What organization did you intern for in Africa?

“My internship introduced me to the NGO world in Africa, which was an eye opening experience and very difficult at times. I was part of a world-renowned HIV advocacy organization, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). TAC is a national organization, though my placement was in a township just outside of Cape Town. These townships were formed during apartheid when the Dutch resettled the black population of Cape Town into shanties outside the city. These communities are primarily black and very impoverished due to the impacts of apartheid and the struggle to gain their rights.”

“TAC specializes in community education and awareness as well as social activism. Their projects include administering education in the local clinics and hosting community awareness campaigns dealing with gender based violence, HIV/AIDS, TB, child disclosure, termination of pregnancy, and other relevant health concerns. They also advocate via the political system to gain rights for individuals and are very active in court cases dealing with the issues of rape, violence, or healthcare rights.”

Did you work on any specific projects?

“My participation in this organization involved a little bit of everything, which allowed me to experience many different aspects of a health outreach organization. I was able to visit Khayelitsha’s Magistrate Court House to protest against a pastor accused of rape who was being held on trial for bail. I also visited clinics to observe adherence counselors for HIV treatment of ARV’s. I was fortunate enough to see, from within, the struggles, challenges, and triumphs of a South African outreach organization and meet the inspiring people who work for TAC.”
How did you get connected with this opportunity and what attracted you to this internship in particular?

“Before I applied to IE3, I searched around for different internship and study abroad opportunities. IE3 turned out to be the perfect combination to fit into my academic requirements and personal goals. Kevin Hood, IE3 campus coordinator, was a huge advocator for this program and helped me gain all of the academic prerequisites before leaving for Africa. Without his help I would not have been successful in gaining ten credits through my experience and being awarded numerous scholarships.”

“Through my university studies I have become very interested in HIV in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly dealing with stigma against AIDS and the access to healthcare in rural communities. Working in Cape Town with an NGO such as this was the perfect way for me to be introduced into the healthcare system in Africa. This experience allowed me to gain insights I would not have been able to learn if I was purely studying these phenomenon’s from within the United States.”

What was the most rewarding part of this experience?

“I found that the most rewarding aspect of this internship was being able to work in the community and meet the individuals who have made it their life work to be involved with TAC and its efforts to create better communities across South Africa. These individuals have overcome adversities few could imagine and work in a controversial organization in an unsafe area, yet when they speak the passion and love for their community is apparent. It was so inspiring to meet these individuals and work alongside them as they fought for their community and the rights of the people.”

Did you face any challenges that you had to overcome during your time in Africa?

“This internship was the most challenging experience I have ever had, yet it has allowed me to grow as a person and has increased my passion for working in the health field, and I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity to test myself.”

“One of the biggest challenges to working in this setting was the language barrier. My work was set in a township that primarily spoke Xhosa, a language involving clicks that is very difficult to learn. While
the majority of those I worked with knew English, it was not their first language and thus sometimes difficult to understand. However, more importantly, it was a barrier when observing educational workshops that were being held in the clinics and communities. While it was disappointing not to be able to understand what was going on in these clinics, there was still a lot to learn from observation and interviews with the facilitator after the session.”

What was your living situation like?

“I lived with one other IE3 intern from Utah and another intern from Canada that were all going through Volunteer Adventure Corps, the organization that supervised our internships in Cape Town. I also lived with a Dutch intern, another intern from the states, and a girl from Zimbabwe that was going to culinary school. It was so fun living with people from around the world and hearing about their interests and their lives.”

Do you have a favorite part of the internship?

“My favorite part of this experience was being able to speak with health specialists in Khayelitsha. Through speaking with nurses, caretakers, and TAC workers I was able to formulate a solid understanding of the health problems in this area. It was also incredibly inspirational to learn their stories and reasons for fighting for better healthcare. It is these people who are at the heart of this healthcare movement and they are truly changing the world they live in.”

Were you able to do other things outside of the internship for fun?

“While I was living in Cape Town I had ample opportunity to drive down the coast to go surfing, see penguins, and explore the small beach communities that line the coast. However, my favorite side trip I took was up to the Kwazulu Natal Region in northeast South Africa. I snorkeled in the Indian Ocean and saw sharks, whales and dolphins that were traveling the coast for the great Sardine Run. I also visited the very rural and impoverished areas of Coffee Bay and Port St. Johns and was able to explore around the areas and see how people live. I was able to meet with a traditional Xhosa family and ask them questions about their livelihood. This was the most amazing experience I took part in because I got to see the rural side of Africa and fall in love with the landscape of rolling hills and steep cliffs falling into the crashing waters below.”

How has your participation in this internship impacted your future goals?

“One of the biggest learning points I have taken away from this experience is knowing more about what I want to pursue. While I loved living in Cape Town and working in a township, I am focused instead on rural healthcare and on my next trip to Africa I want to immerse myself in a rural community and learn about the healthcare problems in that setting. This has been a critical learning point for me in my career as a community health specialist and I would not change any part of it. I have learned a great deal about myself and about what I imagine for myself in the future.”
“Just as any internship would provide, I gained experience that I can build off of in future jobs and internships. I have my foot in the door working in developing countries and working with a world-renowned HIV and AIDS organization will absolutely allow me to open up more doors in the future. I am even more convinced that I am doing the work that I was born to do and have become even more passionate about preventative healthcare.”

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

“I would recommend traveling overseas and doing an internship to any student, regardless of their interest internationally. It is vitally important for people to be aware of the conditions that exist outside the comfort of their own home and to meet people from different cultures. This experience was extremely rewarding and completely different from what I had expected. While learning about HIV and healthcare in South Africa, I also learned a tremendous amount about myself. College may be the easiest time for someone to travel and to not take advantage of this opportunity is a detriment of any student. If able, traveling abroad is an important experience everyone should have.”

What’s next for you?

“After I graduate, I hope to return to Africa to work in a rural population in the healthcare field to understand how to increase access to these communities. I am want to start the Master’s International Peace Corps Grad program after I complete my undergraduate degree and travel back to Africa to complete my Peace Corps requirements. Spending time in rural Africa to understand the people and the culture has been a dream of mine for many years. This internship was a great start to my career of healthcare in developing countries and am so thankful for this opportunity.”