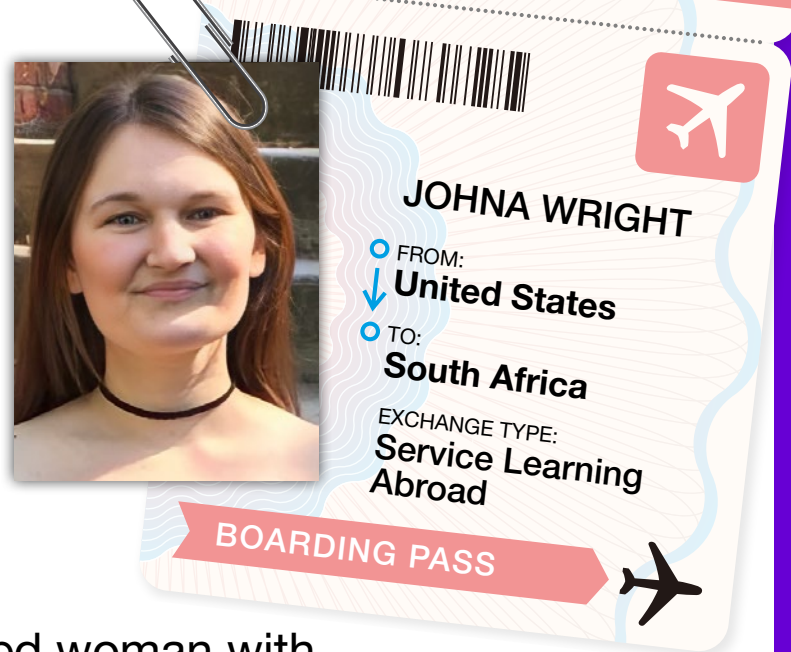


# Impact Where it is Least Expected: A Watershed Moment in South Africa



Johna Wright, a visually impaired woman with chronic health disabilities, discovered her calling at Mercer University's service scholars exchange to South Africa in 2018.

The South African business owner listened to the two young women, uncertainty painted on his features. He occasionally glanced to their male professor for confirmation of what he was being told.

As Johna Wright and her fellow student attempted to explain the reasons why this owner of a construction company needed to enhance his techniques for keeping inventory so that his workers would not unexpectedly be caught without the necessary materials to complete a day's work, it seemed as if their message was not getting across. It wasn't necessarily because their ideas were not sound, but rather because the business owner was not accustomed to taking business advice from women. He directed follow-up questions regarding the students' presentation to their professor, who respectfully directed the conversation back to the two young women.

If she were another person, she might have not been able to handle the situation quite as gracefully as she did, but Johna is not like other people.

"At first it was a bit shocking, but then I kind of remembered. I face the same things as a person with a disability in America." Johna Wright.

Johna was accustomed to asserting herself. She had done so for many years as a member of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), a U.S.-based consumer organization of blind and visually impaired Americans. She had even had to fight to be accepted in the program in the months leading up to the trip. The professors considered that Mercer's care of duty extended to Johna in cases of personal injury, which they presumed would be more likely in the irregular terrain of the South African countryside. Johna was initially shocked at the faculty's reluctance to allow her to join the program. She wondered what to do. She went to her mentor David Davis, the director of the English department, to ask for advice. Her mentor urged her to go straight to the Dean's office, and if she couldn't speak with the Dean, to go to the study abroad department and tell them what happened. Knowing that she also struggled with some anxiety, her mentor offered to accompany her. She was soon allowed to go, after a process that drew out over subsequent weeks in which a chorus of her other professors registered their disapproval with the department, and the Dean spoke with her professor.

In South Africa, Johna approached the situation from the point of view that the business owner had likely been conditioned into his worldview

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from the environment in which he was raised. She and her teammate might have been the first women with expertise in inventory that he had encountered, and his reservations may have come more from disbelief than a misogynistic conviction that women should stay in their place. They proceeded as best they could with their presentation. They gracefully answered the owner's questions that were directed back to them by their professor, and they did their best to make sure that he felt that his input was being respected. By the second day, it seemed as if their efforts were paying off. The man was paying closer attention to what they were saying, and directing follow-up questions to them instead of the professor.

It might seem surprising, but with only one exception none of the 15 Mercer students accompanying Johna on her service scholars project came from a business background. They were working through majors as wide ranging as pre-med, psychology, computer science, education and in Johna's case, psychology. As part of their mandatory service scholars project, they might have carried out any variety of development initiatives abroad; however, since the professor assigned to the program for that year possessed a background in business consultancy, the focus shaped into a project to help grow small businesses in South Africa.

The students took a course on business practices during the previous spring semester. They studied a variety of topics including marketing, inventory, human resources, and building a brand. Following this crash course,

the plan was to spend three weeks in a rural South African community outside of Cape Town. Each week the students would work with a different set of businesses. Mondays would be dedicated to coursework for the students. On Tuesdays they would present on business practices to that week's entrepreneurs. On Wednesday and Thursday they would divide up into groups in order to get to know their assigned business inside and out. Over those days they would compose a report outlining their recommendations, and on Friday the plan was to present their recommendations to the entrepreneur.

Johna and her teammate consulted with entrepreneurs involved in an interesting variety of areas. The first week, they worked with a father and son team who owned a workshop designing furniture pieces. Noticing that there was a need for the business to enhance its marketing, the two young women put together a "look book" which featured some of the signature furniture pieces of the artisans. The second week, they met with the owner of the construction company, which did projects for local businesses. On the third week, they advised an operator of a nonprofit that taught music to children in local schools how to access more funding options by obtaining co-op status, a sort of nonprofit equivalent under South African law. The students spent a great deal of time researching the law so they could advise the owner. They also put together a list of government and foundation grants for which the owner would be eligible upon achieving co-op status.

Students took the chance on weekends to sightsee as a group, which included a couple high points for Johna. The first was a visit to a rugby match. At first the tour guides were anxious that she would not be able to enjoy it, not being able to see the players on the field. They suggested that she might want to do something else, but Johna insisted.

Johna had no difficulty enjoying the rugby match. The bus driver, with whom she had struck up a friendship, was available to describe the play-by-play action on the field, along with the background of what each occurrence meant.

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The tour guides also surprised Johna, and the rest of the students, with a visit to the Cape Town School for the Blind. They were guided around by one of the blind students. They learned about the courses offered at the school, and the institution's advocacy work on behalf of people with disabilities in South Africa.

Up to that point, Johnna was "dead set on going to graduate school to become a professor and teach forensic psychology." However, the visit to the school was only one of the experiences on the trip that got her thinking. In addition to learning about the school for the blind, Johna was surprised at the accessibility of Cape Town compared to her home community. There were curb cuts with truncated domes. Each intersection had an accessible pedestrian signal that audibly alerted you when it was okay to cross, and gave a different sound when you were running out of time.

While the community where students did their service project was more irregular than Johna was accustomed to, she was able to avoid mishaps by relying on her cane skills. She brought her computer with the JAWS screenreader on the trip. She collaborated with her teammate on their reports over Microsoft 365, as she found that it was more accessible than Google suite, which the rest of the students were using. She helped her teammates take pictures of the furniture pieces in the workshop at their first assignment, and gave feedback on the logo, which her teammate put together.



She was very familiar with advocacy from the U.S. perspective; however, it had never occurred to her that this kind of advocacy could take place, or that it could bear fruits, in a place like South Africa, or really anywhere else in the world. It was in this watershed moment while touring the School for the Blind that she discovered an avidity for international advocacy, and the direction that she would take in graduate school.

Following up with the businesses with which she consulted six months later, Johna also got to learn how her actions on the international stage could change a local community for the better. Using their new look book and social media presence, the father and son team expanded their business into Cape Town, significantly increasing their revenues. The owner of the music service had received his co-op status, and able to leverage all of the new funding opportunities that that entailed, along with a monthly stipend from the government.

But what about the owner of the construction business? Because he had continued to adopt the inventory system that the students put together for him, his jobs were experiencing fewer delays or setbacks. Our actions matter, even when it may not seem so. ■