



Lavar Thomas

In 2010 as a Kingsborough Community College participant, I could not fathom the possibilities that would have unfolded as a result of the Global Citizenship Program. Having participated in my high school's student exchange program, the GCP was the first time I was challenged to think about global issues in a way that led me to want to be a part of its solutions. During that time, I was particularly interested in addressing health outcomes within the African American community. However,

that focus slightly shifted as I gained a global perspective. My views regarding public health, education and community empowerment were transformed after discussing what it meant to be a global citizen.

The GCP removed me from my comfort zone as a community college student and unveiled a new global critical lens. My experiences with regard to community development, empowerment, and access to equitable healthcare and education all became global terms. I had now been equipped with a critical awareness to better approach and dissect issues both within the United States and internationally. Furthermore, it afforded me the ability to empathize with lives struck by poverty, resulting in limited social mobility.

In reflection, the activity that stood out to me most, was our visit to the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site, which was followed by an evening debrief. Though that particular trip was quite overwhelming, given the Holocaust's history, and limited time to take in the museum and landscape, it led me to examine how a country can move beyond its dark, historical past, and create an inclusive and equitable environment for future generations. I was deeply touched by the discussion and personal accounts given by those directly affected.

Now, as a Peace Corps Volunteer serving in Rwanda, I realize that my goals for service, community development and leadership have become global. I am confronted daily by children affected with malnutrition and families fighting against abysmal poverty conditions. On my commute to my health center, I encounter children who are severely malnourished, with visibly bloated stomachs due to limited access to a consistent meal. This experience has not only been a learning experience and channel to make a difference, but also an opportunity to appreciate what I often took for granted living in the United States and living in NYC. At the local health center where I work, I attempt to address the issue of food security and malnutrition by helping to train mothers and households on creating their own kitchen gardens to increase access to nutritious foods. Additionally, I facilitate leadership, empowerment, and financial literacy workshops for youth within my community to help them fight for their dreams and goals.

The Global Citizenship Program laid the foundation for me to better contextualize global issues in a way to make a difference. I believe a global citizen is any individual who recognizes the social obligation to help those plagued by social ills regardless if they are directly affected or not. It is also the ability to humanize problems and recognize the pressing need to be a voice of concern and solution to bring about awareness to global injustices. I believe the GCP has helped me to develop this perspective. This program sparked my intellectual curiosity to think globally, seek cross-cultural understanding, and desire to navigate different worlds. As a result, I was led to serve in the United

States Peace Corps to not only serve, but also to immerse myself into a different culture and gain a deeper understanding of self at a global level.

Overall, being a part of this environment has helped me to identify what's really important in my life and how I can better lead a life of gratitude and purpose. Working with marginalized populations and communities without a voice has highlighted the great need for cultural exposure and effective leadership. Looking forward, I plan to establish my own international leadership development organization that targets youth and helps them to develop their skills to better advocate for the improvement of their communities. I am passionate about examining social policies such as healthcare and education, which are essential for the social mobility of people within any country. I hope to become an international change agent and demonstrate how through cultural understanding, leaders can better make a difference and create a sustainable positive change.

Lavar provided his impact story in 2016. He is currently a Community Involvement Coordinator with the United States Environmental Protection Agency and Co-Founder of Leaders of the Free World, an international experience and leadership development program for young Black men within community colleges.