



A South African View

By Hannah Carey | August 28, 2012

It was challenging to leave South Africa after bonding so closely with my host family in Durban and finding such fulfillment in my clinical experience. Perhaps if I had been eased into the comforts of American living, I would not have felt like I was a stranger looking into the lifestyle of some other culture when our first family outing included stopping at a shopping mall. Yet, I found myself walking the perimeter of the shopping center feeling the weight of just how excessive my life back home is. I remembered loving the feel (and look) of multiple brand name clothing bags on my arms and my pleasure in retail therapy.

However, I was hit with flashbacks of patients I had met, orphaned and HIV positive children I had spent time with, and my loving host family, and found myself feeling numb. Doctors I shadowed would often point things out to me like, "Here is the skinniest man you will probably ever see," or note the commonness of fatal assault wounds in children and the elderly.



My wonderful host mother, Samke, is a single mom of four lovely daughters; both of the fathers died of tuberculosis. She grew up in a rural village where she walked miles and even had to cross a river in order to get to school each day. Currently, Samke is an elementary teacher and owns her house, which she is constantly expanding and improving. Her income is supplemented through renting to tenants on her property, people who cannot afford more than one room in which to live.

Seeing the fight that is needed for many South Africans to simply *live* will stay with me for the rest of my life. I had not realized how entitled I truly am until I met people who were literally starving in front of me. I know what it is like to be poor in the United States, but this type of hardship was unimaginable before those ten weeks in South Africa. I see that the US level of poverty and that of the rest of the world are two very different standards.



Prior to living in South Africa, I viewed travel as a means of observing other cultures while “escaping” stress back home. However, once there, I was not an observer, but a participant. My interest in public health has evolved into a passion for international work with an emphasis on the relation between poverty and infectious disease. It is an injustice that Samke should watch two husbands die of a treatable illness while she lives on to care for their four daughters. I would like to use the advantages and opportunities I have been given in life to help those like Samke, her children, and the people of South Africa who were born into more challenging circumstances.

