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Personal Statement
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A Secret Mountain In My Backyard

Thirteen years ago, I found myself crammed into the backseat of a two door Mazda 323 that had clearly seen better days. With my life possessions precariously teetering half way out of the trunk and my body crammed into the back seat of a car full of sticky strangers, we sputtered (heavily) off into the suburbs of San Jose, Costa Rica where I would spend the next 6 months of my life. I was 16 years old and experiencing minor shock.

I've looked back on this particular day and the subsequent weeks many times in my vida. At the time, I had not been outside of the United States before and found myself mentally inundated with the superfluity of culture a developing country had to offer. In a phone call home to my parents not long after my arrival, I was asked about the geographical surroundings of my new neighborhood called Alajuelita. Known as a suburb of commoners and farmers, Alajuelita was a fairly densely populated, impoverished area set along the hills surrounding San Jose. As I recall, however, it took me nearly a week to become aware that directly behind my new home there existed a lush, green mountain. It's humorous to think about now, as I had actually failed to acknowledge there was a massive piece of earth residing in my back yard. And while that might seem next to impossible, I have learned how remarkably selective the mind can choose to be during times of mental stress. My glaringly apparent lack of experience and knowledge of a developing country had left my brain more or less feeble in processing the entirety of my surroundings. For weeks, the sordid details of a 3rd world city had literally blinded me from the beauty and spirit of Costa Rica and its people.

You might wonder what my journey as a 16 year old has to do with a summer spent living and working in Accra, Ghana. Well, aside from the fact that my work and studies are a direct result of a life path set in motion by my trip to Costa Rica, during my first few weeks in Accra I admit to humorously catching myself check now and again whether there was a secret mountain in my backyard. Coincidentally, while Alajuelita and Accra do not share similar backyard mountain geography, both locations do have persistent, early rising roosters that are apparently blind.

Transitions are never easy and despite being a far more experienced traveler than I was during my teenage years, Accra was no exception in giving me a good, healthy dose of culture shock. Wiser than I was at 16, however, I'm now self-aware of my addiction and confident in my capability to dive into another world foreign to that of my own. I knew it was only an inevitable matter of time before the veil of dirt (and sweat and smog and DEET) was wiped from my eyes and I was writing home my intent to potentially remain/move to Ghana. Maybe not much has actually changed since I was 16, afterall!

When I first arrived in Accra the following adjectives might have come to mind: sticky, dirty, loud, crowded, bustling, dusty, smoggy, smelly, stomach-achy and intense. Months later (and with the “mountain” in my backyard now visible), I describe Accra as a vibrant, bustling, city full of smiling, dancing, hardworking Ghanaians who are full of pride and hope. In my opinion, the brave traveling souls that have chosen to live and work in Accra proper are the fortunate ones. So few visitors to Ghana truly give the city a chance and upon initial inspection, I certainly can’t blame them. Ultimately though, it is the interactions that we have with people and the relationships forged that make up the true beauty of an experience and place. Time and time again I’ve found this to be the case and Accra, Ghana is no exception. The charm and vibrancy of Accra and its amazing people simply snuck up on me and I find myself helplessly hooked.

Which brings me to the reason why I came to Ghana in the first place - to work with the Eagle Women’s Empowerment Club in partnership with Vital Voices and The Advocacy Project. It has been a summer of learning, sharing and laughing with some incredibly, incredible women. And while EWEC may be a young organization faced with real challenges in growth, resources and sustainability, it is the women of EWEC that will no doubt persevere forward and create real change for women in Ghana and Africa. The remarkable and inspiring women that proudly call themselves Eagle Women have repeatedly astounded me. So many of EWEC’s members have risen from humble beginnings, conquering a great deal to become the successful businesswomen they are today. Yet their work does not stop there. Eagle Women strive to share their knowledge and experiences with other women, with mentorship at the core of their beliefs. They are beautiful women, inside and out, and it is these women, these mothers, these sisters, these leaders, who are the future of Africa.

And so as I finish typing this and things from home start returning to me, I’m reminded that summer is over. The evenings in Accra have gotten cooler, the breeze has picked up and now it’s time to go.

I’ll see you soon Ghana.