The project consisted of a water catchment, pipeline, and three water taps in the village. We also built water filters for people to use in their homes. Villagers were required to participate in the project. During construction of the project we started seeing the challenges of the everyday life style in Barombi village. Just getting materials to the village was difficult with the bad road. We nearly lost a bundle of piping in a canoe. Just getting a bag of concrete! Or the labor involved in getting the materials to the catchment area.

While we lived in what I thought was the most beautiful place on earth, the villagers were forced to live with the struggles we dealt with on a daily basis. We really got to know people in the community—we cooked, we used an outhouse, we took bucket baths, and every day the guys played football. At the end of our stay we had a big celebration. And the UD students were “knighted” *Sang*

Maleif— Mother of the Water, Mother of the Lake (and Father ...). We witnessed happiness and necessity, down to the bare elements of life. And then we witnessed complex government corruption. We did question why ETHOS had to step in and why the government didn't provide this necessity. I was frustrated with the government during this project, but I also saw the good in the people wanting to care for their neighbors.

This experience in Cameroon left me wanting to continue to travel and learn. I got an internship job with the International Medical Corps and was asked by my boss—with a day's notice—to go to Haiti to help with the response to the cholera outbreak after the earthquake. Of course I accepted, wanting to learn. This was my first emergency response and was an eye-opener. I assisted in four cholera treatment units. Doctors and nurses knew nothing about cholera when the outbreak first occurred. I realized during this trip just how valuable our education and health care system are.

We have all heard of the Holocaust, but how many of us are familiar with the Khmer Rouge? When in graduate school at the University of Oklahoma, I was planning for my research trip to Cambodia and realized how little I knew about their history, the genocide of nearly 2 million people that took place between 1975-1979. This trip made me realize how much I don't know around the world. What is taught in history class is selective. It is our responsibility to share with others what we learn from our travel experiences and to keep history alive.

I now live in a small town in Wyoming, which none of these trips could have prepared me for. While I am not traveling as much, I am trying to learn as much as I can about other cultures and make an impact where I am now. I won't know everything, but I have an open mind and continue to ask others about their lives and experiences. I love reading and encourage you to read to learn about other places. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author and has some great books and TED talks available. Thank you.

Adanna M. Smith

My name is Adanna Smith. I attended the University of Dayton from 2012 through 2016. I visited Cameroon for the first time during the summer of 2013, and I returned a second time during the summer of 2016. Once I graduated from the University of Dayton, I moved to Baltimore, Maryland, to pursue a career in law. After three long years I have finally reached my goal of becoming an attorney. My choice to become an attorney was largely due to my Cameroon experiences. Cameroon shaped my global viewpoint, helped me discover what I am truly passionate about, and began me on a career path that I hope will allow me to effect change in my community, my country, and the world!

Why I chose to visit Cameroon

When I was a little girl, I had big dreams of growing up and becoming a doctor. Throughout my childhood I did everything I could think of to prepare for my exciting career in medicine. I participated in forensic and science camps, I applied to medical programs for high schoolers. I had even worked in hospitals and doctors' offices domestically. Nonetheless, I wanted to pursue my passion for medicine beyond the borders of America, and the University of Dayton had the perfect opportunity for someone like me. When I was first admitted to UD, I heard about the different immersion programs that Campus Ministry offered. The Cameroon trip was unique because it allowed students to explore and experience Cameroonian culture, but it also gave students an opportunity to work in their respective fields of interest. I learned that if I went to Cameroon I would be allowed to work in a hospital. I was instantly determined to take this trip before I graduated.

Another reason I wanted to visit Cameroon was that my mother lived and taught in Nigeria for a year after she graduated from the University of Dayton. While I was growing up, she always told me stories about how much she loved her experience in Nigeria. I, too, wanted to go to Cameroon and experience the change and growth

that my mother had described all those years. I was excited for the opportunity to go to the motherland and experience not only a culture that was different, but also a culture I knew would resonate with me. I wanted to go to Cameroon to be transformed as an individual, but I never could have imagined that Cameroon would change me in such a drastic way.

My expectations about my trips to Cameroon

Before I went to Cameroon I intentionally did not create expectations about what my experience would entail. I wanted to go to the country and experience everything it had to offer without any preconceived notions, expectations, or implicit biases. In a broad sense, I expected to be transformed, enjoy a different culture, and make life-long relationships. My expectations were minimal because I truly wanted to immerse myself in the culture.

My mother and other Black American students who had gone on the trip told me about some of their experiences. They warned me that some of the Cameroonians would ignore me and flock to the white students who were on the trip. They also informed me that some Cameroonians associated Black Americans with negative stereotypes and would treat me accordingly. Although I understood the warnings, I didn't allow them to obscure my viewpoint when I went to Africa. I still went knowing that it was going to be the best experience of my life, and I didn't let anything, or anyone influence me in a way that would stifle my experience, or act as a barrier to the full potential of my global growth. My mother continuously reminded me to take this opportunity and make it my own unique experience. She kept telling me that it was going to be different and new, but she also assured me that I was going to fall in love with Cameroon. And she could not have been more right!

Experiencing Cameroon

I had the opportunity to go to Cameroon on two separate occasions. Both of my experiences were magnificent and unique in their own way. The first time I went to Cameroon, I can remember

landing in Douala and coming out of the airport and being greeted by people who looked like me but who could also easily tell I was a foreigner! I remember getting on the bus and travelling to Kumba. Once we arrived in Kumba we went to Dr. Amin's family home and everybody was so welcoming. We were greeted by our homestay families, other members of the community, and a huge meal. One thing about Cameroonians is they are going to feed you—and I knew, as someone who enjoys eating, I was right at home!

I was introduced to the family I would be staying with, the Ebens. My homestay mother was a delegate and legislator; my father was a doctor with his own practice. The Ebens were so welcoming, and it was amazing to have a homestay family that really treated me like I was one of their children. Mommy would cook for me, she would hug me and comfort me, she helped me with my laundry, and she always made sure that we did not stay out too late. It was wonderful to be treated as a member of the household. I enjoyed eating family meals and spending time with the family. We went to church together, and although I'm not a Catholic, it was still amazing to be able to fellowship, sing, and worship with people from a different culture.

The second time I went to Cameroon, I stayed with a different homestay family. Once again, my experience was amazing, and once again I was treated as a member of the family. I helped with chores, I did laundry, I even sat in the kitchen and tried to help my homestay mommy cook. She taught me how to make egusi soup and pepper sauce (which I still use in my food to this day). With both of my homestay families I truly felt at home. When I left Cameroon, both of my families told me that I would always have a place in their homes and in their hearts, which was special to me.

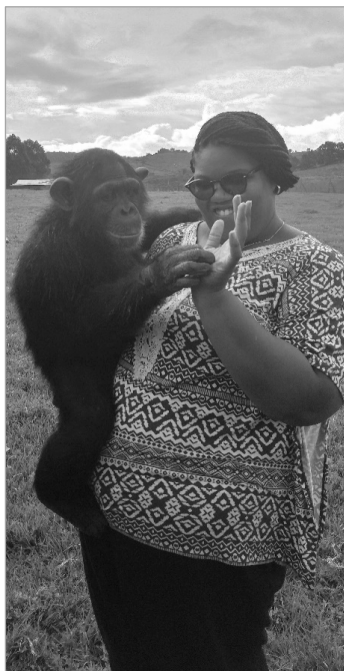
I did not get homesick very often while I was in Cameroon, which was largely due to the fact that I had a family while I was there. Cameroonian culture is centered around community. Everyone looks out for everyone. When I was in Kumba, the children would run around and play freely because the whole community was watching out for them. Sometimes when I would catch a cab, I would have only large bills of currency and the cab drivers would

not have enough change to give me. In these instances, people would pay for me—not because I didn't have enough money, but because I had too much. People in the community would also warn me about things I should and should not to do. The longer I stayed in Cameroon, the more comfortable I felt. I got to know people around the town and would see them when I was walking to and from work. Everybody was so kind, generous, and loving, and so I felt like I was a part of the Kumba community.

Immersing myself in the community and culture of Cameroon was affirming for me as a Black woman. It was inspiring for me as a Black American to see people who looked like me in every walk of life. I saw Black doctors, Black lawyers, Black congressmen, Black chiefs of villages, Black businessmen, Black princes—everyone was Black, and it was encouraging to see a community of Black people working and living together. In America, many times the visible Black figures are athletes or musicians, and it's rare to see Black people highlighted in professional positions, such as CEOs, doctors, or lawyers. When the group travelled throughout Cameroon, wherever we stopped—be it a University, a village, a palace, or the Town Hall—everyone in charge of those places looked like me, and that was one of my favorite parts of my trip!

During the second half of the trip, the group traveled to different cities in Cameroon to experience Cameroon outside of Kumba. Everywhere we went, people greeted us and welcomed us with smiles and kindness. Both in Kumba and the other cities we visited, I became aware of my privileged status as an American. I was seen as smart and elite because I was an American, which was a novel experience for me—a Black American woman. Nonetheless, I knew that my being an American was not the only reason that I was treated like royalty. I was treated so well because that's just how the people of Cameroon are.

While visiting places all across Cameroon, I saw enormous wealth and extreme poverty. Many times, western media portray Africa as being a poor continent with little to offer. However, travelling around the country made it clear that Africa and Cameroon are dynamic and diverse places. There were people who were wealthy beyond measure. For example, we visited a tea plantation owned by one single man. He owned thousands of herds of cattle and horses, and he had his own personal zoo with chimpanzees (of course, I got to hold one!). The plantation was so vast that no matter where you stood, if you looked in any direction, as far as you could see, that land belonged to him. And although I was exposed to instances of immense poverty, I also saw wealth and innovation. Cameroon, just like any place on earth, is an eclectic country that does not fit into a single box.



My time at the Kumba District Hospital

Both times I visited Cameroon, I worked at the Kumba District Hospital. I worked in the children's ward and the maternity ward, and I also did a little bit of work in the surgical units. I absolutely loved my time at the hospital, and it was the most transformative aspect of my Cameroon experience.

As I previously mentioned, when I entered UD as an undergrad in 2012, I knew I was going to grow up and become a doctor. So naturally I was very excited to have the opportunity to work at the District Hospital. Because I was an American, the doctors and nurses automatically had a lot of faith in my (non-existent) ability to

perform medical procedures and operations, even though I didn't have any of the qualifications. They would ask me if I wanted to deliver a baby or whether I wanted to insert IV lines and give injections. My answer was always no because I knew that I didn't have the skill set, but it was very interesting to me that they were so trusting of my ability to perform medical tasks based solely on the



fact that I was an American coming from an American university.

Although I didn't do any of the more complex medical procedures, I did help out with day-to-day rounds and operations. I would accompany the doctors on their rounds as they gave their diagnoses and administered treatment, and I took patient vitals. After women gave birth, the nurses would help take care of the babies by washing them every day. Washing newborn babies quickly became one of my favorite daily tasks. I also

watched several natural and caesarean births, and I would dress the newborns in their first outfits and put vitamin D on their eyes. I definitely enjoyed the hands-on experience that I had at the hospital.

While washing babies and taking temperatures, I noticed how prevalent the community culture was in the hospital. The hospital structure was vastly different from United States hospitals. One major difference is that patients in Cameroon are required to pay for their services and necessary medical supplies before they receive treatment. Therefore, if someone cannot afford a particular item needed for the treatment, he or she may not receive treatment. For example, one of the most common ailments in the hospital was

malaria, which commonly carries with it a fever. So, if a patient could not afford to buy a mercury thermometer, then the doctors had no way of monitoring temperature—which is critical for treating and monitoring the progression of malaria in a patient. It really saddened and frustrated me to see how people could be refused care if they couldn't afford particular medical supplies.

Although someone could be turned away who could not afford medical supplies, many people in the hospital—including the doctors and nurses—would donate money and help people if they could not afford treatment. I remember one time there was a woman who was due to give birth, and she was carrying twins. She thought that she was going to be able to have a natural birth, so she had only enough money to pay for the natural birth. The doctors discovered that there was a complication and the mother would have to deliver her twins by caesarean section. The c-section cost twice as much as a natural birth, and she didn't have enough money. I watched the mother break down because she was panicking about how she was going to give birth to her children. Here's what she did. She went around the hospital and she asked for assistance. And many people gave her money. By the end of the day she had collected enough money to have her c-section. A part of me was devastated that this mother had to make such an important decision about the health of her children without having the benefit of any health insurance. But I was also very humbled and in complete awe because the experience focused my perspective and allowed me to see the beauty in a community coming together to support that mother.

I also loved the familial culture that was present throughout the hospital, and I made a lot of long-lasting relationships while working there. I became very close with the doctors and nurses I worked with, and I keep in contact with many of them to this day. The doctors were willing to teach me everything they knew. They showed me different ways to treat patients and explained why they chose certain procedures over others. They had to be strategic in treating their patients because they had access to only a limited amount of resources. I was amazed at their diligence, their intelligence, and their capability to do their jobs with excellence despite not having

nearly the amount of resources as a standard American or Western hospital. I can honestly say that those doctors were my superheroes, and I enjoyed going to the hospital every day, working alongside them to help improve people's lives.

Although my experiences at the hospital were overwhelmingly positive, there were things that I witnessed that were heartbreaking. I witnessed a young boy pass away because the doctors were unable to get him an oxygen machine in time. There were only two oxygen machines in the entire hospital. I heard his mother wailing over her son, and it broke me. I realized that maybe I was not suited to work in hospitals for the rest of my life. I understood that the doctors and nurses had to become accustomed to death and dying in order to do their jobs well, and I was not sure I could ever become accustomed to that aspect of being a doctor.

When I was given the opportunity to return to Cameroon in 2016, I wanted to come up with a way to thank the doctors and nurses for welcoming me and caring for me. I also wanted to show my appreciation for the work that they were doing at the hospital. I wanted to help make their jobs a little bit easier. So before I went back to Cameroon for the second time, I decided to ask my community and my church family to donate money and medical supplies. After the medical drive, we had collected over 150 pounds of medical supplies, including Band-Aids, digital thermometers, gloves, antiseptic wipes, and other things that were necessary for the hospital to function. Once we got the medical supplies over to Cameroon, the local government distributed the supplies to all the hospitals in Kumba.



The doctors were ecstatic and grateful because they now had more of the tools they needed to do their jobs. I was ecstatic to be able to give back to a community that welcomed me with open arms. I was ecstatic to be able to champion a cause that would positively impact people who loved and cared for me and who are passionate about loving and taking care of other people.

Fun Memories



My absolute favorite memory was during my first trip to Cameroon when I got to name a baby after me. While working at the hospital I became very close with one of the ward maids—she was like a second mother to me. During my stay she was very pregnant with a little baby girl. One day we were sitting in the children's ward and she looked at me and said, “I want you to name my baby.” I laughed because I thought she was joking. About five minutes passed and she asked, “Have you come up with a name for my baby yet?” I knew that in many African cultures the

meaning of a name is significant. I wanted to make sure that I knew the meaning of the name I gave to the baby. I decided to give the baby my middle name—Maisha—which means bringer of laughter in Swahili, and I gave her my first name for her middle name. My first name, Adanna, is an Igbo name that means my “father's daughter.”

Our names ended up being the inverse of one another. I am Adanna Maisha and my Cameroonian baby is Maisha Adanna. After I gave the baby her name, everyone in the hospital started calling her baby Maisha before she was born—and they started calling me Maisha. The entire time I worked in the hospital, everyone was calling me by my middle name. The doctors, nurses, and long-term patients knew me and knew about baby Maisha. As I mentioned, for part of the trip the group leaves Kumba and travels to other parts of Cameroon. I was so worried that I would come back to Kumba and baby Maisha would not be born yet. I thought I was going to have to go all the way back to the U.S. without meeting the baby I named.



The day we came back from traveling, I went straight to the hospital. As soon as I got there, everyone was telling me, “Baby Maisha is here! Baby Maisha is here! Your baby is here!” I went straight to the maternity ward and there was my little tiny baby, named Maisha Adanna, and she is my namesake in Cameroon. I was so overjoyed. And I held her, and I looked at her, and I just could not believe that I was leaving this amazing country having named a child after me.

In 2016 when I came back, she had grown up so much! I brought her books to read. And toys! She had grown up into such a cute, sassy little girl! To this day I still talk to my Cameroonian mom and baby Maisha! She is almost 7 years old, and this story still sounds unreal to me, but she is one of my favorite memories and greatest treasures from Cameroon!



Another one of my favorite memories outside the hospital was my developing the greatest friendship with Tanyi Enoh Efangafa. Tanyi was one of our in-country contacts. The first time we met, we introduced ourselves—and then became the best of friends! He would take me places and show me around. He introduced me to his family, and he and I developed such a special bond. When we travelled to other parts of the country, we would find a couch and sit and talk. He would tell me about his life in Cameroon and I would tell him about my life in America. We compared and contrasted our life experiences and learned that, although we were two different people from across the world, we had so many similarities between our cultures. I always felt safe with Tanyi. We laughed and listened to music together on the long bus rides, and he really became like a brother to me during my first trip.

When I returned to the United States, we never lost contact. We talked on WhatsApp and over Facebook. When I told him that I was coming back in 2016, we were both so excited to reconnect. Our bond was just as strong as before! I truly would have had a completely different experience in Cameroon had it not been for Tanyi being there the entire time. Even after I left and returned to the U.S. for the second time, we never lost contact. We still talk to this day, and I truly consider him my brother. I think our relationship is

one of the most valuable things I gained from Cameroon. Our friendship is demonstrative of the fact that, even on a global scale, there are plenty of similarities between people who come from different backgrounds. There is beauty in the differences of cultures, but there's also beauty in the similarities. Being able to connect with someone and form a long-term relationship with someone that I met halfway across the world is amazing and indescribable, and I am so glad that it is something that I have to remember.

How Cameroon changed me

When I returned to the United States after visiting Cameroon in 2013, I could not stop talking about my trip! My mentors, family, and friends noticed that while I talked about my experience working in the hospital, what I was really passionate about was the inequity in global healthcare systems. Many people encouraged me to abandon my dream of going to medical school and consider taking up a career in law. I thought about it for a long time, and I understood and agreed with the advice I was receiving. I started researching global health law, which was a relatively new legal field, and then I decided I was going to go to law school. I spent my junior and senior years of undergrad school learning all I could about the legal field. I applied to law school, got accepted, and moved to Baltimore. I graduated law school, passed the bar, and was sworn in as an attorney. I hope now to pursue a career in healthcare law and international law, and hopefully reach a point where the international law and the healthcare law intersect.

Cameroon clearly was a catalyst for me becoming the woman I am today. The experience changed my life and showed me how I could effect meaningful change. I owe Cameroon and the people of Cameroon endless gratitude. Cameroon will always be a second home to me. It will always hold a special place in my heart. I cannot wait until I go back.

Thank you to Dr. Amin, my friends, mentors, my mother, and the University of Dayton for being a part of this amazing journey.

Frances Albanese

I went to Cameroon in the summer of 2010 after my freshman year. There was so much to process from the immersion; I'm grateful for the opportunity to participate on this panel and reflect on the experience. Even now I feel as if I have only touched the surface. When I first came back from that trip, I just felt overwhelmed with all that there was to process, and that manifested in my sharing only short anecdotes, phrases in pidgin, or pictures—not even beginning to try to talk about the effects that it had on me personally or how it affected by faith, my career path, my understanding of myself. I am very thankful that, although I do not regularly journal, I was dedicated to keeping a daily journal during that trip (which has actually been in my bedstand for 10 years and which I have rarely re-read).

Just briefly about the trip. I spent 1 month in Cameroon. When the plane landed in Cameroon, I will never forget that people clapped and cheered; this is the only experience I have had with people cheering on an airplane, and so it was apparent immediately that there was something joyful about Cameroon. We travelled to Yaounde, Bamende, and Doala, and we found a home in Kumba, where we lived for about two weeks with a host family. There I gained an African mother, father, and older and younger siblings—the Njikam family. I'll never forget my mom there hugging me and telling me that I have to tell my mother that now I have a new mom in Africa. Other details: we toured industries, including a rubber factory as well as tea, banana, and bottle factories; we met with students, from whom I first learned about a conflict between Anglo and Francophone Cameroonians; we met an ambassador and a chief; I visited the home of our in-country coordinator; I visited an orphanage, the school that my mother ran.

I had also forgotten, until reading my journal, that I was supposed to have a two-week placement in the Community Development Center, but that on the morning of our first day, I was transitioned to the Ejed Clinic instead. This is where I spent two weeks shadowing doctors, nurses, and a lab technician. I'd spent

little time in hospitals and clinics in America, and this was my first exposure to work a medical placement. I learned how to diagnose typhoid and yellow fever from blood work, I learned how to complete intake for patients, I watched surgery. And I also witnessed the process of dying for the first time—from a man who had come into the clinic in respiratory distress and likely shock.

I had never realized it before, but I wrote in my journal that maybe I would pursue a career in healthcare—I had thought nursing—and this was probably the first time that had crossed my mind. I now work as a speech-language pathologist in a children’s hospital, where I work with patients who have feeding/swallowing disorders and with infants and children who have acute language/cognitive deficits. I had always attributed my career path to working with children with disabilities, but I really put together for the first time while reviewing the journal entries that I may have gone the medical route in speech pathology because of this early experience in Cameroon.

More importantly, an overarching theme in my journal and one that I am still processing now is the theme of service. I had always wanted to go to Africa since I was a child, and at the start of the trip, I found myself feeling incredibly selfish about taking the summer to have an experience that I thought of as purely for myself. I typically worked at a summer camp for adults with disabilities, and so I felt really bad about leaving that work to go and explore. I was naïve in thinking I would get to hike and see animals in addition to spending time with a host family. I think I was picturing an idyllic village. But I also pictured myself as a helper. When I got to Cameroon, a huge part of the challenge was that immersion was way different than I had pictured it. We were experiencing firsthand the deep and lasting effects of colonialism. I also experienced being a minority for the first time and what it means to be “white man” in a country where white men had ingrained the mindset that whiteness equals more importance/betterness. I struggled with the set-up that I was not allowed to even help in my home. I witnessed whiteness in public too, getting myself and my classmates priority treatment, not needing to wait in lines, getting free passes, etc. I felt ashamed and confused.

After witnessing that person die in the clinic, where I was completely helpless, and then coming home to hear that I was not allowed to participate in chores or housework (my host family was preparing for a big event at home), I remember going to talk to Dr. Amin. I wrote in my journal:

I felt so trapped. I feel at times completely useless here. I could do nothing for that man and I can never help in the house. I am serving no one. I have no control over what or when I eat, my time, the people I'm with or anything. I talked to Sabina¹, and she said I shouldn't be offended and trapped—it's just the culture ("We love you, you're my sister."). Dr. Amin ... talked about the role of colonialism in Cameroon—there is still very much a feeling that white people are superior here (thus "The work is too hard" equals "This isn't white man's work"). Also he said that this trip is about education—education in ways we don't understand yet. And also service through education. That we don't get or give a qualitative type of service, but a kind of service that will hit us and others later, and that our impact may never be understood by us.

This hit me hard, reading it in my journal last week. I think for the first time I understood better that that trip was not just about experiencing a culture, but about providing service to one another by being there to listen to each other's stories. Service offered through learning, and listening, and sharing, and also service through experiencing humility. I learned—and am learning—that, in order to be a servant, you have to first come from a place of understanding. Sometimes that process includes challenging the expectations that you have about yourself. My time in Cameroon seeped into my personhood and became a part of me.

¹ Sabina Obenakam, in-country coordinator.

Whether I realized it then or not (I didn't!), traveling to Cameroon afforded me the opportunity to respond more thoughtfully to the needs in my immediate community and to those around me through listening and sharing. It set into motion a changed course for my remaining time at UD. Following the trip to Cameroon, I went on to two separate global, but domestic, experiences: a week-long trip to El Paso, Texas, for a border-culture immersion that was also supposed to include time in Juarez, Mexico; and a trip to Los Angeles to meet with students from the Marianist schools of Chaminade in Hawaii and St. Mary's in San Antonio, Texas.

The domestic trips were to learn about the experience of living on the border and about the stories of immigrants, to learn about the Marianists and in LA particularly, to learn about how the Marianist character relates to serving and being in solidarity with the underprivileged and the poor. In these two places I had the opportunity to meet with refugees, immigrants at a women's shelter, Marianist brothers and sisters, former gang members, and Father Greg Boyle, who helps them re-integrate into safe and supportive community.

But it was the immersion experience in Cameroon that helped give me the tools to be a better listener and observer for these experiences, which were in turn transformative for me. Concretely, the experience in LA solidified for me that I wanted to become a lay-Marianist, and I joined a community of 12 classmates that following semester in the lay-Marianist formation under the guidance of AJ and Joan Wagner from Campus Ministries. And all of these experiences have helped inspire me to find ways to get involved in new communities that are accessible to me. I am currently involved in my Catholic church, where I participate in the Outreach and Social Justice Committees, which are partly dedicated to understanding the experiences of refugees and immigrants in our community from Central and South America and from Asia (the Karenni population). Also because of my time in Cameroon, I find myself to be a better advocate for my patients, particularly those who are from a different culture or speak another language. I never leave a patient's room without first learning how to say "thank you" in their language. I

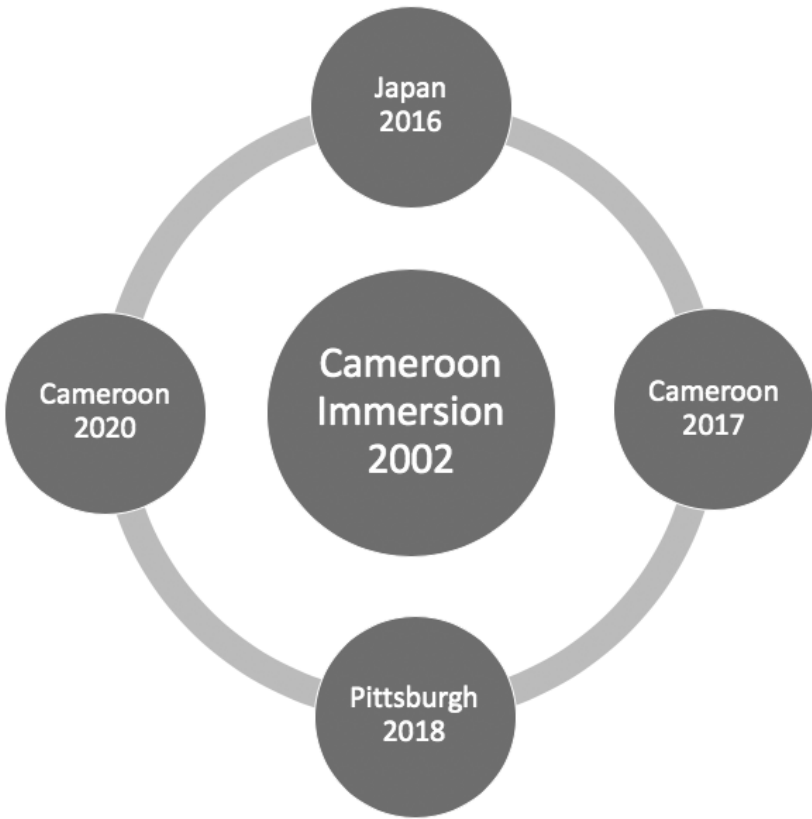
have a different relationship with time, too, and with the concept of instant gratification. I practice gratitude in a different way, and I catch myself looking up when I am walking and feeling lucky to be in a certain place—like I felt one day walking home in Kumba from the Ejed Clinic. I am a better listener, and though it’s a learning process, I am more sensitive to issues of race and privilege.

Traveling to Cameroon was difficult, but also joyful, inspiring, life-altering. It affected me behind the scenes in ways, as Dr. Amin said, that I’m still processing today, and that I may never fully understand. It has taught me the importance of listening to each other’s stories, learning about another region and culture and history, learning about people’s struggles, beliefs, what unifies them, what makes them proud and gives them joy. I’m forever grateful and humbled for the opportunity to be immersed in Cameroon and the family that I gained there—and to discover the service of learning and listening.

Benedict J. Kolber

Natural Products Drug Discovery in Cameroon

This presentation highlights how my past immersion experience in Cameroon in 2002 eventually led to a major part of my professional experience as a biology professor at Duquesne University. The story goes from Cameroon in 2002, to Japan in 2016, back to Cameroon in 2017, and beyond.



When I went to Cameroon in 2002 I had the opportunity to work on a social psychology research project with Dr. Charles Kimble in the Psychology Department. Dr. Kimble, who passed away a number of years ago, taught me a lot about qualitative research, something I use today in my lab's work.

After completing my undergraduate research with Dr. Kimble and Dr. Carissa Krane (Department of Biology), I was fortunate to attend Washington University in St. Louis for graduate school in neuroscience. At Wash U, I studied the role of hormones in depression and anxiety. Following my Ph.D., I stayed at Wash U as a post-doctoral research fellow in the lab of Dr. Robert Gereau IV, where I had the opportunity to expand my knowledge set to include the field of pain and the importance of academics in the drug discovery process for pain and psychiatric disease.

I left Washington University in 2011 to join the faculty at Duquesne University in the Department of Biological Sciences and the Chronic Pain Research Consortium. My research laboratory at Duquesne involves three foci. First, we utilize non-pharmacological approaches to treat chronic musculoskeletal pain. We just completed a phase II clinical trial comparing the impact of combined mindfulness meditation and aerobic exercise on chronic low back pain. Second, we study the amygdala, an area in the brain involved in emotional regulation and pain, using basic science approaches. Third, and most relevant to our Cameroon work, we do drug discovery for pain, anxiety, and depression. We work with existing FDA-approved drugs, such as Narcan (naloxone), to help fight the opioid epidemic. We also work with pharmaceutical companies to test novel drugs for pain. Finally, we do natural products drug discovery. Our longest program in the natural products space involves working with marine cyanobacteria. We have been able to collaborate with researchers in Curacao, Panama, and Puerto Rico to isolate novel compounds from these organisms. We use these compounds as novel chemical scaffolds to design better drugs. This work took me to Japan in 2016 for the International Association for the Study of Pain World Congress on Pain.

While at this conference, I based myself by a large bulletin board that advertised the countries represented at the conference. Beyond the usual suspects—from North America, Europe and Asia—I noticed the flag of Cameroon. I decided to track down the person from Cameroon. This search brought me to the scientific poster of Dr. Téséphore Nguélefack from the Université de Dschang (University of Dschang).

After listening to Dr. Nguélefack, we realized that we could easily collaborate together on his ethnopharmacological natural products research. In ethnopharmacology, researchers explore the use of natural products by people, often by people in rural areas without easy access to western medicine. Dr. Nguélefack's group goes into villages in Cameroon and asks people what they use when they have pain. He then collects samples and specimens of the plant or tree utilized by the villagers in order to rigorously test the

medicinal efficacy of the extracts. Over the last decade, his research group has been able to progress a number of extracts from the villages to the laboratory. However, due to resource limitations at the university, he is not able to easily identify the specific chemicals in the plant extracts that might be providing the benefit. We realized that my group at Duquesne, with the help of my partner, Dr. Kevin Tidgewell, could help in this work. We could isolate the pure compounds and then send those back to Cameroon for a full circle collaboration.

After that Japan conference in 2016, we wrote a small internal grant from Duquesne to fund a trip to Cameroon in 2017. Dr. Tidgewell and I travelled to Cameroon where, in addition to solidifying our collaboration with Dr. Nguielefack, we gave lectures and worked with local scientists. Returning from Cameroon, we were able to get additional funding from the IASP for Dr. Nguielefack to visit Duquesne and the USA in 2018 as well as for us to return this coming summer 2020 in May.²

An example of one of our collaborative projects is our work with a plant *Paulinia pinnata*. This project was led by a graduate student, Pius Pum. We found that extracts from this plant reduced inflammatory pain. An article about this work was recently published in the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*.

As I reflect on the Cameroon immersion, I must credit the program with three elements in my approach to my profession. First, the international experience of the immersion program broke down an invisible barrier to travelling and to experiencing new cultures. Second, the program opened my eyes to different opportunities. If I had not participated in the program, there is almost no chance that I would have formed that collaboration with Dr. Nguielefack. Third, the preparation that we did for the Immersion program provided a valuable skill set for travelling to different areas. I also make an effort to learn languages, customs, and history of any foreign country that I travel to. The Immersion program has made it very easy for me to appreciate other cultures—without judgment.

² The May 2020 immersion was canceled in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

