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THE DEEP LEARNING OF A MCNAIR SCHOLAR IN GHANA



Michael Vidal '12 holding a ball and chain used to punish captives at The Elmina Slave Castle in Elmina, Ghana

“When I became an International Affairs (IA) Dual Major, I was clear that I wanted to study abroad in Africa—perhaps because of the similarities to my own culture,” asserts Michael Vidal (Psychology, IA, Women’s Studies ’12), who was raised in both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic (DR). The McNair scholar joined a small group of UNH students who went to Ghana last summer, where he found “sights, sounds and smells, food, climate, and even the mannerisms of the people” that in a core way reminded him of his native DR. His mission was to continue the research he conducted the preceding year on a McNair program in London on access to higher education in the U.K. In Ghana, Michael adapted that previous research to focus on power and privilege and the access to education of underrepresented groups. What he found was that his research question went against cultural norms there and was perhaps premature:

“The government emphasizes that Ghanaians are ‘one people,’ downplaying the country’s ethnic minorities. Perhaps because of the vast challenges of poverty and development, Ghana is not looking seriously at what we here in the West would call equity issues. Gender equality, handicap access, gay and lesbian issues—these are not on a nationwide agenda in Ghana that is focused on meeting basic human needs, creating economic opportunities and raising the overall standard of living.”

While his research proved difficult, the experience itself was transformational. He learned to think outside the box, ask deeper questions and challenge his own findings, including whether his research topic was relevant to present day Ghana. Personally, the experience was also profound for Michael Vidal. “My identity as a person of color was challenged due to my lighter skin and the societal construct there. There was a huge culture of slavery on the island La Espanola, part of which is now the DR. But being in Ghana and visiting Elmina Castle, seeing the shackles and dungeons, and passing through the “door of no return” through which millions of Africans were forced into slavery, was one of those experiences I will never forget.”

His time abroad reinforced his desire to continue his education and become a social justice educator. Michael is thrilled to be accepted into the highly

regarded UMass Amherst graduate program in that field for the fall. “In Ghana, everyday I experienced countless societal differences such as the expression of gender (men holding hands) and the construction of race and color, which was truly eye-opening,” he recounts. “We all think our reality is the only one, or the only ‘true’ one. I ask myself, ‘how in society can each group's reality be validated? How can we connect and integrate them into an inclusive environment that breaks down the walls of fear and exclusion?’”

Connecting and integrating was also Michael's focus at UNH. As the director of the Diversity Support Coalition, in addition to his heavy course load and

research, he has strived to integrate and build connections between psychology and women’s issues and social justice and then take it all to the international level with the help of his IA Dual Major. Lilla Watson, an indigenous Australian activist and writer who has inspired Michael during his tenure at UNH, sums up his feelings about his future path: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

To learn more about Michael Vidal's background as a first-generation college student and to see a video of him addressing the UNH community during this year's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration, please read the recent [article in the College Letter](#) by Susan Dumais.



Vidal at a fishing dock at the Cape Coast Slave Castle

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