Children’s Rights in South Africa
Edited by Emily Pritchard

Emily Mendoza, a Social Work Senior with minors in International Development and Spanish, spent last summer as an intern for children’s rights organization in South Africa called Molo Songololo. “I was exposed to circumstances I could have never imagined before I left and this has certainly effected who I am as a person and a social worker.”

To start, tell us a little about your internship in general.

“There are few words that could completely capture how enriching this experience was. The nonprofit I worked for (Molo Songololo), focused on children’s rights with regards to child sexual exploitation, child trafficking, and prostitution. I conducted educational workshops with children ages 12-17 in the townships Delft and Atlantis. I was also given the opportunity to review South African policy such as the Victim Empowerment Bill and the Children’s Amendment Act and present proposed changes. It was eye opening to conduct forums with the children and hear the kinds of things that they are exposed to in their communities. The occurrence of violence and crime was disheartening but the enthusiasm that the children had for change was unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

What drew you to this internship and how did you find it?

“The combination of my fascination with culture and social justice led me to this internship. I wanted to fulfill my Social Work practicum requirements in a different cultural context and explore the ways in which an organization functions in a different nation.”

“I was referred to Kevin Hood’s office for international internship opportunities. After exploring many options, I decided that South Africa would be the best option for me and I applied through IE3 Global.”

What was the most rewarding part of this incredible internship? Any challenges?

“The entire experience was incredibly rewarding but I think one of my proudest moments was watching two of the children I worked with present in Parliament. I met with them along with 15 other kids to talk about the Children’s Amendment Act. I was able to select two children to present on behalf of the organization and assisted them in writing and preparing a speech for the public hearing.”

“When I first began my internship, I was challenged by
language. Even though most people spoke some English, many of the children I worked with had trouble understanding and responding to me. I was challenged to figure out new ways to communicate and build trust with my clients."

**Were there any results from your work with the students or parliament that you know of yet?**

“I have not heard any news about the parliament hearing that I participated in. I know they are taking time to hold another public hearing and discuss the children’s amendment act in more detail. The organization seems to be doing well still. I have been communicating with the man who is running the peer educator program and I always look forward to hearing about upcoming trainings.”

**Do you have a favorite part of being abroad?**

“My favorite part was interacting with locals and gaining a better understanding of their culture. The amount of surprising and exciting events that occurred during my time in South Africa is innumerable. The poverty, the violence, and the crime were shocking but the humor, enthusiasm and kind spirits of the people I met made the experience unforgettable.”

**What was your living situation like in South Africa?**

“In South Africa I lived in a house with 9 other people. This particular renting company in town, rented rooms to international students. Some of them were American but there were also other people from around the world. I did not have any issues with the food while I was there. I got to try some local food such as lamb pie, springbok jerky and South African sausages.”

**How has your participation in this AE experience impacted your life as a student and as a person in general?**

“As a student, I was able to complete all of my practicum hours for my Bachelor’s in Social Work. I was able to put all of my theory classes to the test and challenge my cultural competency as a social work student. As a person, I was tested and constantly challenged by working in a foreign country. I returned with my eyes wide open as to how lucky I am to be living so comfortably in Montana. I was exposed to circumstances I could have never imagined before I left and this has certainly effected who I am as a person and a social worker.”

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**Academic Enrichment**

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Has this experience reaffirmed your career goals or has it changed your mind in any way?

“This experience reinforced my interest in issues of human trafficking and sexual exploitation but it has allowed me to see them in a different way. Ever since my return I have been questioning how I want to confront these issues in my career whether it be through social work or legal advocacy.”

Do you think you will do another internship?

“I have been volunteering with SARC (Student Advocacy Resource Center) for three years now and when I returned from Africa I wanted to continue working with sexual assault domestic violence and discrimination in the Missoula community. I am continuing my work at SARC this semester and using the experience for internship credit.”

What advice would you give other students considering opportunities like this?

“I would say if you have any interest in interning abroad you should absolutely do it! The experience is much different than studying abroad because you don’t have the structure of a university but it challenges you in ways you can’t even imagine and in the end I believe you gain more from the experience. There are many reasons you might hesitate before applying or even before your departure but definitely take the leap!”

To wrap-up, describe your internship experience in one sentence.

“This experience was inspiring, confusing, saddening, empowering and overall life changing.”