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CWIL Travel Grant Essay

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Crossing Boundaries

One does not often cross boundaries until led to the edge of one's position and asked to examine the other side. My experiences at an all women's college have invited me to carefully and thoughtfully evaluate my life as a woman and challenge the boundary of sex and gender-based discrimination. The economic status of my family has demanded that I consider the class boundaries imposed in our society. Recent coursework in women's studies has required that I begin to intellectually and personally evaluate my relationship to my own whiteness and approach the boundary of race. It was not until I was given a travel grant by the Center for Women's InterCultural Leadership that I was brought to the edge of my cultural position and provided with the opportunity to cross cultural boundaries. During my two-month internship in Washington, D.C., I was presented with the opportunity to transgress multiple cultural boundaries, both while working at the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and also while living in metropolitan D.C.

The work I was doing while at Maryknoll was very intercultural in nature and encouraged me to view the world from a different cultural lens. My work on international debt relief, the negotiation of trade agreements between the United States and other nations, and other economic justice issues required that I view policy making in terms of global impact on individual persons, not as benefiting the American economy or United States citizens. As an American, news and seemingly factual arguments had been presented to me in terms of costs and benefits to the American people. Being able to explore issues in terms of their actual impact on all persons

involved provided me with the opportunity to embrace a more intercultural view of the policy decisions made in Washington.

The making of decisions in Washington, D.C. had always seemed to me to be a sort of “ivory tower” of political power, and this was another boundary I was able to cross during my summer internship. The view of politics with which I had been presented led to images of a political culture in which primarily white men sit in cold marble offices and make decisions based solely on their own pocketbook. While some may argue that this is, in fact, the way politics truly operate, I was exposed to another perspective during my intercultural travel experience. While working at Maryknoll, I was able to telephone the offices of many members of Congress to request their examination of a particular issue. This was not done by some high-class professional in an important office while wearing a business suit, but was and can be done by anyone with access to a telephone. By simply calling the publicly listed number to any Senator or Representative, one can speak to the Foreign Policy aide to that representative and can express a concern or ask a question. I was particularly struck with this notion of the accessibility of politics one day while faxing a hundred members or so of Congress demanding the closing of the School of the Americas in Georgia. This work does not need to be done by a particularly respected organization, but by any concerned citizen. Crossing the boundary of whom and what constitutes political action was an important personal discovery during my stay in Washington.

Another particularly memorable cultural experience I had during my internship with Maryknoll occurred while I was at a meeting on Guatemala held by the Latin America Working Group. A Guatemalan woman was the guest of honor at this particular meeting, and she was to report on the state of affairs regarding the eradication of the military in Guatemala. This woman only spoke Spanish, and I was the only participant in the meeting not fluent in her language. Fortunately I was able to read over the shoulder of another intern who was kind enough to take

notes from her talk in English. This hour and a half meeting was the first time in my life where I was excluded from a conversation by not being able to speak the language of another person. This was an important boundary crossing for me, as Americans very frequently require everyone to speak their language and act in their cultural traditions.

I was also required to move beyond the cultural traditions with which I am comfortable in my interactions with the people with whom I worked. The other intern working in the Maryknoll office for the summer was a man by the name of Joseph Isanga. Joseph is a Holy Cross priest from Uganda, studying international human rights law. His cultural traditions were quite different from mine, and our friendship required me to stretch my comfort level. From language to personal space, I was able to experience the limits of my American culture.

If one is not provided with the opportunity to interact beyond one's own cultural experience, one is able to view one's own culture as absolute and as normative. Once one is exposed to different cultural traditions, one is able to measure experiences against each another in order to redefine one's own culture. My intercultural travel experience in Washington, D.C. provided me with the space to explore the boundaries imposed by my status as an American. Learning about policies from a global perspective, engaging with politics on a personal level, and being exposed to varying languages and cultural practices enabled me to define my own cultural background. As a result of my two-month internship at the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, I am able to locate my cultural experience in a particular space. In having such a location, I am able to see myself and my American culture as limited and as not being the only option. Such a realization enables me to view myself as a member of a global community, with the power to recognize, embrace, celebrate, and honor both my own culture and that of others.