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Community Engaged Learning: Rwanda and SWIM

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CEL Summative Report

Over this past school year I have been fortunate enough to have taken part in two amazing CEL opportunities both abroad, and here in the London community. Completing my first credit through service learning abroad in Rwanda at Centre Marembo was an experience I will never forget and the lessons it taught me really carried forward into my second placement of working at Single Women in Motherhood. While both experiences were transformative in terms of the skills I developed, the wonderful people I met, and the work I completed, they both had unique qualities that have enhanced my perspective of what volunteer work really means and the importance of learning how to properly help others achieve their goals.

Being in Rwanda for five weeks this past spring has been a most interesting and eye-opening experience. Before this opportunity arose, I had always been fascinated by the thought of traveling to Africa and learning about the many cultures and histories of the people that occupied the region, but I never thought I would have the opportunity to make it a reality. Hearing about this course and being motivated to participate in it by not only my family and friends but also my own faculty gave me the incentive to take it on. Within the first few days of the course, I knew the work would be challenging, but in the most rewarding sense. While I learned a lot about the history, politics, and cultural traditions of Rwanda during the school year, nothing could have prepared me for what I was exposed to during my placement, when I was fully immersed in the culture. Before we left, I had a limited idea as to what exactly what I would be doing there, and I was told to avoid creating expectations for myself. While at the time

it was extremely difficult, in the end it worked to my advantage. Not having any set ideas of what I would be doing was the first lesson I took away from this trip, in that having no expectations meant that I had the freedom to pursue the work I was given without any expectations or fear of failure.

Before this trip, I had never really been exposed to any sort of service or engaged-learning work beyond volunteering in my own community. Every trip out of the country that I taken was, for the most part, for personal fulfillment. Beyond that, on some of my trips with my family, we donated to various programs in our host communities. So, for me, this trip was really the first time I had ever committed to working in a local community. One of the most difficult moments of completing this course was being challenged by family and friends who were not necessarily against my going, but who were critical of the work I would be doing and its effect on myself and the people with whom I would be working. I became hesitant and began to feel as if the trip might only advance my own self-fulfillment.

I noticed almost immediately from this trip compared to my past travels, however, that working directly with community partners creates a deeper connection and understanding of the place in which you are staying. Rwanda has especially challenged my preconceived notions and expectations of what I believed “Africa” to be. After a couple weeks into my placement, which I will discuss in detail later, I began to see that my work had a purpose and that working as an equal member among my group and the staff at Centre Marembo created an environment of reciprocal learning. I am grateful to Henri for limiting my expectations for the trip as much as possible and giving me the opportunity to form an impression based on what was taught in class and from my own personal experience during placement hours.

Analyzing the Rwandan genocide and the physical and social reconstruction that occurred so rapidly in the aftermath was central to this course. During the first couple of days in Kigali, we were able to visit several memorial sites throughout the country and go to the Genocide museum to read about its history, which spoke to the strength and resilience of the people. The people with whom I interacted during my trip, many of whom lived through the genocide, follow a way of life that focuses on reconstruction and forgiveness, rather than the events of the past. The people of Rwanda, although still suffering from the effects of the genocide, make it their mission as a unified country to learn from their mistakes and come together to build a society aimed at achieving equality and prosperity. This was incredible to see in person, but reflecting on it in the moment, I found it hard to understand. The country underwent a period of such political and social turmoil, and here I was only twenty-five years later in a place whose sense of community, advancements in technology and healthcare, and improving political system made it seem almost impossible. Seeing this amazing feat brought me back to a reading on reverse innovation, an idea that low-income countries might offer transferable lessons to wealthier parts of the world (Binagwaho et al., 2013).

This idea offers a change in perspective compared to the dominant view and presents several opportunities for significant growth in developed countries. As I saw the social structures in place in Rwanda and, more specifically, the strong sense of community and care that each person had for one another, I knew there was so much that Rwanda has to offer the western world. This comes back to the lesson of “A Single Story”: a story of a particular place may often come to define that same place and ignore its other achievements (Adichie, 2009). This is what I found with the story of the genocide. I saw it in Canada when I brought up the fact that I was going to Rwanda, as most of the people whom I had told brought up the story of the genocide

and rarely mentioned Rwanda's many other achievements. The genocide has overshadowed Rwanda's rapid progress as a peaceful and innovative nation, and education through trips like these are a way to combat this close-minded way of thinking that we have in the West (Adichie, 2009). Canada, while a wonderful country, is still dominated by an individualistic way of life, and learning from Rwanda, about its history and its current policies and culture, could be extremely beneficial to both countries.

I was fortunate enough to be placed at Centre Marembo, and being a part of that team taught me so many lessons about what it means to be of service to others. At the new centre, we were responsible for preparing a place for the young girls who were going to have the opportunity to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society. Nicolette, the centre's director, has devoted her life to the girls, and you can see the bond she has with them by the way they interact with her, especially when they call her "Mummy." Above everything else she gives them, she gives them love. Many of these girls have gone through experiences that I will never even begin to comprehend, and by just showing them compassion and providing them with the resources they can use to improve their current situations, the centre gives them a future that they can look forward to. Two young men, Théogène and Elfi, also work at the centre, and it was beautiful to see how much they care about the girls and how invested they are in making the centre a success. Having them with me during my time working at Marembo helped me to focus on my goals and taught me how to really enjoy being of service to others. They always kept work interesting and inspired me to work a little harder and push through some of the days when I was frustrated or confused about my abilities or purpose of my work.

One of our tasks to prepare the centre was to paint several murals throughout the property. My group members and I chose to focus on the main house, as that was where the girls

often congregated to eat, meet with the social workers, and attend some lessons offered at the centre. Looking back on the finished products now makes me extremely pleased with the work I did, but when I think of how difficult it was to complete the task, I remember some more difficult times. Patience was the biggest lesson I took away from preparing that new centre, as finding materials to clean with, driving around multiple times to find paint and painting tools, agreeing on a plan as a group, and getting the final approval for the centre took a lot of time and effort. Learning how to properly communicate with the staff and the other workers at the centre was difficult, especially with the language barrier, but in the end, it worked to our benefit. We even learned a lot of Kinyarwanda while trying to figure out our day-to-day plans. When dealing with these situations, our class lectures on intercultural competence became quite useful as I needed both a style of communication and behaviour that was both effective and appropriate (Deardoff, n.d). Learning how to communicate and act effectively with the staff depended on my group's ability to be respectful of the needs of the centre and ourselves. I found that as I got to know Marembo more, I began to take more time to try and look at the problem from their perspective, instead of mine, in order to find a solution (Deardoff, n.d). The work had to be done, and I am grateful for my team members for never giving up. This task pushed my team to work harder and to accept that things do not always go to plan.

The girls at Centre Marembo were most definitely my greatest teachers. Each one, with her different personality, life experiences, and continuous curiosity, taught me how to enjoy to the fullest the opportunities I had been given. Meeting them and being able to interact with them has taught me about resilience, as they have all experienced hardships that I will never truly understand. They are children, but at such a young age, many of them have experienced homelessness, rejection by their family or community, and, for some, the immense responsibility

of being a mother. Yet, they are so cheerful, positive, and intelligent, and they work together to create a home for themselves at the centre. They see their challenges as an opportunity to grow as women, and they are examples of strength that I can only hope to follow.

Another part of the trip that really helped me learn about Rwanda's culture was being with such a close-knit group. Having classmates to come home to every evening to share stories about the work we did at our specific placements that day helped me to learn from their mistakes and achievements, not just my own. Learning from each other gave me the opportunity to correct behaviours that may not have been as beneficial to my work, or to offer a new solution to an issue faced by my placement's staff and directors (Deardoff, n.d). For example, when painting the murals, I had had no previous experience so it was extremely helpful to have Katie to guide me. She paints regularly at home, in various environments, so doing a mural was nothing new to her. Having her help with sketching, watching proportions, and even mixing for even coats, allowed me to learn and to prevent any mistakes that would have wasted any of our costly resources. This cooperative environment also gave me a bigger perspective on how I sometimes assume how people experience different situations. It became more apparent to me on this trip that I should not have the same expectations for others around me as I do for myself and to understand that people learn in many different ways. I often struggled with this during the first couple of weeks, but once I got to know everyone a little better, I was fascinated to see my group members' various points of views and ways of interacting with Rwandan culture, politics, and social structures.

Lastly, working to understand and emulate the concept of Ubuntu was a lesson that is still in progress for me. When I first heard the meaning of the word, "I am because we are" (Tutu, 2013), it seemed quite simple, but being in Rwanda and seeing people live the concept made it a

lot more difficult to grasp. Before this trip, I used to think that I had a pretty good idea of thinking of and helping others. I do believe that my parents raised me to be considerate of others and put those less fortunate before myself. Yet, being in Rwanda and seeing how the staff at Centre Marembo interacted with one another, how the staff and visitors at Centre St. Paul behaved towards me, and even how people whom I only had brief interactions with at the market or during one of our excursions on the weekends behaved was inspiring. One example that comes to mind is that of the staff at the centre. Every morning they would greet you, no matter if they knew you or not, and make eye contact (this was very important). Then they would always ask about how you were and you could tell they really meant it to. And this sort of interaction would happen between staff or customers and it was very striking. What I saw was the recognition of the other person's humanity, as it did not matter if one was superior in position or not. It was things like this, a simple yet meaningful acknowledgement of another person, that allowed them to work cooperatively with one another. And at the centre it was no different. I was given the same amount of respect and compassion as workers who had been there for many years. However, Ubuntu goes beyond just thinking and doing for others: it also requires you to improve your own behaviour in order to set an example that people wish to follow and respect (Tutu, 2013). Of course, it includes putting others before yourself and working together to improve society. I have noticed that the concept requires personal growth and pride in one's own actions and beliefs for it to truly be effective in creating a beneficial and harmonious society.

Being back in Canada and noticing the differences, big or little, between the way Rwandans and Canadians live has been difficult at times, but it has also been a push of encouragement for me to educate those around me. Canadian society is very individualistic and although it is not always a negative thing, it has really made me see how selfish we can be. From

daily things like how people act on public transit to bigger things like our education system, I have noticed how self-centred we are. Often times this is through no fault of our own as the system is designed to ignore the weak. But the need for change is there, and its up to people like myself to help push towards it and raise awareness for it. Coming back here, I knew that, if there were anything that I had taken away from this trip, it was that I needed to share the fundamental ideals of Rwandan culture with my family, classmates, and friends. This all goes back to the idea of civic renewal within my own community here at home. I do feel as if this service-learning experience has reinforced my willingness to work with others and act on behalf of the common good as well as to benefit myself (Jacoyb et al., 2003). Prioritizing respect for yourself and others, fostering a strong sense of community, and appreciating the opportunities one is presented with are sometimes concepts we are lacking here in Canada, and I aim to help improve that in any way I can. I myself have taken my privilege for granted many times, and this trip has taught me to become more self-aware and conscious towards others' experiences and limitations. These past five weeks have taught me that to be a global citizen does not mean I have to travel around the world to help. It could be something as simple as noticing a need in my own communities and trying to improve the lives of those around me. Going on this trip has helped me recognize the responsibility and privilege that I have to help those around me if I have the power to do so. I hope to apply these beautiful ideals, which many Rwandans follow, to my future career and to continue learning from the many experiences that I have from my time in Rwanda.

After my experience in Rwanda I was completely unsure of what I was going to do next. Thankfully the opportunity to volunteer at Single Women in Motherhood came along, and I thought it would be a perfect transition from what I had been doing abroad into the London

community. When I heard about the project of writing 20 stories on the various experiences of single mothers here in Ontario, I did not really know what to expect. However, I was excited to begin the project as it would give me the chance to improve my writing skills, educate myself on the particular issue, and hopefully offer any help and support to single mothers in need.

Working at SWIM for my CEL this semester has definitely been a learning experience unlike any other. The “20 Stories of Hope” project itself is an incredible idea, and I feel like once completed it has the potential to help many single-mothers as well as the organization itself. I am so grateful for the opportunity I have had, as it’s really helped develop my research and writing skills, my interpersonal skills, greater self-sufficiency and organizational habits, and most importantly, a deeper understanding of an often overlooked social issue. There were some difficulties along the way, but learning how to overcome them to make the best of the situation was all part of the learning experience.

Since I knew I was going to be very self-reliant in taking on this project, I needed to make sure I knew the steps required to even approach a book like this. I started with the preliminary research and stored everything I found useful on my drive. This was quite interesting as I never knew how involved the process of writing and publishing a book actually was, and it gave me a better understanding of what to expect when I got to the actual writing process. I also had to keep myself extremely organized since I had a very strict timeline in which to get interviews and write up the draft stories.

In terms of the challenges I faced during this experience, I would say that there were two issues that had to be addressed. The biggest of the two challenges was definitely working on this project by myself. The topic really interested me, however having to coordinate the entire project on my own made it feel a little overwhelming and stressful at times. I realize now that going into

it, I had certain hopes that I would be able to complete most, if not all, the interviews. Now that I have gone through the process of finding participants and started writing the stories, I realize how big of an expectation I had set for myself. I had to readjust my expectations quite a bit, but by doing that I believe it made the work, that I was able to complete, better off. I am grateful for the guidance that Ann-Marie and Wardah, my supervisors, were able to give me but it was very brief and this was understandable since there were many other ongoing responsibilities they both had to attend to on a day to day basis.

The second challenge I faced was finding willing participants that fit Ann-Marie's vision. She had wanted me to collect stories from women with diverse backgrounds in order to appeal to all different types of readers, and I completely understood this. However, it was very difficult to find participants much less those that fit the set criteria. In the end it was a good lesson in trial and error as several of my days volunteering were spent emailing organization after organization trying to reach out to single-mothers to see if they were interested. It was very hard to find people to commit to the project, however I was successful with a couple of my emails and after reaching out to my supervisors they were also able to connect me with some eager single mothers. This issue again connects with my first challenge of working alone, as I feel if there had been another person(s) working with me, this process would have been easier to tackle, and it would have relieved some of the pressure that I initially felt.

Despite the challenges I faced, reaching the actual interview and writing stages was very exciting. Interacting with the women I worked with, along with those I interviewed, taught me quite a bit about building better interpersonal skills. The women that I interviewed all came from various racial and socio-economic backgrounds so each of their stories were influenced by this. Some of the women had come from a socio-economic backgrounds closer to the poverty line

than the others, which strongly impacted their experience as single mothers and it was often far from favourable. As I listened to their stories I had to learn how to react to these difficult experiences without making them feel uncomfortable or judged. Another thing that I learned through this was how to probe and collect sensitive information while still being respectful and mindful of the individual. Making them uncomfortable or jeopardizing the trust they had put in me to share their story was something I could not afford to do, as it would have affected their willingness to answer my questions and carried on into the quality of my work.

Improvements in these areas developed as I spoke with my supervisor Wardah who helped me with my line of questioning for the interviews. She had previous experience in research, specifically with vulnerable female populations, and her guidance really helped me along the way. One other way I learned to deal with these challenges was to really take the time to listen to what they were saying and not just continue on without acknowledging what had been shared. Taking the time to reaffirm their statements or praise them on some of their own self-improvements made me realize the significance of the challenges they had faced. It also helped me understand how they saw motherhood as a chance to start over and provide a good life for their child, something the majority of them had never experienced.

Carrying out the actual interviews and writing the draft stories was a very emotional and insightful process. For many of the mothers that I met with, the main challenges they faced were a lack of support systems, financial worries, and a fear of raising their children in an environment similar to their own upbringing. The majority of them grew up in underprivileged households and some even with a parent(s) in the penal system. They also revealed to me that relying on family or friends was also extremely difficult both during and after their pregnancy due to the stigma of being a single parent.

Hearing all of this reaffirmed the research I had done previously on the social determinants affecting single mothers in Canada, but to actually meet some of these women that were experiencing it made it more of a reality to me. It made me think of how privileged I was to grow up with the resources I had, to be in the position I am today, and what I could do to make a difference. For women who make this brave decision to raise a child on their own it is an incredible feat and none of them should have to worry about finding the necessary financial and emotional support to do so, much less be judged for it. Now that I am in the writing process I am hopeful that I can capture their struggle and how they have made strides to overcome them. I want to bring more awareness to the issues that they are facing, and to the mothers that may read their stories, someone to relate to and possible strategies to help overcome such challenges in their own lives.

Given my timeline and my limited knowledge of writing a book like this, I am very proud of what I am going to accomplish. I came into this placement with a certain idea of how it would go, however I soon had to readjust my expectations to suite the needs of the organization. What initially started as an overwhelming experience led to me developing several valuable life skills and, more importantly I began a project with an amazing amount of potential to help single mothers all over. I also had the privilege to meet some fantastic women, whose lives have inspired me to try and continue with the project, or at least find another way to get involved in some of the many issues facing these women.

Overall, I would say that main takeaway from both of these placements is that working in service of others helped me appreciate all the parts of my life that I take for granted everyday from my education to my family and even to basic necessities. Both placements have given me experiences that I will never forget and lessons that I can apply to any future work that I do.

They both have enhanced my character, and my worldview, and that is something I am learning to appreciate more.

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