

Jamaica Summer 2009

The following is a collection of short reflections from the Jamaica Service trip 2009. Each of the thirteen students that took this course has contributed to this collection and each reflection will be very different. Like the reflections, each of the students in this course brought a unique set of skills and knowledge, as well as a wide array of backgrounds; thus, each individual's experience was powerful, yet personal.

Thanks for your generous contributions!

Spending ten days in Jamaica wasn't something I ever planned on doing in my life. Spending ten days in Jamaica on a



service learning project never even crossed my mind. But ultimately, it was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life. The trip was specifically planned and offered through Bellarmine to teach me things about Education and my chosen profession, Social Work. In addition to learning invaluable lessons about how to care for children of different capacities, I learned more about myself than anything else. The most poignant moment of the trip for me was when we were leaving the West Haven Children's Home and I got teary eyed. I realized that I made a bond with the kids there and it taught me how powerful just a few days can be. The fact that, as an adult, I can make such an impact on a child's life really surprised me and I've been able to treat kids much different with that in mind. The opportunity in Jamaica was truly an amazing one and one I will never forget.

My experience in Jamaica was influenced greatly by the time we spent at West Haven. I have no educational background, and no experience working with handicap children. I was thrown far beyond the lines of my comfort zone at West Haven. There was a lot of physical contact between myself and the kids. That made me uncomfortable. I also had trouble communicating with the kids. It was very difficult



not being able to easily communicate with them. That was my biggest struggle. I am used to communicating with people with ease and a flow of words. It was amazing to watch them communicate with each other, though. They knew exactly what the others wanted. Nonverbal communication is seen every day in the United States and elsewhere, but it has never been that blatant as it was at West Haven. I totally shut down at the end of the first day when the kids were eating lunch. I closed myself off and sat in a corner. No one directly asked me to help feed a child, but I would have refused. Being put outside my comfort zone has made me more aware of all the difficulties that others face in life. I was really uncomfortable

during our time at West Haven, but now I am thankful that I had those experiences in Jamaica.

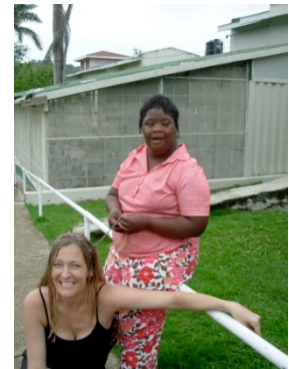
In the last few days, I've really started to think about how I could integrate worldly affairs like Jamaica and Iran into my classroom so that students understand what is going on in the world. I'm so sick of being ignorant of happenings around the world! I want to teach the students I encounter how to not be ignorant of these things and to NOT fail "American" history. This means that I must first learn how to overcome my ignorance. When a student who had taken the trip the prior year said that she read a lot last summer so that she could have a response when someone challenged her ideas, that really struck me because I feel like that a lot of the time. I feel like there's so much I need to know and understand and I don't even know where to start.

I have never been a great speller. To this day, I have to write words down before telling someone how to spell something. This is why I am still amazed when fifty six-year-olds respond without hesitation when asked to spell “community.” Their teacher said she did not put limits on what they wanted to do. When I got back, I was at a family function and asked my cousin who just finished first grade if she could spell community. My cousin looked at me as if I was speaking another language. This is where I become confused. I see those children in Jamaica and think of the potential they have in their education. I then think of some of their living situation and become frustrated.

Though limited in resources, they are learning more than some children in the United States, yet because those children were born in the United States, they will more than likely be better off than the children in Jamaica. This is because the unemployment rate is higher because the country is in an overwhelming debt that they have been working to pay off for the past forty years. From now on when I think of community, I think of Jamaica and the community at Wee Care Basic School because they allowed us to be a part of their community and help open my eyes to the larger picture involved.



Reflecting back on the course title, *Education for Liberation or Domination*, I can honestly say that this course was a liberating experience for me. For the first time in my life, an educative experience has forced me to find meaning and answers to questions that were not just hand-fed to me. I have a strong passion for education and believe that my purpose in this world will come in the form of educating though I am not sure how yet. I love elementary education and special education, but suddenly am not sure if that is the way that I can leave my mark. Sure, I can give one year of liberating education to my students but at such a young age, how much of a difference can one year make when they have ten or fifteen more years in a system that is set up to dominate. What can I do to change education so that we can teach individuals to make a difference and not to perpetuate the current systems in place? I am not sure if I am ok working within the system when I know that the system MUST be changed. Another idea comes from Mrs. Kaye (one of our teacher partners) who made a point at our dinner that kind of started me rethinking my purpose and that was something along the lines of how can we teach kids that come to school hungry. Why do kids have to come to school hungry? This is a problem not only in Jamaica, but right here in Louisville. In a world that has enough food to feed everyone, why do millions of kids go to school hungry every day? I believe that I can help change that. My career will probably start in a classroom but I am not sure where it will go from there. I might end up working with teachers or administrators or just in the community as an educator. The prospect of not knowing is both scary and invigorating at the same time. For the first time in my life, I do not want my life figured out for me. I will grow with each day and need to be able to embrace myself and life and wherever that will take me. I want to own my life and my work and that is where this experience has taken me. Education for liberation is about owning yourself and your experiences. It is about figuring out the answers to life’s questions on your own and understanding that most questions do not have a right or wrong answer, something that is not shared in a dominating system. I happen to believe that liberation in a classroom is found in making a classroom a democratic place. Thank you all for making this a democratic class and allowing and even pushing us to own the experience in Jamaica. It was about much more than taking the lead and sharing the work, which are important but not as significant as what happened as a result of taking hold of the reigns. Finding the path of your own



journey gives you a sense of empowerment and for me a voice that I never knew I had. Up until Jamaica, I was great at leading OTHERS people's work. Taking someone's vision or idea and owning it. I could always meet other's standards. Now, I feel like I have both the responsibility and the ability to have great ideas and create change. In fact, I believe that it is the only way that I can truly be who I am.

Our trip to Jamaica was a particularly moving experience for me, especially as a future educator. It was enlightening to experience the education system of Jamaica and compare/contrast it with our own education system. One particular experience that I found interesting was the time spent at Wee Care Basic school. In Jamaica, the basic school teaches students anywhere from 3-6 years of age. I was astounded by the number of students enrolled in the school, the limited space the school offered and the level of education being provided. Most classes had at least 25-30 students, being taught in a 12 x 12 classroom, just large enough for the appropriate number of desks and a chalkboard. Moving space was hard to come by. And yet, the school was actually running very smoothly.



The teachers were loving and demonstrated patience and care for their students. Although supplies and space were limited, they worked with what they had and succeeded in educating these children. It really moved me to see how these teachers could teach not only the curriculum but also life lessons and integrated religion into each day. It seemed they had so many factors working against them, factors that most U.S teachers will never face, and yet these teachers were so positive and the students were so bright. Many could read and spell words that most 7-8 year olds in the U.S are learning to spell. This proves to me that it does not take a significant amount of money and supplies to provide a good education (although it never hurts). In reality, it simply takes a dedication to education and a positive attitude.

For me, going to the Wee Care Basic School was very moving and eye-opening. As education major, I have been exposed to several different schools in the United States, all varying in their level of income and resources. When I was a sophomore, I observed in a very, very low income school where I was advised to leave all valuables at home, and lock my doors upon entering the building so people would not steal my things. The school had very little resources because they scored lowest in Kentucky on standardized testing. On Friday afternoons, the students got a backpack full of food to help them through the weekend while away from school where they are guaranteed two meals a day.

While at Wee Care, I realized that the low income school where I had previously observed looked like a five star resort compared this school. Upon talking to local Jamaicans and others who had previously been on this trip, they said that Wee Care was very typical for a basic school in Jamaica. Around twenty five students



crammed into small, un-air conditioned rooms the size of a large walk-in closets. The teachers had to talk over the other teachers who were also attempting to teach in the room next to them which was simply sectioned off by a chalk board. The students were given a hot meal once a day; only the food was not something I would be willing eat.

Overall, my experience at Wee Care was very beneficial for me since I am about to start student teaching. I realized that I will be very lucky to have my own room with concrete walls separating me from other rooms, not chalk boards. Although I may think I need a larger room than what I am allotted, I have seen students cram into small spaces where there is hardly any walking room and where technology is almost nonexistent. The teachers had a real care and concern for their students; they wanted them to grow and learn how to be contributing citizens. Their true passion, especially considering their circumstances, was a great example and made me want to teach more than ever.

I felt as though, during our time in Jamaica, I was the closest I have ever been to determining who I am. I'm not sure if it was because of the people I was around, the people that I met, the topics that we



discussed, or the time away from my "life", but I was finally comfortable enough to speak my mind. Now that I'm at home, though, I've clammed up. The 'real world' has me completely swamped, I feel like I can't breathe. In Jamaica, I felt free, I felt alive, I felt like I was heard, and I felt different yet the same. Even though it took me about five months to get comfortable speaking up in discussions, in Jamaica I felt as if my voice actually mattered. I didn't fear of being criticized or ridiculed for my thoughts or lack thereof, as I have felt in the past. But I ask myself, as I have asked myself many times before, why do I feel as if I will be criticized and

ridiculed? Why can't I just be comfortable with who I am and what I think? But then the question is still there, who am I exactly? What do I really think? However, I know that my time in Jamaica, especially the time I spent in my niche, teaching the most outstanding group of students at Wee Care Basic, is going to be my rock, my foundation, to answering that question.

I really have been searching inside myself to figure out who I am since we've returned. While I have not come to a conclusion, I hope that I never completely do. I hope that I continually grow, change, and question who I really am. I hope that I keep searching inside myself in order to become a better person for society. Challenging myself to become more knowledgeable, to use critical literacy in the classroom, and to start acting out for the community is what has evolved from this trip. If I do not act on these challenges, please call me out. I want to struggle all year, regardless of what country I am in or whom I am around. I may need help.





I wasn't and am still unable to fully be aware of what took place in Jamaica. I would like to remain optimistic and say that its affects will be long standing and I will realize it with each passing day. But I will never be able to

forget the children we worked with at Wee Care. Never have I had children touch me the way that those kids did, especially in that short a time period. To see and attempt to understand what they go through in their day to day and the way they are able to push it aside and enjoy school did something to me that little else can.

A large part of my reflection after returning from Jamaica was dealing with the guilt I felt because of the life I now live and the subsequent anger for somehow being made to feel guilty, not by the class or the trip, but by the plight of others which my now life-of-privilege helped to created. My parents were forced to flee their broken and dangerous nation in terror. They went from servers in a restaurant to a six digit income. *My family deserves this, my parents deserve this. They worked so hard. We've all worked so hard. We deserve this life.* These thoughts played in my mind over and over while in Jamaica. And then I returned to another repetitive line: *Everyone deserves this life. Everyone deserves a life of dignity and respect. Everyone deserves to be treated humanly.* And yet not everyone will be able to attain such a life. In fact, most people in the world will live in deep poverty, without basic health and human resources, without a basic education.



I have many more questions now, after returning and reflecting. And for me, that is an extremely uncomfortable position to be in. I enjoy having answers and solutions. And the issues we were exposed to in Jamaica are far too complex to be able to have finite answers. The overwhelming nature of the work is daunting but the rewards of dialogue and understanding are far greater than I ever imagined.

Personally, the most life-changing aspects of our trip to Jamaica were the powerful relationships I developed not only with the members of our trip, but also with the friends we met and worked with in Jamaica, at Wee Care Basic School and at West Haven. The Jamaica experience provided me with personal growth in my abilities to dissect myself, the world in



general, and the system that our world functions through; but for me the most important part of our trip wasn't the self-discovery or personal growth I would gain from traveling abroad and doing 'service work'. I found the meaning for my trip in spending time with the children at Wee Care, in discussing education with the amazingly talented teachers at Wee Care, and most of all in spending time at West Haven. The



friendships I gained while spending time with such amazing people are still my favorite part of the trip. I think about our friends daily, and that is one of the most powerful experiences I believe a person can gain from life. We have made friends that will love us all forever, and I know that I will never forget them and their smiles, their open kindness and love for all of us, and the joy I felt while getting to spend time with them.

When I registered to take this course, I looked at an experience in Jamaica as an opportunity to gain valuable teaching experience. Having an opportunity to work with the teachers at Wee Care Basic was one of the most powerful experiences of my teacher training thus far. The teachers at Wee Care had

so much faith in their students and their students lived up to their high expectations. While having dinner with the teachers, one of the teachers shared with me her method of teaching. She told my group that she lets her students lead the instruction in her class. She encourages students to question and then empowers them to find answers to their own questions. It is this kind of teaching that creates independent individuals who are ready to make changes in the world. I valued my experience in Jamaica and can honestly say that not only did my time in Jamaica make me a better teacher, it changed my life.

I can honestly say that the experience in Jamaica was the single most rewarding experience of my more worthwhile time in my life. For me, it wasn't the beautiful view of the ocean that I woke up to every morning or the company of my fellow classmates; it was the lifelong friends that I made along the way.

It was Komiko, trying to convince me that even though she and Nina were the same skin tone, they were completely different.



It was Anna, calling me Auntie Jessica because she wanted me to come home with her.



It was Kevin, telling me he loved me while he kissed me on the cheek.



Most of all, it was an overlooked young man named Burgess's pure enthusiasm as he participate in a simple game of cricket.



Never did I imagine that a man whom I couldn't communicate with could teach me so many valuable lessons. This is the kind of experience that I feel everyone should experience at least once in their lives. I can't even begin to explain all of the life lessons I received while on this trip. I can however say this, it has changed my life forever.