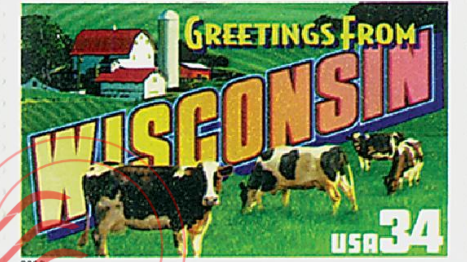


It was late and dark by the time we arrived in Cape Town. After nearly 24 hours of traveling we arrived at Bonani B & B where Mama Mandisa St. Clair was waiting and greeted us with open arms. I distinctly remember standing in our new room and hearing, "you are home now." It did not take long to realize how true and sincere these words were. We smiled each time we would hear Mama call us "her girls." Just a few days after our arrival we were invited to a braai with Mama's family out in Gugulatu. We also were escorted by members of Mama's family to mZolie's a well-known dance club in the townships. Our comfort and safety was priority during our stay.

One night after a long day of touring Simon's Town and the other coastal towns on the southern line we misjudged the time and found ourselves on the train after dark. Our anxiety was increasing and to make matters worse we got off at the wrong stop. We called Mama and within minutes we were "rescued" by Ronny, Mama's husband. We never lived that one down and Ronny frequently asked what train station he should look for us at each time we left the house. Because of Dreamcatcher's homestays we had opportunities and experiences which would never have been possible staying in volunteer hostels or hotels.



Postcard



From: **Allison, Wisconsin,
United States**

Volunteered in: **Cape Town &
Qwaqwa**

When: **2012**

We volunteered at Place of Hope which provides crisis shelter for women and children. Much of our time was spent in the crèche with the younger children. Initially we worked on building relationships and trust with the children. As time progressed we began modeling safe and meaningful behavior management techniques. The initial challenges were worth the outcome. Slowly, the children appeared to be responding well to a more structured and ultimately safe crèche. Feedback from the crèche staff was positive and upon returning to Cape Town after being gone for 6 weeks we were pleasantly surprised when we learned that the structure was still in place and the children were thriving.

It took some finesse to gain the trust of the women at the shelter. It was understandable as we learned their stories and heard the horrors they escaped. Despite all the reasons the women had to not trust us many eventually confided in us and shared their struggles and their triumphs. We had the pleasure of running a workshop for the women and shared our passion for working with children who have experienced significant trauma. After explaining to the women that we had no intentions of preaching to them about how to raise their children the women became much more receptive to what we wanted to present. The women listened to our mini-neuropsychology lesson and despite some language barriers they were engaged in the conversation and shared how they related to the information being shared. After Place of Hope we spent some time at De Hiede working with children with severe developmental and physical challenges. At that time we had no idea how much we would appreciate the time we were able to spend with the physiotherapist and occupational therapist. There was no way of preparing us for the northbound journey to Qwaqwa, Free State!

After 16 hours traveling via Greyhound to Free State we are greeted with open arms by Mama Merriam. Quickly we gained another family. It was truly a warm place (figuratively and literally) and it was home. Mama and her daughter Debrah were a blast. We went to church with them, shared lazy weekend afternoons, and even attended a professional soccer game with them (Amakhosi 4 life!). Although we only stayed at Mama Merriam's for 3 weeks and we were only moving less than a few kilometers away, the move was unexpectedly emotional. Mama Ntombi and her two granddaughters were able to help comfort our sadness. The younger granddaughter, nDazo took to Becca very well and in no time was doing Becca's hair (and visa versa), learning to make friendship bracelets, working on her English via our small laptop, and serenading us with her amazing voice.

Regardless of how tired we were at the end of the day it was hard not to smile when we were greeted with hugs (sometimes running from several blocks away) by nDazo and an entourage of children. Again, the things we experienced staying with Mama Merriam and Mama Ntombi would never have been possible if we were living in a hostel or hotel. Because of our Mama's we learned about both the Besotho and Zulu customs and traditions.

Mama Merriam proudly put her traditional Besotho clothing on and explained how much could be learned about a person just by understanding the meaning of different articles of clothing they were wearing. Mama Ntomni was an amazing cook. One night she cooked a traditional meal of pup, cabbage, and lamb. Ironically the electricity had gone out earlier that day and we ate by candle light. As we sat for dinner she took our utensils away and told us we were eating the traditional way. She chuckled at our trial and error tactics when attempting to tackle this challenge. It is important to only use one hand as the greasy fingers make picking up your glass of juice very difficult!

Qwaqwa is a very different place than Cape Town. It is difficult to miss the poverty and disadvantages of such a rural community. Aside from spotting an occasional white person driving by in a car, we were the only white people in Qwaqwa. This led to many interesting conversations and experiences. Many people were genuinely intrigued and wanted to talk with us about our impression of their community. Talking with the people in Qwaqwa was an adventure all in itself. Often it was assumed that we spoke Afrikaans and people were surprised to hear us respond with, "hello!" English was less fluent in Qwaqwa leading us to learn many simple (and essential) Sotho words. We laughed along with people as we attempted saying words with clicks and failed miserably. I finally conceded to the fact that my mouth just does not work that way.

Itsoseng Centre for Physically and Mentally Disabled Children is where we spent a great amount of time while in Qwaqwa. Mama Merriam began the center back in the mid-nineties. Currently the center has about 33 children and adults. 6 caretakers (2 sets of 3) rotate 12 hour shifts. They are responsible for all the daily living tasks including making food, feeding children, cleaning, laundry, changing nappies, and much more. Our time spent at the center was challenging, emotional, amazing, and exhausting. It was amazing how a difficult day could be erased with the smile and hug of a child. We watched a 2 year old who was showing signs of what we call 'failure to thrive' syndrome in the US blossom and make huge developmental leaps. She had suffered from neglect prior to coming to the center. When we first met her she was very withdrawn, made little eye contact, refused to stand on her feet, made no attempts to talk, and preferred to be in her crib alone.

The day we left I watched her from a distance as she was babbling and laughing as she was playing with another child close to her. She was making attempts to walk however was still building strength to support herself. When we would walk past her she made eye-contact and raised her arms to be picked up.

It was fun to hold a conversation with a 15 year old with cerebral palsy who knew English. His personality started to come alive the last week we were there. The last week an 8 year old girl finally remembered my name and proudly yelled across the room Allison (pronouncing it Al-lee-SON) instead of referring to me as Luke (the last longer-term volunteer). Burned into my memory forever is a 6 year old who was hit by a car and appeared to have nerve damage affecting his balance and hand-eye coordination. When we were leaving the last day he was somberly standing in the doorway like a statue and remained there when I turned to look back when we were 2 blocks away. Mama Merriam's passion for these children is admirable. She puts every ounce of her heart and soul into the center and the children there. 8 of the children do not have homes to return to. These 8 children (including her biological son with cerebral palsy) she refers to as "her children." During school holidays these children stay with her at her home.

The English language falls short for best describing the incredible work of Dreamcatcher and what an amazing organisation we found them to be! No amount of thanks could suffice in describing the gratitude I have for Dreamcatchers. The positive impact of the organization is incredible. From empowering people to succeed and supporting other projects serving disadvantaged people Dreamcatchers is making an impact across the globe. The 3 months spent in South Africa has impacted every part of my being. I may have returned home however my heart forever spans from the tip of Cape Point up to Table Mountain and across the Drakensburg Mountains in Qwaqwa. I am proud to know I still have family in South Africa.