The Beauty of Silence
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My favorite memories begin and end with the soft fluttering of hands, creating stories and feelings incomparable to anything else I’ve seen or heard. Whether it’s my mom, reading my favorite childhood book before bed, or my dad describing the latest funny video he found on Facebook, or the hundreds of hands that silently yet so very loudly greeted me as I stepped onto the basketball court of the Ambo Lazarist Catholic School for the Deaf in Ambo, Ethiopia for the first time — these are my favorite moments. This is where I begin to feel the world.

This summer I had the beautiful opportunity to travel to Ethiopia with a group of five other CODAs and one Deaf individual, where we worked with a newly established school for the Deaf to help further promote and establish Deaf culture in Ambo, as well as taking note of resources the school desperately needs to thrive throughout the next few years. We arrived with a plan in mind, but honestly, had no idea what to expect. And within seconds of watching the students parade out of a single classroom, all of our plans were flipped upside down.

Where we thought would be 15, there came nearly 100, each and every one of them greeting us with a soft flutter of their hands — Good morning, how are you? God is good. Thank you. They handed us flowers and signs that read “Thank you America and Ireland for this opportunity” and, although we couldn’t yet understand them, it felt magical. Magical, to be welcomed in a place so far away from home, yet to feel instantly connected as if we were family.

As we shuffled into the tiny classroom allocated to all students, we were surprisingly met with tiny whispers — Come sit. What is your name? I turned to my sister, very confused as to how the Deaf hands we met outside now turned into tiny voices. We later learned that the school did indeed only have 15 Deaf students, but that during our time there they were hosting a month long community class during school vacation. Here, children and adults of all ages could come every day for just a few hours to learn Ethiopian Sign Language. And they came, all 80 of them, each and every day we were there.

Throughout our two weeks at the Deaf school we worked with the Deaf students, discussing the different aspects of Deaf culture around the world and empowering them to do more, teaching them basic computer skills along the way. We taught the hearing students the signs for animals, colors, numbers and basic conversation starters, and we were so pleased when they would run up to us on the street later after school, proudly showing off the skills they learned earlier in the day. And through these moments we saw a bridge form between these communities.

It was amazing to me, just simply beautiful, to see how much enthusiasm and acceptance the community had for a culture that was just beginning to be established. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before, and I was so happy to be a part of it. So happy for it to be mine, all because the experiences that having Deaf parents granted me led me to this moment.

For me, this experience was all about finding the beauty that erupts when you unite communities. When we asked one of the hearing students why he came to learn, he simply said: “I am missing a part of my life because I do not know sign language. There are Deaf people around and so we must know how to communicate with them!”
As a journalist, my job is to bring information and opportunities to people — in a way, I think this, too, creates a bridge. Forming a way for people to exchange ideas and stories and to find importance in one another’s lives. As a CODA, I’ve often been this bridge between the hearing and the Deaf world — becoming a two-way street for communication and translating culture, and so I think it only came natural to me that I would want to merge this part of me into my future occupation, as well.

During our time in Ethiopia I wrote, and I wrote a lot. I scribbled down every moment, every laugh and every memory, trying furiously to describe it in a way that everyone back home would see what I saw. I wanted to be the bridge that showed them the beauty of two cultures coming together and accepting each other for who they are, and I wanted to be that bridge because I hoped that maybe the magic of their communities would spread back home and unite our Deaf and hearing sectors in the United States, as well.

This fuel is what drives me to work towards becoming an international journalist, where I can hopefully provide others with a unique look into other cultures around the world and bring important issues to the forefront of international news. However, this experience also made me rethink another big part of my future: the Peace Corps.

Ever since I can remember, I’ve felt the need to join the Peace Corps at some point in my life, but my time in Ethiopia only confirmed that. As much as I taught the students, I think I may have learned the most. There, I learned a lot about myself and a lot about the power of people. I saw simple ideas coming to life and bringing happiness, light and unity to a group of people, and I loved that. I loved being a part of those moments, and I think that if I can lend myself to the world and in any way become a part of what builds that bridge in the future, then I want to do it. I think this is where I’ll continue to feel the world.

My favorite memories begin and end with the soft fluttering of hands, and my departure from Ethiopia was no different. As we walked off of the basketball court, we were left with a hundred waving ‘I love you’s,’ and I never want to forget that moment — the feeling that I was a part of something so much bigger than just myself. This is the beauty of silence.