# IGS Abroad Newsletter

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Issue 18



## Global Health in Action Newsletter

Featured: Summer Public Health Fellowships!

Let the world be your classrom

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# EDITOR'S *Note*

Studying abroad has a unique way of changing how we see the world, not just as students, but as people. Leaving home, stepping into a new culture, and learning to navigate life in an unfamiliar place asks something of oneself that cannot simply be learned in a classroom. Immersing yourself in a new culture, giving back to communities away from home, forming new bonds, and being open to new experiences are all things that one experiences from taking a chance, a risk even, on yourself and deciding to study abroad. Studying abroad is a way to make cross cultural connections that allow you to see that we are all connected as humans no matter where we come from.

As students, studying abroad is not just a grade that can be inputted into Canvas but something tangible that forces you to utilize everything you have learned in your studies in the real world. As people, studying abroad is something that changes the way we see the world. It allows us to learn things about ourselves as humans by challenging our assumptions, developing new curiosities, and making new bonds. It also allows us to learn about humility, joy, empathy, hardships, and community within a cultural context different from our own.

In this edition, we learn about students and faculty members' study abroad experiences through in-depth interviews, illustrating how cross-cultural experiences shaped who they are. Through many memorable moments, various challenges, lots of gratitude, and wonderful lessons, we hope this edition of the GHIA Newsletter shows the impact studying abroad has on people's lives and leaves you wondering where in the world you will go next.



**"Studying abroad has a unique way of changing how we see the world, not just as students, but as people."**

*Keslyn Billings*

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**





# Mercer IGS Global Footprints

By Ann Potts






**Mercer IGS students have reached 30+ countries through various programs and 18 through IGS programs — a global footprint spanning nearly 50 nations.**

# Lifelong Impacts in India

**By Reese Von Norhiem**

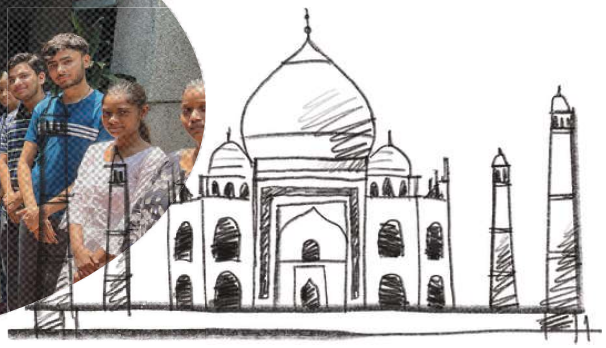


**"Nothing prepares you for real-world experience other than real-world experience," says Gracie Granados, a Global Health Studies senior at Mercer.**

Through Mercer on Mission, Gracie had the opportunity to travel to India alongside graduate nursing students from Mercer's Georgia Baptist Nursing School in the summer of 2024. Gracie was especially excited at the opportunity to work alongside graduate students and seasoned nurse practitioners in her pursuit of using her global health knowledge to make a change in the world. The mix of grad and undergrad students was equipped with the skills to serve the local community by providing wellness checks to children in schools and orphanages in disadvantaged areas. One of Gracie's most memorable experiences from the trip was interacting with and providing wellness checks for children in a girls' orphanage. These girls, who had been taken from such unfair circumstances, now had the opportunity to receive care and education in ways that were not available before. Gracie was proud to have been able to provide that for them and to contribute to their prospects for a better life. The stories and experiences shared with her by the young girls and the adults caring for them. To see smiles on their faces and hear their laughter as they grew comfortable with the volunteers and played with them was uplifting, a moment she won't soon forget. Lifelong impacts were made for not only the people whose lives they touched, but themselves, too. The things they accomplished were incredible, Gracie says. The distribution of resources, medication, and health education will benefit lives in a big way.







The volunteer group also helped ensure that their recorded health data was made available and accessible to these communities, as such information is often hard to reach in disadvantaged areas. Gracie was initially cautious of adopting the western perspective that comes with the term 'mission', but she was elated when it became apparent that they were the ones learning from the local community. They were the ones being led by locals and experiencing their culture in a significant, authentic way.

The communities in which Gracie and the other students interacted with were overtly welcoming, inviting them into their homes and offering them cooked meals. Gracie realized that there is so much kindness in the world, even in people who have very little. She felt included and invited to experience a culture that she never had before. Everybody has a story to share– the loclas, the volunteers, the practitioners, and the translators. She says that one of the most important things you can gain from a study abroad experience is conversations with the locals. "You learn a lot from interacting with people that you never would have encountered otherwise."

On Mercer on Missions, students learn more from the locals and the community than they could ever learn in a classroom. There is just something special and genuine that comes from actively applying your knowledge and getting experience in return. "You can take courses and read books and look at photos for years on the subject, but nothing really compares to experiencing and witnessing those concepts and those lived realities in person," says Gracie.

She believes that studying abroad is an integral part of a comprehensive global health-related education and an enriching experience for anyone's life as a whole. Studying abroad can make you well-rounded as a person, prompting you to grow and develop new skills and experiences. Gracie encourages everyone to do a study abroad experience, especially those interested in healthcare. Like her fellow classmates, her trip to India ignited a wish to do more. From the stories she gleaned to the people she met and the places she witnessed, she is inspired to do more for both her community and others.

**"There's always something more to see, there's always something to learn, there's always someone to meet."**

Gracie is beyond grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from such incredible people, both within her volunteer team and the many faces she met abroad. She's glad to have had the chance to return home and share the things she's learned with her own community. She says she'd do it all over again if she had the chance, and encourages anyone considering studying abroad to take that leap and go for it.



# Why Study Abroad Matters

By: Keslyn Billings

No two people are the same, and no two cultures are the same." Megan, a Mercer University senior, studying global health, went on Mercer on Mission (MoM) to Papoli, Uganda this past summer. Megan reflects on how this was a wonderful experience for her as she went to Uganda last year on a faculty-led research trip. She was very excited to go back and work with the community in a service capacity, as a way to give back.

The purpose of this MoM to Uganda was to engage in community-driven and culturally minded educational health workshops regarding nutrition in the community and sexual health education in schools. For the nutrition workshop she presented about protein combinations and taught how cultural foods such as quoni and peas had the same nutrients as chicken. The people in the community were farming experts and helped shape how her team presented, allowing the workshop to run smoothly and address issues such as Kwashiorkor. For the sexual health workshop she read the National Framework on Sexual and Reproductive Health for Uganda and utilized this to formulate a workshop for high schoolers. Her team presented about good vs bad relationships and what traits and situations composed each.

As a Global Health major, two of the most important skills you gain are practicing cultural humility and having empathy for the cultures and communities you learn about and work within. Megan discussed how her experience in Uganda allowed her to practice cultural empathy and witness how the social determinants of health impact people's lives in real time. Social determinants of health are conditions that people live in that impact their health outcomes. Her experience solidified how we are all "socialized by our own culture." It was important for her to understand how all cultures have their own socialized myths about health, which are assumptions held about health perpetuated by social interactions, before entering a community and trying to extend help based on her own personal perspectives. She understood that she had to approach the community with "the humility of wanting to facilitate connection and relationships to work through these myths for the health of everyone, and not from a place of self-righteousness." She realized that cultural understanding and acknowledgement of how culture impacts health is foundational to global health practices.

"Studying abroad is the best, most fruitful addiction you could ever have."



It is important to help people not in a way that is demanding and invasive, but in a manner that fosters collaboration and understanding from all sides. When discussing her final thoughts on empathy, Megan concludes with: "Cultural empathy helps us not to fixate on right or wrong, but to ask why. Why does this myth about health exist in the first place? And the answer typically lies within the cultural context."

When discussing the most memorable part of her experience, Megan highlighted how kind and welcoming the community was in Papoli, Uganda. She discussed how the most surprising part about the community was how familiar and at home she felt. Megan is from Ecuador, and she grew up spending all her summers there and stated that Uganda, although different, felt very culturally familiar. For Megan, everyone was so welcoming and hospitable. Megan reflects on one of her highlights of the MoM – getting to reconnect with her host family and specifically her host sister, Mercy, from her trip to Uganda the previous year. She recalls how she felt just as welcome and loved as the first time she was with her host family.

Beyond the moments of connection and familiarity, Megan also reflected on some of the challenges she faced during her time abroad. One of the biggest hurdles developed writing and teaching the sexual health curriculum. As none of the students on the trip were education majors, the group quickly realized that teaching sensitive material in a culturally informed, age-appropriate way required intentionality, patience, and humility. "It was definitely a learning curve," Megan admitted, "but ultimately a really good experience." The challenge taught her not only how to communicate health concepts more clearly but also how to adapt to the needs of a community in real time.

As our conversation continued, it was clear how deeply Megan's experience aligned with the mission of the IGS Department. She reflected on how culture, environment, and socioeconomic status shape health outcomes, and how seeing these dynamics firsthand is far more impactful than simply learning about them in a classroom. The trip allowed her to experience global health in action.

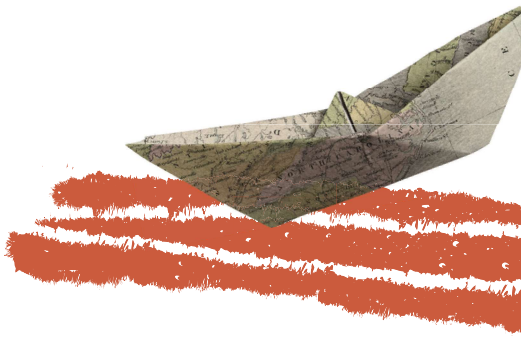
When asked what advice she would give to students considering study abroad, Megan's response was immediate – "Do it." Megan stated, saying that that study abroad is "the best, most fruitful addiction you could ever have." It not only helps students grow academically, but personally, emotionally, and culturally. The kind of growth, she explained, that only happens when you immerse yourself in a completely new environment.

Finally, when asked if she would participate in another Mercer On Mission or study abroad trip, Megan didn't hesitate. She hopes to join as many programs as possible before she graduates. With a passion for global health and a curiosity for different cultures, she wants to continue learning about the world and the diverse health issues faced by communities across it. For Megan, each new place is an opportunity to learn and to continue practicing the kind of cultural empathy that lies at the heart of global health.

# New Lessons From New Cultures

**By Gianna Richards**





During Haven's study abroad experience, she found that the most powerful lessons came not from textbooks alone, but pushed her to experience global health not only as a theory but as the lived intersection of people and their culture. Over her college career, she has participated in robust choices of Mercer on Missions and study abroad trips. Among these experiences, her time in Tanzania stands out. The red-earth landscapes and sun-soaked plains were just the beginning of her enrichment she brought back to her global health coursework.In Tanzania her and her team worked with local NGOs to develop a three-part curriculum on gender-based violence, focusing on women's leadership and human rights. Piloting this curriculum into secondary schools and rural communities allowed her to see firsthand how cultural norms and traditions shaped the communities views on gender, safety and community roles. Many rural communities were far removed from urban centers and held tight to their deeply embedded traditions and norms, which clashed with ideas presented in the curriculum and textbooks.

Haven's accounts for hearing men openly describe domestic violence as a cultural norm was shocking, but through it all it taught her how important it is to approach global health work with humility and adaptability. Through the rough patch, she and her team successfully reshaped their curriculum to show that not only does gender-based violence affect women but its trickles into affecting the community as well. This approach made the curriculum digestible to her peers, more meaningful and culturally accessible.

Haven's time in Greece offered a parallel dimension of learning as well. There she worked creating a first aid emergency training program for the underserved people of the Roma community, due to prejudices, which lead to them lacking quality healthcare. Haven and her team designed a program not only based on the problem alone, but they also took into account the social determinants of health that contributed to people's suffering. Thus making her and her teams program a very rich and meaningful tool for the communities they worked with.

Haven's last stop was in Spain where she studied Spanish coursework partnered with the vibrant community of Spain to go along with it. While the academic side of Haven's coursework strengthened her fluency and understanding of the language, her homestay experience introduced an unexpected layer of challenge.

**“Learning the language and using it, even if its is a little bit, makes a big impact. Even just “hello” and “please and thank you” in someones language means a lot to them.”**

Unlike many of her classmates, who had a positive and engaging experience with their families, who fostered a homey environment, Haven found her homestay a bit uncomfortable. Even though it was not the experience she imagined, her silver lining of it all was her resilience to continue her month-long study and took into account not every international experience will feel the same or familiar.

With each country visited came a new memory, a lesson that classrooms cannot replicate. Each country embraced Haven into a new path, requiring her to think critically, communicate intentionally, and approach situations with an open mind. Whether it was adapting curriculum materials in Tanzania, designing healthcare programs in Greece, or navigating the daily realities of her host family in Spain, she learned lessons that molded her worldview. Every experience added a fresh layer of academic foundation required to change the world. Fulfilling Mercer’s motto of changing the world, Haven has been fueled to carry forward not only what she has learned but who she has become,to step confidently into her future with a commitment to serve and uplift communities around the world.



# The Power of Storytelling

**By Hannah Knight**

"You don't always get what you want out of a research project, but what I got was really interesting."

How does one enact change? For Dr. Amy Nichols-Belo, change starts with a story - a story about the lives of others, which might be very different or very similar to our own. Regardless, stories teach individuals about real connections, real people who live in time and space, and open our eyes to new possibilities in our own stories.

Dr. Nichols-Belo grew up traveling the world as her father was a diplomat, establishing her foundational focus on being a global citizen. She has conducted much research in Tanzania and also led Mercer University students on Mercer on Mission trips to Tanzania. When planning her sabbatical time, Dr. Nichols-Belo pursued a Fulbright fellowship at a university in Africa, as she wanted to give back to the area where she had immensely benefited from. She also wanted the opportunity to bring her son Liam along, so that he could gain experience on being a global citizen. Dr. Nichols-Belo was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to teach at the University of Nairobi in Kenya and pursue ongoing projects in global health.




Dr. Nichols-Belo researches the lived experiences of individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in Tanzania and Kenya, as the two countries had very different policy approaches to the pandemic. Kenya enforced extreme lockdowns and strict curfews, while Tanzania had much more relaxed policies. Dr. Nichols-Belo is interested in comparing how these different political approaches during the pandemic affected everyday individuals, as a spillover event - viruses moving from one species to another - will happen again.

To conduct her research, Dr. Nichols-Belo took an ethnographic approach, focusing on observational field notes and interviews with the working class and university students. Dr. Nichols-Belo mainly conducted interviews in the backseat of Ubers while stuck in the busy streets of Nairobi. Her son also helped her record her field notes by helping reconstruct conversations. Also, a graduate student who had connections in informal housing settlements interviewed petty male workers, as Dr. Nichols-Belo was struggling to access this group.

There were many challenges for Dr. Nichols-Belo while she conducted her research: there were extensive rains causing flooding and drownings within the city, as well as political unrest and protests on taxation. These problems created physical boundaries and safety concerns for Dr. Nichols-Belo to conduct research, as well as emotional sensitivity issues - Dr. Nichols-Belo did not feel it was appropriate to rehash the past with current issues taking precedent. But the main problem was the busyness of Nairobi - people did not have time to chat.
Dr. Nichols-Belo discusses the real hardships people live through - food insecurity, feelings of isolation, loss of income, stress, police brutality, and loss of travel.



Surprisingly, to Dr. Nichols-Belo, as she conducted her research during a time of extreme political critique, there was an overwhelming approval of the policies of the Kenyan government during the pandemic. When asked comparatively about Tanzania and Kenya's pandemic policies, individuals thought that Kenya did a better job of managing the pandemic. Dr. Nichols-Belo notes that these are preliminary findings as she is still analyzing the data. Interestingly, Dr. Nichols-Belo uncovered the idea of pandemic rage. Through her interviews with university students, she learned of their experiences of the pandemic during high school, which, for most Kenyan students, is at a boarding school. At the beginning of the pandemic, the government shut down schools, sending students home.



Then, the government sent students back to school, having students work around the clock - six days a week, until ten o'clock at night, and without any extracurriculars. Absolute chaos ensued with students engaging in physical protests of setting dorms on fire and breaking stuff. Fast forward three years, and the same generation, Gen Z, is protesting in the streets. Dr. Nichols-Belo wants to pursue the influences of forced compliance under duress and how that impacts transformative political movements. Dr. Nichols-Belo could not conduct more interviews because of this political unrest, but highlights how "you don't know what is going to be interesting until the interesting thing pops out at you."

Dr. Nichols-Belo emphasizes the importance of telling stories. While Kenya had a low case load of COVID-19, people still experienced hardship and difficulties during the pandemic. Dr. Nichols-Belo shares the story of her Uber driver - an accountant at PricewaterhouseCoopers, who was laid off during the pandemic. This man has a mortgage and two children in private school, and started working as an Uber driver to provide for his family. The entire trajectory of his life changed; he reflects positively about the situation as he was able to start a business, do some accounting on the side, and maintain a flexible schedule with Uber. For Dr. Nichols-Belo, these stories are what matter - human experience at the pinnacle of research. Numerical data is important, but numerical data without faces, without people that the data regards, is dangerous. Stories humanize numbers, creating empathy, real connections, and real change.

Dr. Nichols-Belo emphasizes the importance of telling stories. While Kenya had a low case load of COVID-19, people still experienced hardship and difficulties during the pandemic. Dr. Nichols-Belo shares the story of her Uber driver - an accountant at PricewaterhouseCoopers, who was laid off during the pandemic. This man has a mortgage and two children in private school, and started working as an Uber driver to provide for his family. The entire trajectory of his life changed; he reflects positively about the situation as he was able to start a business, do some accounting on the side, and maintain a flexible schedule with Uber. For Dr. Nichols-Belo, these stories are what matter - human experience at the pinnacle of research. Numerical data is important, but numerical data without faces, without people that the data regards, is dangerous. Stories humanize numbers, creating empathy, real connections, and real change. Dr. Nichols-Belo acknowledges the challenges she has faced abroad. There were times in Kenya where Dr. Nichols-Belo was homesick and struggling to make connections, questioning, "Why am I doing this to myself?" However, Dr. Nichols-Belo claims the benefits far outweigh the struggles - discomfort is where learning, growth, and development happen. She recognizes that not every day is perfect and gives herself room to feel her emotions - loneliness, peace, sadness, joy. Dr. Nichols-Belo implores students to study abroad and take advantage of opportunities to go someplace culturally different. While reading stories about others is transformational, experiencing places and people firsthand is unparalleled. For Mercer University students, Dr. Nichols-Belo encourages them to take advantage of faculty-led programs to go to places that are hard to get to and cannot be duplicated on vacation. Overall, Dr. Nichols-Belo knows from firsthand experience that being abroad is hard, but it is where transformation happens.

# Beyond the Classroom

By Keslyn Billings



"Mercer On Mission is not only an opportunity for change," she said, "but also a chance for individual growth and reformation through the lens of a life that is not your own."

While in college, many students take certain classes and learn in a way that allows them to put the information on an exam, then forget about it later. For Nea, a senior global health and biology double major, what she learned in her Global Health in Latin America class about the Kichwa people stayed with her and pushed her to apply for a Mercer On Mission (MoM) to Ecuador. She wanted to use what she learned in class to make a direct impact on the people she had been studying.

The purpose of this MoM was to support the preservation and continuation of Kichwa culture, traditions, and ways of life. This included learning directly from the community, participating in cultural practices, and developing projects that were meaningful and useful to the Kichwa people. After learning about the community's history and challenges, Nea said that the opportunity to go to Ecuador was something she couldn't pass up.

One of Nea's most memorable experiences was visiting the Waorani community after a long boat ride down the Amazon River with her classmates. "It was truly amazing," she said. She immersed herself in Waorani culture by participating in their traditional dances and songs, which is an experience she described as deeply meaningful. "It made me feel a responsibility to share my experiences and make their culture and voices known." She also attended a midwifery session and learned about generational birthing practices that rely heavily on plant medicine, which left a lasting impression.

Of course, studying abroad comes with challenges. For Nea, one of the biggest was the language barrier. She was fluent in neither Kichwa nor Spanish, making it difficult to grasp the emotional nuance or humor behind certain interactions. "It made it harder to understand the depth behind what people were saying," she explained, but it also pushed her to work harder to connect.

Her time in Ecuador significantly deepened her understanding of global health. She saw how cultural misunderstandings can harm health outcomes and how traditional healing practices are essential to Indigenous well-being. She also witnessed how systems like capitalism and Western medicine often disrupt generational knowledge, land use, and cultural identity. These experiences reaffirmed her commitment to practicing global health with empathy, humility, and cultural understanding. One of the most important lessons Nea gained was seeing how closely Kichwa cultural practices are tied to plant medicine and environmental stewardship.

She also realized that global health "requires both knowledge and compassion." This MoM, and her global health education as a whole, has changed how she sees the world, shaping the way she engages with people, culture, and health every day.Nea was also surprised by the depth of spiritual connection the Kichwa people maintain with their land. She admired the strength of oral storytelling traditions, the extensive knowledge of medicinal plants, and the closeness of families who have lived next to each other for generations. These elements of culture were richer and more resilient than she ever imagined.

When asked what advice she would give to students considering studying abroad, Nea didn't hesitate to say "approach the experience with curiosity and humility." "Be open to learning from people whose knowledge may not appear in textbooks," she said. She emphasized the importance of flexibility and understanding that real communities don't operate on rigid schedules, and that meaningful engagement requires patience and openness.
s for whether she would participate in another Mercer On Mission or study abroad trip, Nea's answer was simple: she already is. The experience influenced her so deeply that she is participating in a MoM to Tanzania this upcoming summer. She hopes to continue learning, growing, and making meaningful connections with communities around the world "Mercer On Mission is not only an opportunity for change," she said, "but also a chance for individual growth and reformation through the lens of a life that is not your own."





**"Global health requires both knowledge and compassion."**

# When Strangers Become Family

By Gianna Richards



For Norma, studying abroad became a journey of the soul, each country a chapter in her story. Norma's study abroad journey stretches across multiple countries and multiple years, each one shaping her in ways she never expected. Her first experience began her freshman year with a Mercer On Mission trip to Tanzania, where her cohort partnered with an NGO called Haki Zetu. Their project focused on developing and piloting a curriculum centered on gender-based violence and human rights education. Norma and her peers not only created the curriculum but brought it into real communities and secondary schools, learning firsthand how culture and tradition influence perspectives on violence and leadership. After adapting the curriculum based on community feedback, they left it with the NGO to ensure its sustainability,an effort that made Norma feel like she contributed something meaningful to a place closely tied to her family and identity.

Her sophomore year took her to France through another Mercer On Mission program. There, she worked with refugees who had recently been resettled, partnering with several NGOs that supported families in their transition. Norma accompanied individuals to emergency housing, helped organize a day camp for children, and developed programs meant to help families adjust to their new environments.

The work required patience, compassion, and emotional presence,skills that grew even stronger when she returned to France this past summer to intern with the same organizations. This time, she stepped into a deeper level of responsibility, helping newly resettled refugees navigate complex systems and offering support in the early stages of rebuilding their lives. Norma chose Tanzania because it is the place her family is from, a country that holds a special place in her heart. Contributing something meaningful there felt personal.

France, on the other hand, represented her interest in refugees and her desire to grow her French language skills. Both places offered different types of learning, but each taught her more about herself and about the world than she ever imagined.When reflecting on the most memorable parts of her experiences, Norma doesn't point to a single moment or project. Instead, she talks about the people she met,the families, the students, the children, the refugees,who touched her life in a way she never expected. She explains that many students think they will be the ones making the biggest impact, but often it is the communities abroad who impact them the most. That emotional exchange, that unexpected depth of connection, became the heart of her study abroad experiences.These programs also transformed Norma's understanding of global health and culture .
he learned quickly that global health is everywhere,not just in hospitals and clinics, but in homes, classrooms, and communities. Every issue must be approached with awareness of cultural context, traditions, and community values. Seeing how cultural factors shape health challenges gave Norma a clearer picture of how deeply culture and care are intertwined. Her advice to any student considering studying abroad is simple: do it. Even if the idea feels intimidating, she believes it is worth it every single time. Study abroad gave her self-confidence, personal growth, and a stronger sense of identity. It taught her to advocate for herself, trust her instincts, and step into the world with curiosity instead of fear. "If you have the means to do it," she says, "you will come out of it a better person. You won't come home thinking it wasn't worth it."
The most important lesson Norma learned is to do everything with love,whether it is serving communities abroad, trying a new dish, or stepping into an unfamiliar situation. She believes that when you approach experiences with passion, intention, and compassion, you gain far more from them. She also learned not to take things for granted, to embrace discomfort, and to keep an open mind. Some of the biggest growth comes from moments that feel uncertain or intimidating.



*"If I could, I would literally just move abroad."~Norma*

Norma's experiences connect deeply to the mission of the IGS department. Her journeys reflect the values of personal growth, exploration, cultural understanding, and service. She spent a month alone in Paris, learning how to navigate a liminal space between familiarity and independence. She grew into someone more self-assured, more compassionate, and more aware of the role she plays in the world. Her work with refugees, her engagement with global communities, and her willingness to step into new cultures exemplify the mission of IGS: to grow, to serve, and to learn through meaningful global experiences.
Norma was surprised by many aspects of her travels. In Tanzania, she realized how different regions can be from one another. Her family's home, Arusha, felt like New York City in energy, while Mwanza was peaceful, quiet, and beautifully calm. In France, she learned that Paris is romanticized in movies but far more complex in reality. The first time she visited, she fell in love with it; the second time, she saw it with clearer eyes but still found beauty in the people, the rhythm, and the small towns like Lisieux that captured her heart

Would she do it all again? "Yes,one hundred percent," she says. If she could, she would move abroad tomorrow. Studying abroad didn't just teach her about the world; it helped her learn about herself, discover her strength, and feel connected to something bigger than her own experience

# Breaking Barriers in Jordan




By Reese Von Nordheim




Taking a few weeks out of the life you're used to and experiencing something new is always a memorable experience. This is what Syrin Suleiman did on the Mercer on Mission to Jordan in the summer of 2025. Syrin is a Global Health senior at Mercer who grew up in Jordan. She was excited that Mercer was traveling to her home and jumped at the opportunity to experience her home country from a different perspective. She and thirteen other Mercer undergrads traveled to Jordan to be part of a STEM camp for Syrian child refugees. "All the chaos was worth it," she says, after spending three weeks with these middle-school-aged children. Despite having lived in Jordan for her whole life, Syrin hadn't had the chance to interact with the Syrian refugee community before studying abroad. Both she and her classmates witnessed the children transform and develop their love for robotics and engineering during the three weeks that they spent together. Communication, which was at first difficult due to language barriers and restlessness from the children, gave way to strong bonds and genuine connections between the refugees and Mercer students. "It felt special to be a part of their lives," Syrin says.



Staff members who work at the STEM camp said they had never seen the children so engrossed and attentive with a group of volunteers before, so eager to learn about a subject. Bonds were made, and stories were shared that overcame even language barriers. The last day the Mercer students were in Jordan was an emotional one. Lots of tears were shed, and heartfelt goodbyes were given. One of the most memorable aspects of Syrin's trip was the impact they made on the children's lives.The things they taught them wouldn't end there at the camp; they would continue to live on in the children and serve as tools of knowledge to make their lives better. After the camp, many of the children would return to Syria. "I will become an engineer and rebuild my country," one of them said. Another expressed that they would take what they've been taught and teach it to other kids from their home country. Mercer on Mission goes beyond the few weeks that students spend abroad; Mercer on Mission is the impact that students are able to make on both the lives of others and their own.

# LOCAL IS GLOBAL

**By Hannah Knight**

Some may approach the concept of global health as lofty global inventions in far-off places, foreign to the individuals providing help. Dr. Chinekwu Obidoa challenges this rhetoric with the claim: "Local is global." For Dr. Obidoa, participating in global health starts by addressing the problems in one's community.




Dr. Obidoa has many research interests, but at the heart of her interest is black youth. Over the last 10 years, she explored the social context of sexual risk-taking of black youth in Macon, GA. She interviewed 150 adults ages 21-25 living in Macon, GA, finding that 70% of individuals reported being sexually active before the age of 18 and 51% had a child. These findings fueled her research on understanding the cycle of teen pregnancy and HIV risk in African American youth in Macon, GA.

Dr. Obidoa highlights that "people no longer talk about teen pregnancy" in the United States - "they think it is gone." Consequently, there is scarce funding in the U.S. that focuses on reducing teen pregnancy. Therefore, Dr. Obidoa chose to utilize her recent sabbatical time, a period of leave for research, professional development, and travel, to complete ongoing research projects in this field and, if possible, initiate new ones.

Dr. Obidoa decided that the first task on her sabbatical would be to visit her parents in Nigeria, stating that "what is the purpose of a sabbatical where I cannot see my aging parents?" She is grateful for this time to visit her parents, as this was the last time she saw her father before he passed. During this period in Nigeria, she started a new study - "Mental Health and Resilience of Undergraduate Emerging Adults in Socio-Economic Crisis in Nigeria." Dr Obidoa highlights the connection between economic downturn and providing basic needs. Dr. Obidoa was interested in undergraduate students' experiences with the crisis and the effect on mental health. She designed a simple study, received IRB approval, and started collecting data from the University of Nigeria.

Dr. Obidoa also finished the Lilly Summer Faculty Fellowship, which she had received two years prior. The Lilly Summer Faculty Fellowships equip faculty with resources to help ther faculty members regain their sense of purpose and calling. Dr. Obidoa attended the final conference and wrote the final report during her sabbatical, concluding her fellowship requirements. Additionally, Dr. Obidoa devoted time during her sabbatical to continue writing a book about research she conducted regarding the "Mental Health of African Immigrant Youth in the U.S." For her research, she surveyed students at Mercer University, gaining thorough insights through qualitative research practices.



Further, Dr. Obidoa had the opportunity to travel to Melbourne, Australia, as a visiting scholar to the Burnet Institute. During her time at the Burney Institute, Dr. Obidoa worked with a video design team for an awareness program for immigrants in multicultural communities and consulted with individuals working on a mental health intervention for youth. Dr. Obidoa also presented her own

work on teen pregnancy and the Untrapped curriculum, and learned new methodologies for research on teen pregnancy. Dr. Obidoa was also invited to give a seminar as a guest speaker about her research on "Mental Health of African Immigrant Youth in the U.S."

**"Why should people care? Because this is a problem."**

Regarding her research on teen pregnancy in Macon, GA, Dr. Obidoa focused on a teen pregnancy prevention curriculum - Untrapped. Dr. Obidoa finished the Untrapped website and curriculum to be launched and disseminated into the community during her sabbatical. The goal of Untrapped is to "expose the entrapping nature of teen pregnancy and how young people can un-trap themselves from its limitations." The intervention is tailored to black youth and is a nonconventional intervention based on videos, discussions, and narratives. The curriculum emphasizes the social, economic, and historical influences on sexual behaviors.

There have been discussions on teen pregnancy, but the cycle continues to flourish in the Macon area. During the launch of Untrapped, Bibb County Division of Family and Children Services director was present, remarking that Untrapped is needed. People see children carrying children and know that there is a problem, but the cycle is a hard thing to break. Dr. Obidoa wants to challenge the narrative that the problem of teen pregnancy is over; instead, she refers to teen pregnancy as unfinished business.



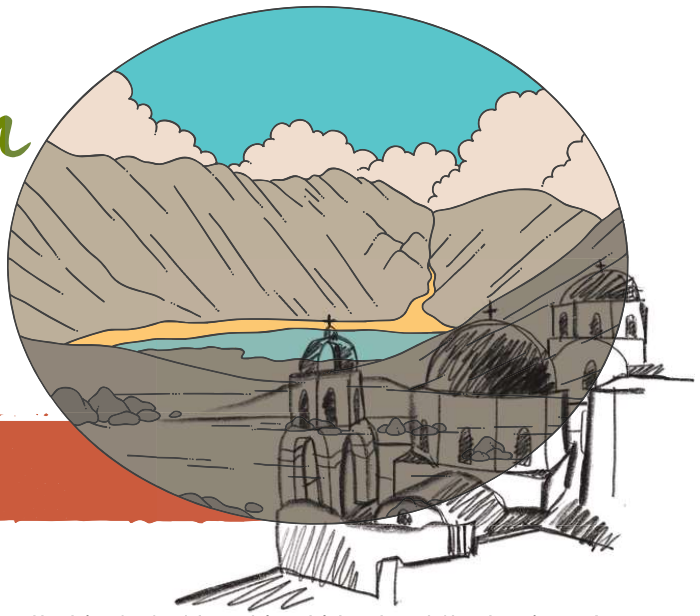
**"Research makes you. Research exposes you to the world that you need to know."**

Reflecting on her recent sabbatical, Dr. Obidoa believes that research is powerful, saying, "Research changes the person doing the research." Dr. Obidoa recalls how she is not the same person before and after she conducted research. When she teaches about health, Dr. Obidoa teaches with faces in her mind - the faces of the individuals she interviewed about teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDs. Dr. Obidoa's encouragement to students is to "find research and let research find you; the rest will be history."

For Dr. Obidoa, there is no disconnection from global and local health - local is global, we are all interconnected. Global health is everyone. Dr. Obidoa believes that understanding local dynamics helps individuals understand the world, which creates an environment for real change.

# Mercer on Mission & Motivating The Next Generation

**By Harry Wolbert**



Even before coming to Mercer University, Ann Potts was interested in opportunities abroad. Ann felt an intense need to help, and, perhaps more importantly, a deep want to learn more about the world and more about her career of interest – health. However, when Ann looks back on her first experience, before coming to Mercer, she feels “disappointed,” and is thankful that Mercer University and Mercer on Mission (MOM) has shown her what a truly fun and productive abroad experience looks like.

Ann has been fortunate enough, but also driven enough, to participate in two different Mercer abroad programs. The first of these was a Mercer on Mission trip to Mongolia in 2023, which later motivated and encouraged her to seek more abroad experiences. Mongolia was an “eye-opener” for Ann, not necessarily because of the foreign location (although there was culture shock too), but mostly because of the way Mercer conducted the program. On paper, the stated goal for the 2023 Mongolia trip was to address the educational disparities faced by many children in disenfranchised communities on the fringe of Ulaanbaatar, the country’s capital. However, Ann, alongside her classmates and faculty, found herself doing and experiencing so much more.

Ann really enjoyed her work teaching the local kids. She led the kids there in various educational STEM activities that included teaching kids about the basics of physical science, like gravity, through interactive lessons. However, Ann also noticed a clear need for reproductive health education in the community. So, Ann took initiative. She asked Dr. Obidoa, one of the lead faculty on the trip, received approval to work on the program.

his trip showed Ann the importance of advocating for the programs you believe in and helped develop the leadership skills necessary for her future career in Global Health. She’s since taken these experiences and skills and followed her own advice to keep doing more.





The Mercer on Mission program to Mongolia serves as a perfect encapsulation for one of MOM's key purposes. The true strength of MOM is that it provides valuable service to communities in need while also giving students amazing opportunities to broaden their perspectives and doors to future career opportunities.

Using what she learned in Mongolia, Ann has worked with both the Coalition For Collaboration On HIV/AIDS Research and Intervention In Middle Georgia (CCHR), and the International AIDS Society (IAS). Mercer on Mission served as an important launching point for Ann, motivating her and providing invaluable experience to jumpstart her professional career.

**"Just do it. Do it as much as possible and take advantage of your opportunities."**

# Public Health Summer Fellowships for Undergraduate Students



### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Over 10 paid internship opportunities that provide hands-on immersive experiences in public health work. https://www.cdc.gov/fellowships/php/opportunities/applying-for-undergraduate-students-opportunities.html

### American Public Health Association (APHA)

Both undergraduate and graduate students are eligible for unpaid APHA internships that offer practical work experience. https://www.apha.org/professional-development/apha-internships-and-fellowships

### National Institutes of Health (NIH)

An opportunity for students in college, graduate, and professional school to perform a summer research internship in the Intramural Research Program at the NIH. https://www.training.nih.gov/research-training/pb/sip/

### Collection of Fellowships

https://www.public-health.uiowa.edu/undergrad-gap-year/

### Health Effects Institutes

For rising juniors and seniors to explore research opportunities in the environmental health sciences. https://www.healtheffects.org/research/funding/fellowship

### Carter Center

A variety of Fellowships and Internships for undergraduate students https://www.cartercenter.org/

# IGS Upcoming Trips

## Marrakech, Morocco
## Spring Break, 2026



Experience the trip of a lifetime with Mercer University's Health Interventions in Marrakech study abroad program! This immersive, faculty-led course takes you beyond the classroom to the vibrant city of Marrakech, Morocco, where you'll interact directly with clinics, NGOs, and government agencies tackling pressing public health issues.

**Contact: Dr. Obidoa**

## Mwanza, Tanzania
## Summer, 2026



This Mercer On Mission program is in partnership with Mwanza Youth and Children Network, a Tanzanian nongovernmental organization that inspires youth and children to participate in the development process.

Working alongside Mwanza Youth and Children's Network, this Mercer On Mission program will support initiatives that encourage youth advocacy around the problem of climate change and its implications for environmental health.

**Contact: Dr. Nichols-Belo**



# Meet Our Editorial Board



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