CAMEROON ’16 JOURNAL 1 – Lea, Stephanie, Caitlin, LaNiece, Karl

1/5/16 Lea

Today was really incredible – I have lots of thoughts circulating around in my mind that I will attempt to condense. We spent most of today painting a school, something that ended up being way more exciting than it sounds. Before we even started painting we had to wait for the supplies to be set up. We ended up playing really fun games and started the day off with lots of laughter. We were also introduced to all of the classes and the kids were incredibly sweet and welcoming. Their teacher introduced us every time as their friends and asked if they were happy to see us – to which they always replied “yes”. I so badly wanted to spend more time with them.

We picked up trash and then painted the school. The kids all came out when they were done and hung out with us while they waited to be picked up. It was strange at first because of the language barrier, but once we started playing and laughing it was as if the language barrier didn’t exist. We had some free time after lunch and I spent it outside on the porch talking and writing and taking in the scenery. I began to think about just how impossible it really is to separate the world in to “haves” and “have nots”. In a country I am “supposed” to view as impoverished and in-need, I can’t help but notice the undeniable beauty of this place and the people who live here. After orientation I was even more inspired just hearing about how hospitable the people are here. So while I sit and think of how hot it is here and how I went almost three days without a shower, I can’t help but appreciate a culture that sees all of its members as brothers and sisters. I feel so lucky to be here and be learning so much already. I am inspired.

1/6/16 Meaghan

It seems impossible to try and write a sufficient journal entry when so much happened today but here it goes. Today was truly incredible. Simply because it was the second day. I felt so much more comfortable and at ease. Walking up to the school and seeing the half-painted wall was kind of inspiring to me. We spent some moments of yesterday worrying about the color or the quality of our not-so-professional painting skills. But seeing the paint dried and after literally taking some steps back to look at it, it looked pretty good. I almost can’t describe the feeling – more accomplished maybe?

I also feel like once we arrived, we all automatically jumped in to the work like we’d been doing it for years. It all felt more normal and comfortable. We stopped focusing on the little details and learned how to cope and move around obstacles. And then, as we were paining one of the best parts of the day began – the kids came out to play. To be honest, I didn’t quite play as much. I sort of talked with a few and then just watched the Frisbee game. I’ve never seen that many kids to excited about Frisbees! One of my favorite moments then was when we all joined hands and ran around in a massive circle (great idea Faith!). It was a moment of true and pure happiness for me.

Later in the day some of us painted windows while others began to paint the bottom parts of the wall (we finally found navy colored paint!). Looking at it after completion was really amazing. Despite being “done”, as many people shared in reflection, we felt that there was still so much more to do. It felt incomplete to leave the school, knowing we’d be in Buea tomorrow. There was so much more we could do, but we couldn’t do it. Everyone there was so kind, welcoming, and appreciative of something that we felt was such a small thing compared to the amount of need.

I really enjoyed reflection tonight. Every time we get together to share ideas I feel so inspired. Tonight I feel like we really touched on the role, value, and views of different perspectives in different places. I’m really glad that our group holds some diversity that allows us to share perspective that we might not otherwise understand. I may feel differently about catcalling than another person, so I’m so grateful that I have the opportunity to try to understand or at least see that. So, as I sit here in the kitchen having a moment alone to write this, I feel so grateful to be here and can’t wait to go join the conversation in the living room.

Love, Meaghan

1/7/16 Caitlin

Today, we traveled from Yaounde to Buea. For breakfast we went to a shop called Acropole, where we also got food for lunch. It was my first time buying something myself in Cameroon, and it was really exciting to speak French and use my francs. The van ride was hot and long (around 7 ½ hours), but it was so interesting to see more of Cameroon. Because of the heat, we kept all the windows down except when we were in the inner city. However, by the end of the trip we were all covered by a layer of dust and dirt. To keep ourselves occupied many of us made bracelets, engaged in awesome conversations, observed our surroundings, and I taught everyone a game called Contact. Steph finally learned that she couldn’t contact herself!

We drove through Douala, which like Faith said was hot hot hot. But soon we were in the Anglophone part and amost here!

When we arrived in Buea people from the NGO showed us where we were staying and helped us get situated. Most of us went on a walk through the neighborhood, and everyone was so welcoming! We already made friends with the neighboring children. When we got back, we helped get water. We don’t have running water, so we had to go to the well pump where people pay to draw water. It wasn’t too far, but a bucket of water sure is heavy! I’m looking forward to spending a week here working, learning, bonding, and having a blast.

1/8/16 LaNiece

Today was a special day. I mean every day has been special, but today was different. The nursery and school we visited today was much more developed than the Wisdom Academic Complex. The work we need to do here is mostly cosmetics, like painting. The children here, just like the last school are so pure and lively its invigorating. The amount of misconceptions about life in Africa is crazy. What we learn and see in the media is so far off, at least in the communities we’ve been in. The people here are just like us, smart, animated, and interested, I am just so sad that most people don’t experience this. I wish the media showed the progress that organizations like UAC are making. There are a few things people can learn from people here. Aside from visiting the schools the drive through the town to the school was pretty interesting. There was a soccer field being built due to funds provided by a Chinese organization and it was being built for girls only. On the rest of the drive I saw many different churches and institutions mostly funded by Cameroonian organizations which was interesting. Also, we drove past a market open Saturdays and Tuesdays which I hope to visit tomorrow.

I almost forgot to mention probably the most important and beautiful aspect of day, the UAC philosophy. The idea of a more holistic education that is taught here is something we should adopt in the sates. Here they don’t only teach subjects but they begin immediate preparation for the workforce and not just white collar jobs, but sewing, cleaning, and cooking. They give the child options for work if they cannot, for whatever reason, continue school. I think that is so amazing because it is very conducive and considerate given the environment they live in.

For dinner tonight we had ndole. It was like boiled greens, like spinach, that contained ginger and onions. It had somewhat of a bitter taste but it was still delicious. Bernice had done it once again! The plantains were also really good boiled, they were like banana flavored potatoes. Preparing dinner was also a really good time. After Ben, Carrie and I washed dishes we hung out with Bernice, Meaghan, Faith, Stephanie, and Caitlin as they prepared dinner. Hanging on the back porch was so nice and relaxing. The pressure of societal norms is not present here and I was really grateful for the time.

Lastly, tonight’s reflection was pretty awesome. We started off with group compliments. Compliments were so heartfelt and authentic. It was really a great way to ge the wheels turning. I love hearing about everyone’s most memorable moments and their highlights of the day. It was nice to hear everyone’s perceptions, thoughts, and experiences of today’s activities.

1/9/16 Karl

As day by day comes and goes, my understanding of the diverse experiences of Cameroon communities advances. So far, we have been able to serve and learn about the structures, organizations, and people of Cameroon. However, today was quite interesting as we witnessed the unique and powerful contributions of creative expression and artistry by Collins and Max. I was fascinated by Collins’ ability to make the perfect shade of 5 different colors out of a very limited supply of paint. He was a really nice asset to have and made our jobs a lot more fun and simple. The opportunity to experience Max’s artwork at his private home and studio was amazing. It is rare for a well-established and known artist to give personal tours of their art and comment on them. I really appreciated and respected the stories and meanings that accompanied each piece of art. Max was also just as great as his paintings. He was warm, inviting, and humble.

1/10/16 Lea

Sunday, the day of rest, or so they say. We began our day with a short but intense hike of Mount Cameroon. Prince led us up to a good stopping point with a view – we were drenched with sweat but the view was really beautiful. After we came back down the mountain, a woman invited us into her yard to show us the process of how she makes starch and sells it. It was really cool to learn about something I knew nothing about without even asking – she just wanted us to learn! Of course, as per usual in Cameroon, we did not leave empty-handed. The woman gave us a pineapple and three ears of corn (which we named and took great care of in the van). Prince showed us his museum, which included many artifacts from the people who used to live around Mount Cameroon. He was so excited to show us all of what he had – bones, photos, seashells etc.

We went to a wildlife preserve and got to see lots of animals, mostly gorillas and monkeys. Our tour guide assured us that the animals were not captured but rather saved from hunters or other dangerous scenarios. The intention is that they will eventually be released back in to their natural habitat. We ate the most delicious lunch after observing the animals. I had a burger and a pineapple juice which was so refreshing I gulped it down in record speed. I think it was pretty unharmonious that we all enjoyed our food.

Afterwards, we traveled to the beach. Even van rides are so much fun because of how much we sing together, and enjoy eachother’s company. The beach was so exciting to me and everyone else. We were so excited to get in the water, most of us couldn’t even wait to change in the changing rooms so we did it on the beach. I was surprised at how warm the water was and how dark the sand was. Turning around in the water I could see a long line of trees and mountains in the background. It was absolutely beautiful. I also got to ride a horse with Emma which was really cool. Reflections today was really fulfilling for me. My main take-away is what an incredible team we have here in Cameroon. I’ve thought it countless times and mentioned it to people as well but I’m constantly floored by how incredible these people are. There are so many people here I knew before the trip but not in the same way. Here I can see them in a new light, doing things they’re passionate about and expressing themselves in a really beautiful way. Specifically in reflections today we were talking about our opinions on pictures and when it’s appropriate. I really enjoyed hearing everyone’s opinion on what originally seemed like a very simple question. It just reminded me that we all come from different places and that has such a large impact on the decisions we make. That’s such a simple thought but it really spoke to me tonight. I’m so thankful to be in a group of people who feel comfortable talking about their lives so freely – I’m learning so much.

1/11/16 Steph

Today we went back to work at the school. We had beignets and bananas for breakfast. All of us were all kinds of tired from yesterday. We got a ride to the school and got started on the mural and finished all of the railing. A lot of us were really excited to carry concrete! Little troopers…I accidentally painted one of the pillars yellow when it was supposed to be purple…fail. Overall, we were able to spend time with all the kids and I was shooting math problems at them and they were pretty good! When we came back a lot of us took naps because we were so drained. I was able to see my friend Marielle! We hugged eachother hello and talked about today. She noticed how exhausted I was. After a short nap we had lunch. BEANS!!! I hated having stomach problems because I wasn’t really able to enjoy my lunch. Right after lunch we took a trip to what we thought was a craft market. Let’s admit, we weren’t expecting “Bob’s” house…. Some of us got really cool necklaces and earrings. After we got some crafts, we stopped at another market that had jewelry and fabric. We weren’t there long. When we came back, some of us went to the bakery and had such a relaxing time! A couple of the residents came up and said hello to us. When we came back we exchanged games with the children from the neighborhood. We played until dinner time. I love beans, they’re my favorite Cameroonian dish. After dinner we played the iceberg game and it was lovely to see how comfortable everyone has become. Again, I love you guys.

-Stephanie

1/12/16 Caitlin

I’ve been writing so much in my personal journal for the past few days, I’ve hit writer’s block big time. If Faith and Carrie don’t type out scratched out words, I wrote a paragraph going over our day and scribbled over it. I don’t really have words today. Our group has gotten so close and we’ve been talking about some serious stuff. We talked about race and skin color. Everyone is so insightful and I enjoyed hearing everyone’s perspectives and experiences. We’ve only been building on the iceberg activity from last night, getting to know each other and understand our diverse background. Tonight it hit me how little time we have left here in Cameroon, but I’m excited to see all my Cameroon friends at Dickinson. This trip continues to be amazing because of each and every one of the beautiful people here with me. Even though my thoughts are scattered, I feel grounded in the group.

1/13/16 LaNiece

We had beignets again this morning, and they were fresh. I love a good breakfast! Anyways, today we were teachers. Ben, Steph, Penny and I were the sports group. We started out by stretching with every class, followed by a game. At first we played duck duck goose but we stopped when a little girl fell and scraped herself up pretty bad. Then we settled for red light green light. Surprisingly all the kids loved it, even the sixth graders. I guess you never get too old to play it because we loved playing it too. I lost count of how many classes we played the game with but I was very tired and hungry when we finished. However the word didn’t end there. We had to organize the library, help build the kitchen, and paint the basketball backboard. We finished the library, some of the kitchen, and most of the backboard. I was pretty satisfied. We ended the day pretty early, about 1:30pm or so, but we had to say goodbye to the kids. By no way was I prepared, nor could I ever have been, to say goodbye to them. The rush of feeling sad and happy was a bit overwhelming as they sang their farewell song to us. We all received so many hugs, so much love, and I definitely was not ready to leave. I may not know all their names, but I will miss them.

1/14/15 Karl

Today is a particularly sad day. We all spent our last morning in Buea and left for Yaounde around 9am. The bus drive was relatively long. Unfortunately, I was unable to sleep on the bus. Anyway, I really am going to miss it here. I am so grateful for this experience and I am going to try to come back. I really hope that I can return. Nonetheless, I am sure that this group will never forget the experience. I am sure that when we all arrive back on campus, we will still be talking about Cameroon with each other. I am also excited to get my shirt back from Mama Becky. I feel like we have so much to learn and serve here but it is coming to an end now. I might cry at the airport, who knows. All I know is that being here with this group was such a remarkable experience that I will cherish forever.

Thank you sincerely for all of your thoughts guys. The 2 weeks we spent together in Cameroon truly have a special place in my memory and more importantly in my heart. Thank you for all contributing to such a memorable journey.

(Journal 2 to come soon)