

Marne Boehm - Class of 2016



This summer I traveled to Johannesburg, Pietermaritzburg and Durban, South Africa as part of a mission seminar course at Viterbo University. This course is centered around serving the common good, with a specific emphasis on the common good in South Africa. A large part of doing good is through active service, but it is not just any service that satisfies the common good. Service-learning is a more appropriate term because it requires the servers to be conscious of the community's need. Viterbo University defines service learning as "a method of teaching that consists of student participation in a service activity that meets an identified community need, has a connection to course content, and includes continuous reflection emphasizing the learning involved in the experience." I believe the most important aspect of service learning is the continuous reflection. Mindless service loses its meaning, and allows for little growth or betterment of a person. Good service learning should lead into what Robert Greenleaf calls "servant leadership." In his 1970 essay Greenleaf defines a servant leader as one who "focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong," which aligns with the definition of the common good. Truly, the servant leader, which we should all aim to be, is someone who works toward the common good. Taking all of this into consideration, travelling to South Africa, as servant leaders we focused foremost on understanding what the community needed versus what we wanted to give them.

My professor wanted to ensure we would be doing ethical service, to keep away from feeding the ideology of a "white savior." Through some connections he had in Pietermaritzburg, we ended up staying at Project Gateway, a non-profit organization built on old prison grounds left from the Apartheid era. Their facilities include an overnight shelter for the homeless, community gardens and crèches (similar to a childcare center), HIV/Aids Training, a Gateway Christian School, and much more. We stayed in an old building, and the rooms still showed to once be prison cells. During our

time there, the only physical service we did consisted of painting one of their hallways. We also spent some time at the Christian school helping with Physical Education and Music classes. Being that we were there for such a short time, the physical impact of our service was very little. We learned and gained far more from the people we met than we could ever give back. This is sometimes difficult to acknowledge, but I think the path you take from doing service going forward matters most. Travelling to South Africa proved to me that I knew nothing about South Africa, and as someone who experienced a small piece, it's my service to spread the truth of South Africa to others. I believe this is the value in intercultural knowledge. It is impossible to understand another nation when you've never experienced their culture or taken the time to learn about it. Overall, I would encourage others to do the same. Travelling to another country should always be about what another's culture can teach you, not the other way around. I do believe, however, that travelling and doing service ended up teaching me more about myself.