

VOLUNTEERING ABROAD:
AN UNPARALLELED, INDESCRIBABLE EXPERIENCE

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Volunteering Abroad: An Unparalleled, Indescribable Experience

I recently received an email from “Mercy Ships” Canada regarding a critical shortage of OR nurses for their next volunteer mission to Madagascar, Africa. Mercy Ships is a global charity that provides free primary medical care and surgeries to areas of West Africa, home to some of the most impoverished people in the world. The *Africa Mercy* is the world’s largest hospital ship that includes four operating theatres, four hospital wards, and a small ICU. As many as 450 volunteers can be on the ship at any one given time to volunteer their time and expertise to help those much less fortunate than ourselves. I have had the privilege of volunteering with the “Mercy Ships” organization twice in the past. My first trip was for five weeks to Free Town, Sierra Leone, West Africa and my second trip was for six weeks to Pointe Noire, Republic of the Congo, West Africa. Both trips were extremely humbling and provided me with life changing experiences that I still reflect on today, working as an OR nurse in Canada. I have always strongly encouraged anyone to pursue a volunteer mission in an underdeveloped country. However, recently after a very surreal moment at the 2015 ORNAC National Conference I would also urge everyone to become well informed about the country and organization they choose to volunteer with.

The opening speaker at the 2015 ORNAC Conference held in Edmonton, Alberta this past May, was Amanda Lindhout. She is a Canadian humanitarian and journalist who was kidnapped in Somalia for over a year, suffering horrible inhumane injustices. She is also the author of *A House in the Sky- A Memoir*. Her book and the sharing of her experience had a profound effect on me. I felt that I was able to identify with Amanda’s character as she was roughly around the same age

as me and shared the same exhilaration and excitement for travelling as I do. She was driven to explore places that presented hardships and a certain degree of culture shock. She was criticized in the public eye for being naive and visiting countries that were identified as being very dangerous. Her words really impacted with me as I realized her experiences were not unlike the countries that I have been to with my involvement with the Mercy Ship. I felt like it was a sincere privilege to be able to hear Amanda speak at our 2015 National Conference. Immediately I had feelings of compassion and understanding for her as she shared her story. Her motivations for going to the countries she visited were very similar to mine and I instantly felt a sort of kinship listening to her. As I reflected on my experiences travelling in West Africa as a single young Canadian lady, I could hear Amanda's voice resonating with me, reminding me how lucky I had been to have been so safe. Canada has a very strict non-negotiation policy with hostage terrorism, and I think I have taken that for granted. The telling of Amanda's story has definitely made me look at my desires to travel to underprivileged countries a little more seriously. I still have a passion and eagerness to volunteer and offer my operating room nursing skills to those less fortunate than I, but now I will do so with a greater degree of caution and reserve.

I would still encourage everyone to volunteer their time if they can to help out in countries that require better access to basic medical care. The rewards of volunteering are endless and have positively impacted my practice as I have learned so much from working with others from all around the world. I would just advise with caution that individuals seek out the organization they will be volunteering with, and do some research into the country they are visiting. I certainly will do my due diligence from now on to ensure that organizations have clear security and hostage contingency plans and policies- and I have Amanda Lindhout to thank for that!

REFERENCES

Amanda Lindhout and Sara Corbett: A House in the Sky- A Memoir. September 3rd, 2013

Mercy Ships Canada Website; accessed July 10th 2015. www.mercyships.ca/who-we-are/about-mercy-ships/