

Brianne L. Overton: Henry Mitchell Scholarship Report

My life is forever changed by my experience in South Africa. I joined Dr. Tom Meuser's research project as a doctoral counseling student to assist in the facilitation of interviews and active participation in this mixed methods research project. The project was much larger than I initially thought. I was so excited to be involved in an international project and to learn from Dr. Tom Meuser, Dr. Nicci Roman, and Thuli Mthembu. As a Thanatologist, I have studied death, dying, and bereavement for a decade. There are not many opportunities in our counseling department to study in the field of death and dying, so when the recruitment email was sent out I was eager to learn more about the Legacy Project. Dr. Meuser and I met and began working together the same week. It's not often you meet someone who not only appreciates the field, but has made a lasting impact through his contributions to the field. I was in awe of all that he has accomplished in his career.

Once I received notification of the scholarship award to accompany Dr. Meuser on the research trip to the University of the Western Cape, the real work began. Before heading to South Africa, I was responsible for interviewing pairs for our Legacy Project in Saint Louis. After transcribing the interviews and meeting with our research team here, we were tasked with moving the project forward by analyzing our data. This would prove to be helpful during our trip with our South African colleagues. We laid the foundation at UMSL and brought our work to UWC.



Our first stop was in Dakar, Senegal. When I opened the window and peered outside, I was overcome with emotions. It was more than just landing and being in Africa. As the tears streamed down my face I felt a sense of connectedness. The feeling of belonging, where everyone around me looked like me, was more overwhelming than I could have ever imagined. I felt like I belonged as if this place that I had only read about welcomed me with open arms. The feeling was indescribable and would carry me throughout our journey through South Africa. I arrived in Cape Town, South Africa on Saturday, February 3rd and my study abroad journey began. We made it to our guesthouse safely and rested up for our adventure. Our first full day we

explored the neighborhood and drove down to the ocean. It was a beautiful day and a wonderful way explore the city.

On Monday, we traveled to the University of the Western Cape to continue our work with our colleagues. We made it to the UWC and were now embarking on a new journey in the presence of our colleagues. After our introductions, we were provided a tour of the UWC. The campus is beautiful. There were visible signs and remnants of rioting that took place just weeks before our arrival to the buildings and campus. This was a such a surreal experience. This was the first of many reminders that even though we are worlds apart, we are still connected in different ways. I was reminded of walking through Ferguson, after Michael Brown was killed, and witnessing first-hand the effects of his death on the community. In this moment, I was reminded that it was not about being afraid and more about accepting and embracing the unknown. I asked a lot of questions about the riots and the students. Our colleagues provided me with information that was helpful and useful. After our tour, we finished the day by analyzing our research and solidifying a plan for the remainder of our time at the UWC.

On Monday evening, we were invited to attend the musical *Miriam Makeba: Mama Africa*, by Dr. Angela Coker and Dr. Niyi Coker. The musical was phenomenal! The musical definitely set the tone for my two weeks in South Africa. To experience the life and legacy of Miriam Makeba through the telling of her story in Cape Town was a very enriching experience. As a counselor educator, it is important for me to experience cultures that are different than my own and to share those experiences. On my first day in Cape Town, I was able to visit and tour the UWC, explore the community surrounding the campus, and visit downtown for the production of *Miriam Makeba: Mama Africa*. This experience helped me to expand my cultural

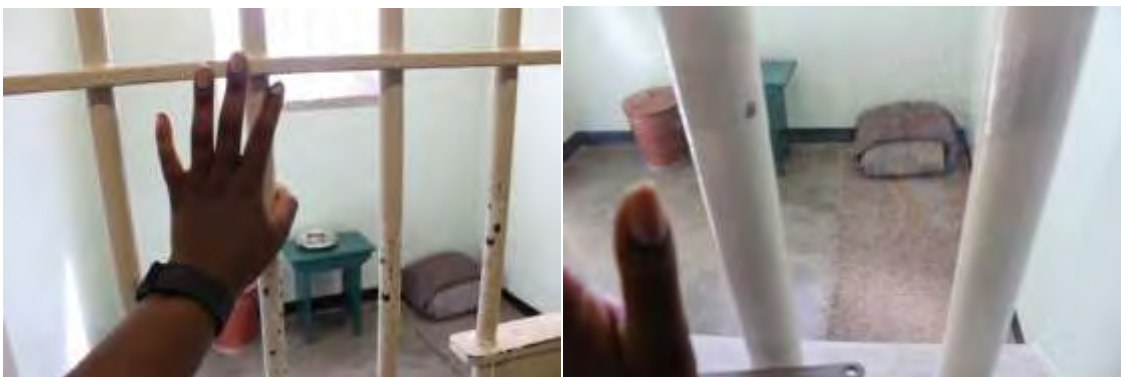
awareness, as a doctoral student in a counselor educator program, it is essential for me to continually grow and develop.

Our primary goal for this trip was to engage and collaborate with our colleagues to further the development and completion of this phase of our research. While in St. Louis, I facilitated and transcribed legacy interviews. As a counselor, it has been fascinating to me to explore this task with the older adults and their adult children. I was ecstatic when I learned that I would be given the opportunity to facilitate an interview with one of the South African pairs. This experience was so enriching as it allowed for more commonalities and themes to surface during our debriefing period. This opportunity provided a first-hand experience of the history and culture of Cape Town. This interaction was one of the highlights of the trip, as it allowed me to put my counseling skills to use while engaging in the interview process. Each time we met with our colleagues I learned something new about our research process and felt like a contributing member of the team. There have been times in my career where I've felt intimidated and not as an equal member of the team. This was certainly not the case with this project. In learning more about myself during this trip, I felt empowered to offer my opinion and my voice to our shared project.

I was in attendance for Dr. Meuser's presentation to the UWC faculty and students on his life review work. His presentation was well received and the question and answer segment was even more intriguing. On our final meeting together, we hosted Dr. Roman and Thuli at our guesthouse. During this meeting, we finalized a plan going forward of how we would move through the next phase of our project. Thuli and Dr. Meuser coordinated dates for Thuli's travel to the University of Missouri – St. Louis (UMSL) and am excited to continue our work together.

During the trip, I had the opportunity to visit several museums and historical sites – Robben Island, Stellenbosch museums/churches/community, Cape of Good Hope, Peninsula tour to Kirstenbosch and Hout Bay, Table Mountain, District Six Museum, and a safari. Cape Town is absolutely beautiful. Engaging with community members and tourists at each place was an enriching experience. Early in the trip I visited a doctor for symptoms of a sinus infection. During the visit, the doctor and I discussed my reason for the visit to South Africa. After discussing the Legacy Project with him, he inquired about my career path. We talked about grief counseling and how I want to continue educating others about death and dying through a counseling lens. Before leaving his office, he bid me farewell and collaboration to offer grief counseling to his patients. This is just one of many examples of the discussions and conversations that I engaged in while in South Africa.

Visiting Robben Island, for me, was another highlight of my trip. Today I cried. I was moved to tears listening to a former prisoner tell his story and the story of #466/64 Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. I was thankful for the tourist that hurried to keep up with the tour guide as I sat in front of the door to his cell in silence to reflect on his story and his legacy. This moment in time I will forever cherish.



Visiting Robben Island – Nelson Mandela's cell

This moment in time stood still. As a person who identifies as an African American female, I reflected upon my place in this world. What does it mean to be me at this very moment in time? Which aspects of the trip will I recall when teaching or educating others about diversity and cultural awareness and competence in the field of counseling? How do I describe my time in Cape Town, South Africa as more than an enriching experience?

During my time in South Africa I was afforded an opportunity of a lifetime. Through this enriching opportunity I meet new people and built life-long relationships with a group of extraordinary people. I am extremely grateful to the UM UWC partnership and the Henry Mitchell Scholarship fund for making this experience possible. Thank you Dr. Meuser, for allowing me to join this project and for valuing my skills and my voice. This trip has helped me grow beyond what I could have ever imagined in terms of educational experience, cultural immersion and competency, and awareness of the self and others. My life is forever changed by my experience in South Africa. I am grateful to all involved that made this possible.

Visiting Cape of Good Hope





Working away on a beautiful day outside



Aquila Game Reserve



Aquila Game Reserve



Research meeting with Dr. Roman and Thuli