



### **Adam Beeson**

There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered...

Nelson Mandela from *Long Walk to Freedom*  
(1995)

When discussing life experiences that led him to the political path, Nelson Mandela writes that he encountered no grand epiphany, but that he “simply found

[himself] doing so, and could not do otherwise.” When I was twenty years old, I found myself doing so. Perhaps it was the physical relocation from my home in western North Carolina to the foothills of the Austrian Alps that unlocked space for my doing to commence. Perhaps it was the introduction of new thoughts, the sharing of ideas and dialogue with a diverse group of peers and mentors that opened my path. Or maybe it was the sudden understanding that I was an inhabitant in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “world house” – a member of “a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.” I do not recall a single epiphany that set me on this course, but I know that after my experience in the Global Citizenship Program, I could not do otherwise.

I arrived in Salzburg in January 2006 as a first-generation college student, and the first of my family to travel outside of the United States. A journalism major with a focus on government and law, I considered myself an informed citizen. What I soon realized, through the plenary lectures and discussions in Salzburg and the many informal conversations I had with faculty and participants throughout the week, was that my information was limited to just a few perspectives. Each day, I consumed news and information from a single television news source, I read from a single newspaper, and I surrounded myself with people who had similar life experiences. My knowledge of cultures outside of the United States was limited to what I learned in history books and international sporting events. The GCP turned this practice around for me by providing me experiences and concrete tools to diversify the news and information I was consuming, and it instilled in me the desire to connect with peers unlike myself. In addition, the experiential components of the program – the visit to the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site and the Kosovo Crisis Scenario – helped me to build empathy with fellow citizens of the globe while teaching me the complex realities of international aid and development.

I returned home with a new worldview: that I am a citizen of both the United States and of the world, and I soon learned I was not alone in this perspective. When asked how he reconciled his allegiance to South Africa with his commitment to the struggles of non-compatriots, Mandela saw no contradiction. “I was first and foremost an African nationalist fighting for our emancipation from minority rule and the right to control our own destiny,” he said. “But at the same time, South Africa and the African continent were part of the larger world. Our problems, while distinctive and special, were not unique, and a philosophy that placed those problems in an international and historical context of the greater world and the course of history was valuable.” I found myself similarly trying to find connections between my local experiences in North Carolina and the wider world, and I found myself doing global citizenship: writing articles in the student newspaper about my experience in Salzburg; speaking about global citizenship for groups of undergraduates and community organizations; taking part in gatherings and discussions that addressed global issues; devouring and sharing books on global affairs by and about world figures like Mandela; retreating to the mountains

to ponder my place in the world; and actively seeking out perspectives different from my own in news sources outside of the United States.

Throughout it all, I asked myself why it took twenty years for me to be launched into these ideas, to learn about global challenges, and to consider my place in a globalizing world, and I wondered how I could help to introduce the idea of global citizenship to a larger audience. It seemed clear to me that I could help bring the notion of global citizenship to light by working in education, and by making a commitment that I would help to provide the type of global citizenship education I wished I had been given earlier in life. In December 2006, I accepted an internship in Austria, during which I worked with young people like myself who were grappling with similar questions and ideas, and so began my career as an educator.

Can I credit my experience as a student in the Global Citizenship Program with the path I've taken since then? Is it because of the GCP that I spent ten years living and working in Washington, DC, Austria, and Costa Rica? That I earned a master's degree in international education from a British university? That I traveled to more than twenty countries and made friends and colleagues across the world? Or even that I entered an international marriage and, soon, will be raising an intercultural, bilingual child? Perhaps the GCP did not provide these experiences to me directly, but it is no exaggeration to say that my time in Salzburg that winter was the starting point to this journey, and that the GCP is where my doing so began.

After a decade away, I recently returned to live and work in western North Carolina, and to raise my daughter in the same mountains I retreated to when I began this journey. I return to the region a changed person, a global citizen. I feel a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment with who I have become, and the work I have done thus far. Yet, like Mandela, "I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb." I return to a state with legalized discrimination and voter suppression, a region plagued by environmental concerns such as clean water, coal ash, fracking, and mountaintop removal, and a country led by a president who normalizes bigotry and hate, and who actively combats the very foundations of global citizenship.

And I know my walk, too, is not yet ended.

*Adam participated in the program in 2006 as a student of Brevard College. He is currently the Head of School and Academic Director of [SI Global Academy](#). "SIGA facilitates immersive learning & global citizenship to empower students to become integrated life-long learners who make positive contributions."*