

Learning about Africa, One Experience at a Time

A group of 14 U of I students joined Professor Richard Akresh on a 20-day trip to Burkina Faso last winter. Students returned from this journey enriched by a one-of-a-kind experience and with stories they wanted to share. This is one of those stories.

Living in Africa is an invaluable experience for students who study the continent. Last summer and fall I was lucky to have that experience of living and traveling in South Africa and Burkina Faso.

I spent summer 2006 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, in an intensive Zulu language and culture training program through the Fulbright-Hays GPA. The homestay with a Zulu family was one of my favorite experiences as we were included in *braais* (South African version of a barbecue),

school trips, graduations, and other events. This program allowed our group, consisting of 13 American students, access to Zulu events like services at the Shembe church (the fastest growing Christian/indigenous religion in South Africa), a virginity testing, and trips around KwaZulu-Natal, learning about the political and cultural history of the Zulu people.

During the fall semester, I moved to Durban and worked as a loan portfolio manager at the Ithala Development Finance Corporation, a

state development bank. In this role, I counseled low-income entrepreneurs on their business plans and provided small loans to expand their businesses and create more jobs in their communities.

As Ithala is 85 percent Zulu, I continued using my Zulu language skills, and was given the name Thokozile, which means "one who is happy." While working at Ithala, I conducted my master's thesis research, examining the impact of savings programs on poverty reduction for low-income clients at four rural Ithala branches.

During the U of I's winter break,

I attended Professor Richard Akresh's course "The Face of Economic Development" in Burkina Faso. While in Ouagadougou, we visited non-governmental organizations to learn about the development programs they ran in the rural areas. We then traveled to the countryside and visited dry season farms with irrigation systems and microcredit groups. Whereas in South Africa, individuals borrowed large sums from the bank,

we visited new savings and loan cooperatives in Burkinabé villages, where women saved approximately 20 cents a week and then pooled their weekly savings together to be loaned out in the future. Even when earning a small amount from sale of boiled peanuts to tourists

and in the market, these women were able to save a little every week.

By participating in these trips, I came to appreciate the large variations among African people and their cultures. It was also an important experience for me to learn more about microfinance and development programming, especially to understand that the amount of a loan is not everything. It put into perspective that making smart investments is as important as the size of an investment. The diversity of experiences in Africa requires that development policies be as varied as the people it serves.

—Jessica Horn

MA alumna, African studies, 2007



Jessica with her host Zulu family.



Going to work at Ithala.

NEW STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

IN AFRICA

The Center for African Studies continues

expanding its campaign to further the interest and knowledge on

campus about the continent through its

sponsorship of study abroad classes taking place in Africa. Two

groups of undergraduate and graduate students

traveled to Benin and Burkina Faso

during winter 2006-07 to explore the rich

cultures, history, and life in these two countries.