

Reflections from the 2015 JR South Africa group

Matt Connor (eNCA)

My South Africa JR was easily my favorite quarter at Northwestern. Do not get me wrong, I love taking classes and participating in student groups on campus. South Africa simply offers an unparalleled experience. There was no better way to get a taste of what I hope to do in the future: report in a foreign country for a news organization. Yet the opportunity to report for a 24-hour news network in South Africa meant so much more than asking the right questions, being professional and carrying over the lessons of Medill.

Whereas reporting for a domestic news outlet would allow me to better train my professional skills, reporting for South Africa's eNCA allowed me to not only further my professional techniques, it enabled me to grow as an individual. Part of the reason reporting in and around Johannesburg allowed me to blossom on a personal level is the numerous lines of identity I was constantly crossing and confronting both in and out of the newsroom. I believe my time in Evanston has allowed me to embark on a voyage of the mind. I believe my time in South Africa allowed me to embark on a voyage of the soul.

No doubt I grew tremendously as a video storyteller, thanks in large part to the colleagues I grew close with (particularly Mosibudi Ratlebjane). Which reminds me of one of the greatest surprises about my time working at eNCA—I never expected to be embraced so closely by colleagues in Johannesburg. Whether it was Mos and Tshepo trusting me as a co-reporter to work on a video package in Mpumalanga, Megan taking me out with her family to Lion Park, or Jessica sharing a book she wrote about Carte Blanche (an investigative news show on MNET), I was treated both as a team member and as a person who mattered. While I also had ample opportunities to report when I worked at a newspaper near Seattle, my internship experience there seemed much more transactional. I wrote stories, my editor edited and on my final day, a thank-you card and a handshake were exchanged. Yet after ten weeks in South Africa, crossing so many lines of identity, upbringing and interests, I felt as if I became more integrated there than I ever have been in a U.S. newsroom.

I will miss—and already do miss—the time spent with Mos and Tshepo reporting in rural Mpumalanga, the numerous influential people our JR group met and interviewed during our first couple weeks of orientation, Jessica's guiding advice in the newsroom, working for something I could watch on television and of course, all the rusks, rooibos tea, and trips to Zoo Lake, Delta Park, and Rosebank Mall. These have been the most rewarding two months of my life. I cannot wait to return.

Jeanne Kuang (The Star)

I tried not to have too many expectations of South Africa before going. As a journalist I wanted to make sure I was knowledgeable while still approaching everything with fresh eyes. I'd advise you try to do this too; it'll let you drink everything in.

During our briefing period and the first few weeks at The Star (where my colleagues became both close friends and journalistic role models), I was thrown into the country's "big issues" immediately. As my fellow students attest, the variety of stories is pretty unlimited. I published nearly a story every day and contributed to coverage on the outbreak of "Afrophobic" violence, national debates over removing colonial influences in academia, and the FIFA corruption scandal that shook the country. But I was also given seemingly smaller assignments—profiles of interesting people, or instructions to just go somewhere and see what life was like there. Those were the stories from which I learned the most—the opportunity to probe people on things that affected their lives, the chance to go to a place and just listen to people talk about what's on their minds. People opened up about their lives, their passions, their problems, their government, their country and where they saw themselves in the world.

Our second week in the country, driving back to Cape Town after spending an afternoon meeting with activists in a nearby fishing community, I spoke with our guide about what we had seen so far. He was a former journalist who had lived all over the world.

"South Africa is the whole world in one place," he said.

And it is. It has a wide array of languages and cultures, immigrants from everywhere. It has one of the world's most brutal histories of racial oppression, the effects of which linger on today, and now one of the world's most progressive and far-reaching constitutions. There's the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor and every rung of the ladder in-between. I think it's a country that's both searching for a unified national identity and celebrating all its diversity. Going to South Africa as a journalist, you'll get to see it all—the whole world in one place, in all its starkness and vibrancy. To be a witness to that is a special kind of privilege.

Sanya Mansoor (The Times)

JR in South Africa was three wonderful months in a chaotic and beautiful country. Joburg is home to countless stories, which I got to report on at The Times.

I've confronted a handful of ethical issues, learned to think more critically and adapt to unfamiliar situations. I walked in with a strong ability to report compelling anecdotes and obtain a lot of information. I left with a sharper focus and an understanding of the importance of context and brevity.

As a magazine student, it's tough to write 400-word news stories on complicated issues. Although it was rare to go in-depth, I accumulated a wide breadth of stories, which touched on health, education, crime and politics.

Race is tricky because it often has an impact but sometimes it's not very clear. I became fascinated with the plight of South Africa's coloured (mixed-race) community, especially in Eldorado Park, a Sowetan township notorious for drug use. I spent a couple of weekends documenting creative and development-oriented initiatives by "Abnormal Talent," a talent development agency started by youth in the region. I filmed their fashion shows, flash mobs, live performances and work at the local parks.

The newsroom was never quiet. I was surprised by how accessible and helpful editors and co-workers were. Arguments over stories were common, as were jokes and banter.

JR isn't just about work, though. Bushfire braais under starry skies in Kruger, adventures in Sowetan nightlife and chesa nyamas, penguins in Cape Town, Sunday services at Hillsong (a church that used to be a nightclub), poetry and jazz sessions at The Orbit, and Maboneng's vibrant cafes all added to an exciting experience, as did my three awesome roommates!

There's a certain wisdom you gain from talking to people with radically different lives. JR led me to a heavyweight wrestling champion, religious drug addicts and nurses who helped the fight against Ebola.

This country has comforted, surprised and humbled me. I'm immensely grateful for the journalist and person it's made me today.

Timothy Duncan (Mail & Guardian)

Reporting in South Africa was the most amazing learning experience of my life. I learned so much about reporting that simply being in a classroom would not have taught me. There were so many factors including the novelty of a country, with a different culture and set of major languages, that encouraged me to go out of my comfort zone.

I worked as a Video Reporter at the Mail & Guardian and had the opportunity to report on major stories. South Africa is a diverse country with several nuances in its culture. Because of this, I visited rich and poor areas and learned how to speak to people from several different backgrounds. I could be interviewing a successful Hip Hop star one day, and then speaking to a victim of xenophobia living in a shack, the next day. No two days were ever the same during the time I stayed there.

Words can't adequately describe the learning experience this has been. I have grown and I have learned to not only become a better journalist, but also to become a more mature adult.

Anthony Settipani (Saturday Star)

My time spent in South Africa was one of the most transformative experiences for me as a person, let alone as a young journalist. There's something about the combination of real life experience, professional role models and being thrown into the complete unknown that really pushes you to be your best. One of my editors there told me that one year in a place like South Africa is like a decade's worth of experience just about anywhere else, and I believe him. The sheer breadth of stories and events I covered at the Saturday Star surpassed everything I had imagined. Within two weeks of reporting, I had already witnessed a police shootout, braved the terrors of South African public transit and spoken face-to-face with the South African equivalent of a Supreme Court justice.

Content aside, the team I worked with was made up of the most friendly, skilled and accommodating people I could have hoped for. None of them ever hesitated to give me a hand when I needed it, and nearly all of them hold multiple awards. I can't imagine any site, foreign or domestic, coming close to equaling the experience I had while in South Africa.

Taylor Shaw (eNCA)

Arriving in South Africa I didn't quite know what to expect so I chose to live without expectations and just be, allowing the country to reveal itself to me. That was a great decision. South Africa is a very complicated country—politically, socially, economically—much like America. My greatest surprise about Johannesburg is how similar it is to America. As a Northwestern student in Johannesburg you'll live a nice, middle-class lifestyle in which it is very easy to forget about what is happening throughout the entirety of South Africa (if you choose to). The highlight of my experience was getting out of Craighall Park nearly every day and meeting all kinds of people who taught me the importance of taking responsibility for yourself and contributing positively to your country.