Written on My Heart

Africa. A place only known by the locals or those brave enough to venture past the danger to place it on their lists of sights to see. Or so it seemed to me. Why was it that people feared this great continent, one full of unknown treasures I imagined it to hold? Danger? Maybe. The distance, I doubted it. But I was determined- determined to fight the odds against me, that someone young could see the other side of the world and leave it a better place than they found it. My heart was set on Africa, practically locked.

Everything about Africa gave me the feeling of an exotic mystery, a place so far and broken, at least that’s what we were told. Growing up in the United States, Africa was always given this reputation, one of desperation, need, hunger, and sickness. Ask a teen about Africa or some sort of answer including, native country with tribal people that are hungry, who have AIDS comes out. When I promised myself as a freshman I was going to go to Africa, some how, some way, people laughed. They told me I would get sick or be kidnapped. None of these comments even slightly fazed me. They did, however, light a small fire inside of me, yearning to prove these imprudent opinions wrong.

Countless hours I spent glaring at my computer screen, only to be let down by another, 18 AND ABOVE in parenthesis at the bottom of the website. I emailed organization after organization, telling my story of how I set out to create a Harborside senior project on the other side of the world. None complied with my lengthy if, ands and buts. And so I waited. Not long after the fifth trip I looked into fell through, I went to grab dinner with Esther the ’know it all’ Harborside graduate, who came home from college. My senior project came up over our fancy dinner of sub sandwiches, and Esther reminded me of Kids Around the World, an organization that had been in front of my face this entire time. She had recently gotten an email from them about the upcoming trips they were taking. Haiti, Nepal, Guatemala, were all on the list, and Esther explained maybe one of these destinations would work better for me and be the perfect fit for the ‘other side of the world’ project I wanted to do. I knew this organization well, and worked with them numerous times packing food in the past. The Haiti trip even fell on the dates of spring break, and being a minor wasn’t listed as a NOT APLLICABLE. KIDS’ food packing and playground ministries encompassed everything I sought after in a trip, everything but one thing. Time was ticking and I wanted Africa. Haiti wasn’t what was written on my heart, Africa was.

Within a matter of a couple days after talking with Esther, I received an email. It included a brand new list of Kids Around the World’s outreach trips. I scrolled through each trip, looking carefully and dates and prices, when my heart suddenly stopped. There at the bottom of the page, the very last trip read PARRL, SOUTH AFRICA- August 2013. I stopped breathing. This was the trip I knew I was destined to take.

I thought back to the day Africa was first encrypted into my mind. At a districts conference in 2010 I heard a presentation from a woman full of spunk and excitement for this great land that had so much to offer the world. She overflowed with the same passion I soon grew to have. Nick, my childhood friend who’s nearly my brother, was sitting next to me and I began to share with him my newly sparked interest in Africa. I wanted to know if I was going crazy or if anyone else felt the same way. By the end, Nick agreed to go with me somehow, someday, if we found a way.

In a matter of minutes after reading the email, I called Nick and reminded him of the ‘promise’ he made years ago. I sold him on Paarl, the hope alone of the opportunity to go, filled us with excitement. We talked to our parents, prayed, and emailed KIDS while starting to create the trip of a lifetime. Each week the dream I once had in my head became increasingly real. Every detail came together in a way I couldn’t have been more thankful for. All the right doors were opened and others were shut. I tried to wrap my head around all the details, both big and small. Time seemed to fly as I counted down the days.

I found myself standing in O’Hare International Airport on August 1, 2013. My best friends and family stood around me, and my loyal traveling companion. To my disbelief Nick followed through and we were about to set out on a two-day trek of traveling 8,530 miles away from home for almost two weeks. I was overwhelmed, shocked full of amazement that this dream of mine was about to come true. But I couldn’t have been happier. My life changed that day. I learned so much about myself in the previous months from preparation and planning. The hard work I did paid off, dealing with change, and how somethings aren’t meant to happen I now understood. I felt accomplished like I was on top of the world physically and literally as our fight flight took off out of Chicago.

I couldn’t have been more right. Africa was exactly the place I was meant to be, the puzzle my pieces all fit into. I thank God for orchestrating this adventure that was so key in sparking a passionate fire in my heart for culture. Africa was full of treasures I never imagined, treasures of compassion, love, and hope were stronger than I’ve ever been able to wrap my head around before. It was all that I had pictured. I went to change people’s lives and came back with mine changed. I left my heart in Africa.