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UNH Global

Internship at the U.S. Embassy in Cameroon

Contributed by Ross Conroy '16, Political Science

Tuesday, December 15, 2015

Picture this, working in a developing country, interacting with government officials, fighting terrorism, poverty, corruption and crime, all while operating in another culture, language, and country. It is the type of job that people studying international affairs and political science dream of. I was lucky enough to spend my summer doing just that, working at the U.S. Embassy in Yaounde, Cameroon.

At UNH during the fall semester of 2014 I began searching for a meaningful experience for the coming summer. As a Political Science major, with minors in International Affairs, African Studies, and French I was hoping to find something that combined all my areas of

interest. Writing this after my internship at the U.S. Embassy in Yaounde, I'd say I found it. Motivated by my previous summer's experiences studying abroad in Paris, France and Dakar, Senegal, I knew I wanted to return to a francophone country to improve my language skills. I also knew that I wanted



Ross Conroy (r) accepting an achievement award for contributions to the Embassy from Ambassador Hoza (l)

to return to Africa. I found the application for the State Department Internship online through USAJobs, and applied directly to work in Cameroon at the Embassy there. Luckily enough I was chosen as one of two interns out of over two hundred applicants and received the job.

But why Cameroon? A lot of it was down to wanting a new experience, to learn about and live in a new country and a new culture. I knew that Cameroon was precariously involved in the conflict against Boko Haram, a terrorist organization operating out of Nigeria, and wanted to see this conflict first hand. I knew that working with the US Embassy I would have plenty to do as events in Cameroon and with Boko Haram became more and more carefully watched by the State Department. And, quite honestly, part of my decision came down to sport. I knew Cameroon's soccer (football) team very well, an iconic African side with famous players past and present, led by the world famous star forward Samuel Eto'o. That was what first put Cameroon on my radar, and from there I found that it was a perfect fit for me.

My work with the Embassy began in the Management section, an essential part of every embassy that is responsible for the everyday jobs that all the other sections rely on. While there I heard it referred to as the 'heart and lungs of the embassy' because without it, nothing else could function. While in the management section I worked with utilities, housing, and human resources, and became familiar with all of the intricacies of operations within the embassy. I was able to spearhead a new program for reducing energy consumption within residencies, as well as entertain guests and manage the food and drinks for the annual 4th of July Party, the Embassy's biggest event of the year where we served nearly 1,000 people.



Ross Conroy (in suit) presenting high-achieving students with awards and scholarships at local school in Cameroon



Ross Conroy interacting with local Cameroonian youth

Halfway through my time in Cameroon I switched sections in order to get a wider breadth of experiences. I moved to the Public Affairs Section. It was here where I got to see the Embassy's true work in action and contribute in a really meaningful way. Public Affairs is in many ways the face of the embassy. Public Affairs interacts with citizens, the media, and students in a way that is both personal and meaningful. I was able to interview different organizations, such as NGOs and Civil Society groups to see the work that they are doing in Cameroon with the hope of being able to direct some US funding or support to their causes. I had the chance to lead and participate in discussion forums with university students on topics such as wildlife conservation, US foreign policy, and studying in the United States. I was able to lead programs for children on American culture and history, as well as visiting schools and presenting awards, prizes, and scholarships to top-performing students. My work in this section was broad and also included writing reports to send to Washington, translating french, and attending events in the place of the Ambassador and Public Affairs Officer when they were not available.

Beyond my work experiences, living in Cameroon was quite an adventure. Because of the threat of Boko Haram and violent crime, I had many security measures and restrictions that I was required to follow. All forms of public transportation were forbidden and walking on foot was advised against, even within the city and especially after nightfall. Needless to say that made traveling difficult. The entirety of the North of Cameroon (where Boko Haram is most active) was off limits barring approval from the Ambassador himself and an armed escort. These restrictions made even the simplest of tasks difficult, something as simple as buying groceries could become a 3 to 4 hour endeavor. While all of these restrictions seemed a bit much when I first arrived, it soon became obvious that they were no joke. The threat of injury and attack was very really, especially as a white diplomat. The last week I was in Cameroon, there were 5 lethal suicide bombings in Cameroon, which saw security measures tightened even further. Despite that, I tried to not let such restrictions limit me too much, and I was still able to get out and see much of the city while remaining safe. Haggling in the artisanal markets, visiting the national museum, trying many different kinds of Cameroonian food, and playing for a



Striking Eagles soccer team celebrating a goal, Ross Conroy (rightmost player in white)

local soccer team were some of my highlights. My team, the Striking Eagles, were all Cameroonian employees at the Embassy, and we enjoyed many fine matches, including a 5-0 victory in my final game against the Cameroonian Civil Aviation Authority team.

This internship gave me some incredible experiences, taught me about the foreign service and working abroad and even allowed me to write my own independent research paper where I examined the difficulties facing NGOs operating in Cameroon and the context in which they work. I spent many hours researching, conducting interviews, and putting together my final paper which I hope to present at the undergraduate research conference. Finally and most importantly I think, I met some truly amazing people, from all of the Cameroonians who took me in with open arms and shared their culture and country with me, to all of the incredibly dedicated and intelligent people I worked with at the Embassy, especially our stellar chief of mission Ambassador Michael S. Hoza and my fellow interns. I am thankful for such an incredible opportunity and can't wait to get started on my next adventure when I study post genocide reconstruction and reconciliation in Rwanda and Uganda this coming spring.

Please note: Cameroon is on the U.S. State Department Travel Warning List. Ross successfully petitioned UNH's International Travel Risk Review Committee before going abroad.

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[political science \(/global/tags/political-science\)](/global/tags/political-science)

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[French \(/global/tags/french\)](/global/tags/french)

Countries: [Cameroon \(/global/country/cm\)](/global/country/cm)

News & Events (</global/news-and-events>)

[News \(/global/news\)](/global/news)

[Internship at the U.S. Embassy in Cameroon \(/global/internship-us-embassy-cameroon\)](/global/internship-us-embassy-cameroon)

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[Events Around the Seacoast Area \(/global/events-around-seacoast-area\)](/global/events-around-seacoast-area)

[Buddies Without Borders \(/global/buddies-without-borders\)](/global/buddies-without-borders)

[NH International Seminar \(/global/nh-international-seminar\)](/global/nh-international-seminar)

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