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When Culture Shock can be Good for You

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commentary

When Culture Shock can be Good for You

—Erica Bertolotto (Editor: Jennifer Lee)

Erica Bertolotto graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in a dual major of political science and international affairs.

After graduating from UNH, I moved to London, England, to do my master's in international development at the London School of Economics (LSE). Since then I've been mostly London-based, and during these years countless people have asked me how higher education in the U.S. and in England compare. I tell them about the amazing opportunities I had as a college student in the U.S., especially the research I did with an International Research Opportunity Program (IROP) grant the summer before my senior year. A program like IROP is unfathomable to European students and, in itself, made my UNH experience. But what that opportunity offered wasn't easy.

In the summer of 2005 I spent two months in Iringa, a smallish town in southwest Tanzania, to research child labor in the agricultural plantations of the region. As an Italian living in the U.S., who had already studied in Central America and travelled lots, I thought I was "immune" to culture shock. As it turned out, I was not.

Culture Shock in East Africa

In Tanzania it was upsetting to find high levels of corruption and frustrating to realize that child labor is an extremely complex issue even in its definition, not to mention in the development of policies to address it. But I would be lying if I didn't admit that my greatest challenge was being a young, white, clueless woman in East Africa. I didn't understand the language, much less the culture or communication style, and I didn't know how to handle being constantly singled out as different.

Apparently since then I've grown to not mind when people scream "mzungu" (white person) at me and to be incredibly fascinated by East Africa—but it took time.

My experience in Tanzania, more than I realized at the time, determined what I did after UNH and where I am now. I got into grad school at the London School of Economics because of my field experiences in Central America and Tanzania. I was one of very few people starting my Master of Science degree immediately after my undergraduate degree. Without those experiences I doubt I would have been accepted.

During my master's work at the LSE, I interned at a small charity called Teach A Man To Fish, and worked in their London office on their education projects in East Africa and Latin America. Having already spent some time in those regions, I could contextualize the theory taught in my coursework and thereby better understand the projects of the organization.



The author in native dress in Iringa, Tanzania, 2005.

In 2008, after graduating from LSE, I moved to Peru for a year to work for a couple small non-government organizations (NGOs) on education and income-generation projects. I chose to move to Latin America over Africa because the effects of the Tanzanian culture shock still hadn't worn off, and I didn't think I could handle working in Africa.

Recovery and Back to Africa

When I got back to London, I took a job in the public sector but kept looking for opportunities in the field of international development. In May 2010 my current job was advertised, and it was with the charity where I had interned during my master's work. During my job interview for the position of Programmes Manager at Teach a Man to Fish, I was asked to complete a written exercise: write the outline for a business plan for a school, anywhere in the world, going into as much detail as possible. I wrote the plan for an agricultural school in Iringa, Tanzania. That's how I got my dream job.

Teach a Man to Fish is a London-based charity that works to provide good quality, affordable education to young people around the world by helping schools become financially self-sufficient. We help set up school-based enterprises which generate a profit that is used to cover some of the running costs of the school. At the same time, the students work in these businesses to gain practical skills that will help them find employment upon graduation.



The author (right) meets Jackie Lewis (IROP '09) in Rwanda, summer 2011.

In December 2010 I returned to Tanzania for Teach a Man to Fish's annual conference and to do research to set up income-generating activities at a polytechnic in the west of the country. When I drove with several colleagues back to Dar-Es-Salam, we stopped for lunch in Iringa. I loved being again in the town, even briefly, that gave me such a hard time five years before!

This past August I was in Rwanda doing research to write business plans for a primary and a post-secondary school—and discovering an extremely interesting, very complex country, that increased my fascination with East Africa and is making me consider moving there for a bit longer.

On a Saturday morning during that trip, I had a brunch meeting with the director of a U.S.-based NGO, Generation Rwanda, in the capital Kigali. As we were casually chatting, I mentioned that I had studied at UNH and that the first time I did some work in Africa was thanks to IROP. That's when he said that a young woman now working with them in Rwanda also first went to Africa through IROP. Small world! That evening at Generation Rwanda's inauguration party, I had the pleasure of meeting Jackie Lewis and reminiscing about UNH and IROP with her.

As I told Jackie then, I hope one day to be able to sponsor a UNH student's IROP research. It really is an incredible program and I want to be able to give back something! I would love to start an IROP alumni network, initially through a Facebook group, to keep in touch and share experiences, and hopefully raise some funds and organize reunions around the world!

Read about Erica's and Jackie's IROP research projects at
<http://www.unh.edu/inquiryjournal/06/articles/bertolotto.html>
<http://www.unh.edu/inquiryjournal/10/articles/lewis.html>

Author Bio

*Although she was born in Torino, Italy, **Erica Bertolotto** considers Durham to be her U.S. hometown. Her interest in development work may have been triggered by a visit to Bangkok, Thailand, with her family when she was 13. It was her first exposure to poverty. “I have always been interested in social justice and culture,” she said, “and spending time in developing countries during college confirmed that was what I wanted to do.” In her current position with Teach a Man to Fish, she likes that it is a very small organization so that “I have the freedom to come up with ideas and try to implement them, and I can see the direct impact of my work.” In addition, “I get to travel!” The other side of her work, however, is that “there are too many things I can’t influence or affect.”*