

A Different World

One single glimpse into the cute little kids' eyes was enough!

When I walked into Masiphumelele, a Township in Cape Town, South Africa, nine cute little kids came running up to me and the others of my group. It completely took me by surprise because the children did not know who we were or where we were from – they knew nothing about us. I must confess, I had never experienced such a warm welcome before. I was filled with joy. Most striking was the look in their eyes, it was magical. This moment roused something in me. It was that day, that changed my perception towards life and our western lifestyle.

I am standing in the middle of a street covered in dirt, smelling the sewage, hearing children play, seeing run-down houses, it feels like being in a completely different world. Thousands of people live here, and most of them have never known any other kind of life. When I realised that, I started thinking to myself 'this must be horrible living under such conditions, I could never do it...'. However, the people in the townships are the happiest people I have ever seen. It is not about the wealth, about success or about fame, life is about trying to make the most of what you have.

Turning back the time to July 2012, the summer of the big turning point in my life. The life of a 15-years-old girl from Switzerland got dramatically changed. I was part of a 'Young Explorers Program' and one of nine teenagers to take part in the 12th and last expedition taking us all the way to Namibia and South Africa for three weeks. The purpose of the entire journey was to focus on ourselves, pushing us to our physical and psychological limits. We also learned about the beauty and danger of mother nature, and we spent three days in Masiphumelele township to do social work.

I will never forget the expression in the kids' eyes. I could see fear, fear of the unknown, but also hope, and pure happiness. I rarely see such pure happiness in someone's eyes in the western world, even though we have all we need – a place we can call home, running water, electricity, enough food, etc. – everything that people in townships do not have.

A little bit about townships, they are usually situated on in the outskirts of big cities. Under apartheid, predominantly non-whites were forced to live out of the cities and were moved into townships. But since the apartheid is over, townships are home to no racial connotations. Violence, crime, poverty, and overpopulation some of the township's conflicts the residents have to deal with every day.

There are thousands of townships around the world of which we are not even aware of or just don't care about. We live in a bubble, concentrating on where to go out for dinner, which fashion or trend to follow, what phone to get, etc. rather

than dedicating time to the real world, to more serious problems, like people living in poverty and a constant battle with life.

Therefore, ever since visiting Masiphumelele and working with the kids, I remind myself to be grateful for what I have, to smile, to respect our surroundings and nature, and to share my belongings.

This whole experience taught me many lessons. Not only it made me realize how privileged I am, but more so how ignorant I have been until then. Ignorant in the sense that I primarily focused on myself and my close surroundings, I was living in a bubble. I have learned to step out of my comfort zone, to help people whenever I can, and to be generous. I feel guilty about how little I knew about townships and the life of the people living there and that I still sometimes complain about unimportant things.

I believe that traveling to developing countries widens the horizon and forces us to step out of our comfort zone. I feel like anyone who has traveled to such countries can relate to when I say 'the beauty of traveling is not only nature and the sights you visit, it is more about the people who live there, that can evoke a change of mindset.'

It is weird to say that despite its misery, Masiphumelele has something magical. I felt like being surrounded by waves of smiles and felt the drive of fulfilling and pursuing the impossible. Now, I understand why I might have felt this way. Because Masiphumelele translated from their language Xhosa, means 'we will succeed'. That's why I like thinking that 'anything is possible', and I think that is the recipe of life the people in developing countries have, and reflects the meaning of the word 'masiphumelele' and it sums up perfectly their life philosophy and approach to everyday struggles.

Remind yourself every day to wake up being grateful to be alive, to always have a smile on your face, to be generous, because there are so many people out there who do not have what you have!

"Masiphumelele"