Ghana: Building Community

One of the first things Silver School of Social Work student Darrin Oliver did upon arriving at NYU Accra in Ghana for a semester was learn how to ride trot-trots, the minibuses of Accra that are as difficult to direct as they are to flag down. He understood that this small bit of new knowledge was key to unlocking the adventures of NYU’s study abroad site in Africa. “All my life, I’d succumbed to the misconceived notion that Africa was like one big country,” Darrin admitted. “And for that, I was ashamed.” But he was on a mission: to gain new perspectives and to change his own. Through a volunteer opportunity, Darrin soon experienced Africa’s diversity firsthand.

“I assisted the social worker at the Osu Children’s Library to draw people from the neighborhood of Nema into the library, to create community in an area where many immigrants from Northern Ghana, Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and other West African countries were searching for opportunities. We worked hard to create a place of cultural exchange.” Darrin’s efforts at community building had a positive result in the neighborhood. In return, he “realized a new passion,” and, when he returned to New York, he took on a second major in metropolitan studies at the College of Arts and Science. “It is so important,” he maintains, “for us, as global citizens, to explore the world that we are given—and be open to the changes our experiences bring.”

Reconnecting with the Past

For Gallatin student Sima Cunningham, the vendors roasting yellow corn along the cobbled streets and the hustle of traffic outside the Blue Mosque in Istanbul stirred memories of Greenwich Village halal carts and the afternoon rush of downtown Manhattan. But she shook it off, understanding that moving past parallels and into the new experiences of Turkish culture would push her forward.

After her Gallatin Scholars trip to Turkey, where the group researched nation building, Sima decided to spend the next semester studying in her ancestral homeland of Armenia. “Before I explored the Middle East, I realized I should place my own story in a historical context and figure out how I personally relate to it and how that influences what I absorb when I study.” While she was studying and learning the language, Sima, whose area of study is cultural diplomacy, volunteered at nonprofit arts organizations and worked alongside Armenians to promote creative expression in a country that had largely been isolated from the rest of the world. Art became a means of reimagining her country’s future—and her own.

When she returned to New York City, Sima shared some of her artwork about Armenia in a salon held by the organization Arts for Peace. Her art was noticed, and soon after, a representative from the United Nations approached her with an offer to work as a Goodwill Ambassador. Sima’s advice to NYU students seeking new experiences in foreign countries?

“You have to be flexible but also deliberate and adventurous.”

Gives & Takes

NYU students in the global network do more than travel—they exchange their knowledge with others, and, by doing so, they change themselves.