

In the spring of 2024, I stepped onto the tarmac of Blaise Diagne International Airport in Dakar, Senegal. As the capital and westernmost point of Africa, Dakar boasts a warm, moderate climate in the spring and is alive with new experiences and excitement. Stepping off the plane, I was filled with excitement, curiosity, and enthusiasm for the opportunity to immerse myself in a new culture. Living and experiencing West Africa had always been a dream of mine, and now, it was finally becoming a reality.

As I settled into my home with my host family in Sacré-Cœur, a large neighborhood in central Dakar, I began to reflect on the cultural differences and my own experience with culture shock. I lived with a Muslim polygamous family; my host father had two families and split his time between them. Coming from a very conservative state, this was initially surprising. However, as I bonded with my host family, I gained a deeper understanding of this cultural practice. Many nights, between dinner and bedtime, I would stand in the doorway of the kitchen, which was outside and separate from the house, and talk with my host mom. We would share stories about our days, practice my French, and discuss her childhood, life in Senegal, and her favorite aspects of the country. Looking back, my heart warms as I remember how welcomed, loved, and cared for I felt. Wolof, the native language of Senegal, has a word for this feeling: *Teranga*, which means hospitality and warmth. No other word better encapsulates the Senegalese spirit. Their culture is one of love, generosity, and kindness.

Generosity was woven into every aspect of Senegalese culture, particularly in its medical system. I completed my internship at the Poste de Santé de Charles Foucauld in central Dakar. I chose this study abroad program for its internship opportunities and learned more than I ever imagined. I had the chance to scribe in women's health, pediatrics, and wound care. This experience was both challenging and eye-opening. I communicated with staff and patients in

French and encountered diseases I had only read about malaria, HIV, worms, and giardia.

Through my conversations with patients and my first hand exposure to the difficulties they faced in accessing quality healthcare, I solidified my passion for medicine. I have always been drawn to international medicine, and my work at the Poste de Santé deepened my commitment to patient care and reinforced my desire to pursue a career in the field.

Learning is never easy, especially when the material is presented in a foreign language. I entered college without any prior French instruction, so when I decided to spend four months in Senegal, I was more than a little nervous. However, my time there turned out to be the most enriching and immersive experience for my French. During the first six weeks of the program, we completed 16 hours of coursework, spending 8 to 9 hours a day at school studying Senegalese history, culture, international development, and public health. I was fully immersed in a challenging yet supportive learning environment that broadened my worldview and deepened my perspective. Because of this program, I now have a stronger cultural understanding and a more comprehensive view of development and international relations.

Studying abroad is not an easy experience; it challenges you to think critically, dig deep, and rely on your own strength. My four months in Senegal were mentally demanding. We experienced political unrest during the elections, which ultimately led to our cohort being confined to our homes for two weeks. As citizens took to the streets to defend their constitutional rights, I sat on my bed, looking out the window and questioning whether it was worth staying. My stomach churned at the thought of staying but also at the thought of leaving. This period of instability taught me more about myself, my resilience, my composure, and my ability to adapt. I had to decide whether staying was worth the challenge in order to grow both academically and personally. As I fought to stay positive, maintain an optimistic outlook, and navigate the city

safely, I proved to myself that resilience builds character. I emerged from this experience stronger, more knowledgeable, and more self-assured. I now understand how to stay safe in a politically unstable environment and how to trust my own judgment. These life lessons will carry me through my next journey as I pursue medical school. As I enter the field of medicine, I will bring with me cultural humility, compassion, and resilience, using these qualities to advocate for my patients' health and well-being.

Overall, I would not trade my experience for anything. Senegal allowed me to reconnect with myself, and I cherished the four months I spent there. This journey made me stronger, more resilient, and more compassionate. I will always remember its golden coast and the warmth of *Teranga* that embraced me.