



Coming Home with New Perspectives

By Stella Chiu | October 26, 2010

It has been a little over a month since I returned to the states. When I was abroad, I thought that everything back at home would have changed, but surprisingly, I slipped back into my old routine and life went back to normal. Once in a while, I am reminded of my time in South Africa. A song, a picture, a conversation will spring up and I am taken back to Long Street (the night-life of Cape Town) or the sounds and smell of an operating room. I have become aware of the cultural differences between the two countries. I miss being able to walk down the street and give a friendly nod or smile to every stranger I see without it being regarded as weird. I miss the amazing food, especially my host mom's cooking. I'm definitely experiencing some "homesickness."



I haven't had any major problems re-integrating. However, the only difficulties I've encountered are through the new perspectives that I've gained. Sometimes it is hard for others to understand my outlook on certain things because they have not experienced what I have experienced. Among the amazing landscapes, wild game, and art, I have also seen poverty, disease, and death. I see my friends buying piles upon piles of shoes knowing that people in townships may not even have one pair of shoes at all. I think about the many toddlers begging for money on the side of the street whenever I open my wallet. I don't let my friends skip a meal without thinking about the malnourished child in Ward C who could barely lift his head. I see them place all their hopes and dreams on one exam when I know there is a bigger world out there with endless opportunities.



My advice to those returning is to take some time to sit down and think about his/her experience. I didn't have that opportunity because as soon as I got off the plane, I began unpacking and re-packing for school the next day, and then returned to work two days later. Now, a month later, as I sit here writing about my experiences, I realize how much my perspective has changed both personally and professionally.



I am grateful for the opportunity CHFI-South Africa has given me in developing my clinical skills and finding my niche. I did rotations in surgery, pediatrics, ophthalmology, and in internal medicine and found an unexpected love for surgery. I grew to understand South Africa's health care system, as well as its deficiencies, setting the groundwork for when I can return someday to work. I have built lifelong relationships with students in the program, and the families that I stayed with. I know that I will always have a home in South Africa.