Of all the advice offered to me prior to my summer internship, I heard “expect the unexpected” most often. In any situation, I find this slice of wisdom important because it allows for adaptability. Highly valued in an abroad living situation, this characteristic permits people to seamlessly transition between different conditions. It pushes people to release their insistence on control and accommodate the demands of the unknown. I expected to spend eight consecutive weeks advocating for the equal rights of people with albinism and other disabilities in Kibondo, Tanzania. Four weeks into the summer, unexpected events that threatened my safety called for the immediate removal from this site. Thus, this summer’s happenings challenged my notion of this insight, leading me to believe that expecting the unexpected is nearly impossible.

I began this summer working under the Diocese of Western Tanganyika for Bishop Mpango Secondary School, and Nengo Primary School and Protectorate Center. Located in Kibondo, Tanzania, these schools accept people who have albinism and other disabilities by integrating them into the general curriculum. At both of these schools I acted as a mentor figure for many of the students, bridging the gaps between the administration and the students in addition to fostering an understanding and tolerance between American and Tanzanian culture differences. Furthermore, I worked closely with many students with albinism to host a national albinism awareness event that took place in Kibondo. During the event, I gave a speech to the community which urged people to view those with albinism just as we view one another. I challenged the audience to think beyond what their culture tells them and to live out the Biblical
belief that God is the only one with the right to judge. The contents of my speech come from the daily social injustices that people with albinism face.

Outcast from society in Tanzania, the pervading belief that people with albinism have body parts that can transmit magical powers has resulted in their persecution, killing, and dismemberment. The superstition has been promulgated and exploited by witch doctors and others who use such body parts as ingredients in rituals, concoctions and potions with the claim that their magic will bring prosperity to the user. Simultaneously, people with albinism have also been ostracized because they are presumed to be cursed and bring bad luck. To combat this issue, the Tanzanian government has set up protectorate centers to improve the living conditions of people with albinism. These organizations strive to minimize their vulnerability to hunters by prohibiting people with albinism from leaving the gates, and implementing tight security with armed police monitoring the grounds. Although this security saves their lives, it does not nourish their self-esteem. Thus, I encouraged the community to investigate how to better integrate these people with those outside the camps without jeopardizing their safety. The same applied to my work with people with other disabilities in that I spent time facilitating a space of understanding and education pertaining to the special treatment these people require. For example, one of the teachers at Nengo Primary School and Protectorate Center had no knowledge of Down syndrome’s existence. I also explained to them the importance of teaching people with special needs basic life skills before any educational curriculum can be implemented.
At the end of June I began work in Dodoma, Tanzania, with an NGO that educates Tanzanians about the atrocities that many women face during the female genital mutilation process. With limited time available in Dodoma, I created a new organizational chart for the organization, and built relationships with the employees in hopes of sending future Sewanee students to work with them. Additionally, I spent time interacting with the students of the Kisasa Primary School for the deaf. Similar to the NGO, I created connections between Sewanee and the Kisasa Primary School as an ambassador of my home University. I intend for these connections to benefit future Sewanee students who have a passion for working with the deaf, as well as educating people about female genital mutilation.

Despite my initial resistance to the transition from Kibondo to Dodoma, it allowed me to experience two different cultures within Tanzania. As opposed to generalizing my experiences in Kibondo to the rest of the country, I observed different customs and habits of the people living in Dodoma. This enhanced my belief that no country can be described by a single, localized experience. In fact, no city can be described by a single, localized experience because of the multiple cultures found in each location. Throughout my journey, I developed an openness to new cultures which I found important in building cross-cultural relationships and being received in a new community. For example, African dress is very important to Tanzanians. Wearing their fabrics symbolizes respect for their culture and indicates a desire to engage in a mutual relationship with the locals. I was mindful of wearing my African clothing whenever I went to a family’s house for dinner, met a person of high-standing, attended a wedding, or attended a
church service. Yet, accepting all aspects of a foreign culture can prove quite difficult. One such cultural component that I struggled with in Tanzania was the high prevalence of gossip. Through conversations with Tanzanian friends, I learned that gossip causes trust issues between many youths within the country. People do not confide their struggles in one another out of fear that what they say may spread around. For this reason, among many others, I realized the importance of my work as their mentor and confidant. Additionally, I ran a trust-building program between a group of students at Bishop Mpango Secondary school to bring them together as a group of people to learn more interpersonal facts about one another. The program encouraged them to lean on one another in times of distress and celebration, thus combating the fear of gossip and rumor-spreading they live with.

This specific instance, among many others, taught me the importance of observing and evaluating a problem before jumping into action to solve it. It is of the utmost importance to spend time investigating and living in a culture before proposing a plan of action. Proposing and planning such ideas takes communication with others, an obstacle that proved challenging during my summer. Many Tanzanians are not direct communicators. For example, one English teacher will teach a grammar lesson in the morning, and a separate teacher will cover the afternoon lesson completely unaware of what the students learned in the morning. This aggravated me because the obvious solution to the problem is basic communication between the two teachers. Thus, when proposing any programming ideas, I would make sure to coordinate with all parties
that might be affected before putting the plan into action. This eliminated any confusion, and removed any feelings of threatened authority that lack of communication could lead to.

Moving forward, I intend on capitalizing upon the communication skills I learned as well as the lessons that I learned in adaptability. Additionally, I now understand the importance of relationship building before any sustainable service work can be done. For example, I created a partnership between the primary and secondary schools in which students from the secondary school would spend time after school with the primary school students with disabilities. The intention was to create an awareness about people with disabilities, in addition to their service as role models for the younger students. This project was only possible if those involved could be trained while I was still in Tanzania, since I did not want the program to dissolve following my departure. Furthermore, sustainable work demonstrates a genuine care for the organization and its future. One of my career goals now includes this desire to create sustainable programming that ultimately does not need my overseeing it in order for it to continue. More importantly, I know that my future involvements will occur with a population of which I am both passionate and knowledgeable. While working in Dodoma opened up multiple windows of opportunity for myself, I did not receive the same feelings of joy that I did while in Kibondo. It takes patience to discover what fields of work bring about senses of wonder and awe, but once found, create a most meaningful life.