

PATHFINDERS

What do
a college president,
a news anchor, an ambassador,
and a cofounder of a girls' school
in Kenya all have in common?

Their study abroad experience
shaped their lives and career paths.

BY KIM FERNANDEZ

SEEING THE STORY THROUGH DIFFERENT EYES

Freeman Hrabrowski, III

President of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County

Few people return from a study abroad experience without saying it changed them in some way. And many say their time overseas affects their choice of career. But for some professionals, a study abroad opportunity has much more far-reaching influences, changing the course of their lives in ways they never anticipated. Four accomplished professionals share the story of how their time studying abroad influenced their journey toward fulfilling and successful careers.

FREEMAN HRABROWSKI doesn't mince words when talking about his semester abroad at the American University in Cairo in 1968–69.

"It was an amazing experience," he says. "It opened my eyes to a totally different world and everything changed. It really put growing up in perspective and helped me understand other people."

That, he says, has been pivotal to the way he's done his job at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC), which attracts students from more than 100 countries. It's pretty far from his upbringing in Birmingham, Alabama, in the middle of the civil rights movement, and he says his international education experience was key.

Hrabrowski graduated from Hampton University in Virginia at age 18 and got married the following year before moving to Illinois for graduate studies. During their junior year at Hampton, Hrabrowski and his future wife leapt at a chance to study in Egypt and go overseas for the first time. But first, they set some unique parameters.

"We were determined not to stay with other Americans," he says. "We wanted to get to know people from Egypt and we worked to understand their perspective and spend time with them, not just in class but out of class. We wanted to get beyond the areas where the tourists went. One of the first things that hit home was that perspectives could be very different depending on what part of the world one grew up in.

"I learned to think about the media differently," he says. "I started learning



that I could see one story through different eyes. I could read something in *Time* or *Newsweek* and see the same facts but have a different interpretation as someone in another part of the world. People could mean well and be telling their truth about the same facts, and come to different conclusions. I learned the world was not simply black and white and I got the chance to understand the perspectives of different people."

It's something that has served him well, particularly at UMBC. "It allows me to relate to and interact comfortably with people who come here from other countries," he says. "I'm always working with colleagues to create a culture that's welcoming, and we're always encouraging both our American students and our students from other countries go beyond their comfort zones. It's comfortable for any human being to be around people like him- or herself. It takes more courage and effort to reach beyond one's own group and get to know people who



Freeman Hrabrowski, president of the University of Maryland Baltimore County, with students.

are different, and it was my experience studying out of the country that taught me that.”

It was a lesson, he says, that evolved as he spent time in Cairo. “It became more comfortable to ask awkward questions to get to know people who were different,” he says. “People asked me about America or being a person of color in America. We began to build trust, and the more we got to know each other, the more trust there was and the more fast the relationships became.”

That, he says, made him comfortable enough to accept an invitation in the 1980s to be part of an international study group on leadership; members from Germany, Japan, and the United States met every six months to talk about education, healthcare, and leadership.

“It was a similar experience as the one I had as a college student,” he says. “The more time we got to know the cultures of those other countries, we understood the problems those countries were facing and the challenges they had, we could propose solutions, and we appreciated our similarities and our differences.”

Named one of America’s Best Leaders by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2008, Hrabrowski has also been called one of America’s 10 best college presidents by *Time* and one of seven top American leaders by the *Washington Post*. He’s been honored with awards from countless institutions, holds more than 20 honorary doctorate degrees, and cofounded the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, along with authoring two books. All the while, UMBC has grown and flourished, becoming a top-ranked university that attracts students from all over the

world—who are encouraged by their university president to study abroad.

“We like giving people alternatives,” he says, recognizing that international study isn’t possible for everyone due to different circumstances. “We have a number of courses that are taught internationally and that allow students to take them through Skype with people in other countries. They see each other in the classes, which are taught by people from two universities, and they text people from other countries for work. So even the kid who can’t go overseas and has to work in the evening can still have an international experience.”

And that, he says, is critical. “It was important to me not just in my career, but in my life,” he says of his summer in Cairo. “It helped me understand how important it is to not make myself and my country the center of my thinking, but that we were one of many nations and groups thinking about our problems and answers. I learned to not be quick to judge. And the students who do that are never quite the same.”

“T.S. Eliot wrote that you can have an experience and miss the point,” he continues. “If you never have the experience, you never get the point. It’s so important to understand what it means to immerse yourself in another culture. Students come here from other places and I’m always pulling them into different things. They ask me, ‘How did you learn to be so comfortable with us?’ I tell them I’ve been to their country or I’ve been an exchange student. I know what it means to feel awkward and different from other people.”



BUILDING A PORTAL FOR CHANGE

Jessica Posner Odede

Cofounder, Shining Hope for Communities

JESSICA POSNER ODEDE never intended to spend a semester in Kenya when she moved from her Denver home to study at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. And she definitely never harbored a deep desire to become a permanent resident of that country's most economically challenged urban district. But her junior year, her best friend announced plans to study in Italy, and Posner couldn't imagine life on campus without her pal. So she went to the study abroad office and asked about traveling somewhere that was completely unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Soon after, she found herself in Kenya.

Eight years later, she and her husband Kennedy Odede (she met him in Kenya; we'll get to that in a minute) are the respected partners behind Shining Hope for Communities, which has founded two hybrid girls' schools and community resource centers in two African slums, offering free education for the young ladies with social services for

anyone in the community. She's been interviewed countless times by major media outlets, bestowed with titles and awards, and honored as a top young philanthropist, and she still spends most of her time in a slum in Kibera, which is considered the largest urban slum in Africa.

She laughs remembering the initial reaction from her parents—a psychologist and an energy consultant—when she told them she was going to Kenya. “Why can’t you go to Europe,” she remembers them asking. “Why can’t you be like everyone else?” But they supported her as they always did; she did not tell them she was moving to a slum until well after the fact.

“I went to Kenya and was introduced to Kennedy Odede, who was a community organizer who grew up in Kibera,” she says. “Kibera is the largest slum in Kenya.” She started working with him on various initiatives, including a street theater project, and ended up moving to Kibera her-



Jessica Posner Odede, center



Jessica Posner Odede and her husband, Kennedy Odede in front of Kibera School for Girls, which they cofounded

self—becoming the first outsider to voluntarily move there in memory—and, eventually, falling in love with Odede.

After her study abroad time was over, she returned to Wesleyan; soon after, Kenya erupted in violence, and Posner helped Odede apply and receive a full scholarship to her university, where they both earned degrees and explored what they could do to really change the Kenyan community. “He always believed it was about women and girls,” she says, and the two decided to found a school. Shining Hope for Communities was born, a \$10,000 grant was procured, and the school opened. Soon after, they expanded their model to beyond providing education for the girls, to also offering clean water and other services for the community.

“We made the school the center of an ecosystem,” she explains. “We connected the social services to the school, which connected the school to the entire community. Anyone could use it. During the last six years, we’ve built a health clinic, established a clean water supply, started economic empowerment and literacy programs, and started early childhood programs that focus on the youngest children.”

Today, a second school has opened in Mathare—an other economically depressed area—and there are plans for more services and more growth by the nonprofit. The Odedes split their time between Kenya and New York, and Posner Odede says her time studying abroad was nothing less than life-changing, both for her and the people she now serves.

“We’re so familiar with our own experiences and our own vision of the world,” she says. “I always thought simplistically that a lot of the rest of the world was like my world. Nairobi is growing very fast and has so much happening, so much going on, so much wealth. There are shopping malls and fancy restaurants everywhere. But at the same time, as much as 60 percent of the population lives in an urban slum. Living in that slum myself gave me an intimate experience of how hard that is but also how resilient people are. They are working every day to make their lives better and the lives of their kids better.”

Culture shock doesn’t begin to cover her first weeks in Kenya, she says. “Life was hard, and it was basic logistics that were the most difficult,” she says. “How do you go to



A student at the Kibera School for Girls

the bathroom? How do you take a shower? There were so many harsh realities that every day was eye-opening. But the people are very proud and so resilient, and they're so determined to do better. That was deeply inspiring."

At the time, she says, she couldn't envision all she'd accomplish seven years later, but she knew her life had been altered. "I learned so much and I was deeply committed to this place," she says. "I had a relationship with the slum and the country that was continuing and ongoing. I didn't, at that moment, have a vision of everything that would happen next." But she knew traditional aid programs weren't enough.

"What's different about our approach is that it's very holistic," she says. "It's a completely integrated approach with many different elements. If you tackle one problem, it's not enough. Having a school connected to clean water connected to a clinic connected to empowerment, that approach can really get a community and a generation out of poverty." The school is a portal to change.

One thing is for sure. "If I hadn't had that study experience," she says, "This would never have happened." She says similar experiences are critical to keep society moving forward.

"We live in a global world," she says. "So many people ask me why I'm working in Africa when America has so many problems of its own. But what I truly believe is that we're living at a point when no issue is isolated. The world today has no borders. What happens in Kenya with empowerment and disempowerment affects what happens to girls in the U.S. And young people need to realize they are global citizens."

Posner Odede, with her husband, chronicles her journey in the forthcoming book, *Find Me Unafraid: Love, Loss, and Hope in an African Slum*, which will be published in mid-October.

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CHANGING PERSPECTIVES AND EXPANDING HORIZONS

Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas

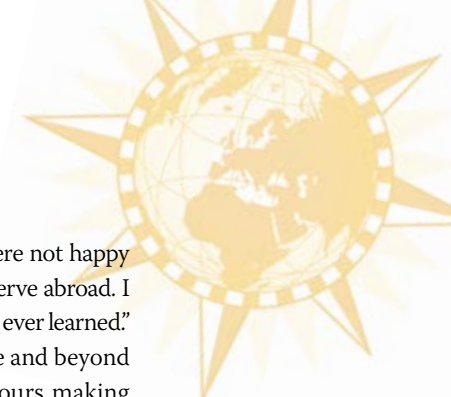
Director, Diplomacy Program at the University of Central Florida

THE PASSPORT of Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas has received quite a workout over her lifetime. During a varied career in foreign service, she not only served as U.S. Ambassador to Senegal, but also worked in Greece, Turkey, France, Belgium, Mali, and Cote d'Ivoire, along with stints at the White House, the U.S. Information Agency (now part of the State Department), and the United Nations.

Born in Boston, Elam-Thomas attended Simmons College in Boston and at age 18, was offered the chance to study just outside of Leon, France. There, she had an ah-ha moment that changed her life.

"Someone said in French, 'The black one, how pretty she is,'" she remembers. "I grew up in Boston and was not terribly stunning at any age. To hear something like that as an 18-year-old was life-changing. For the first time, I felt like someone might think I had value."

Feeling more at home among the people of France than back at home, Elam-Thomas decided to try for a career in Foreign Service, giving her the opportunity to live and work overseas. "By living and working abroad," she says, "Perhaps I could change the perception people had of people of color and of women in general. I was far more accepted for being who I was overseas than I was in my hometown."



She graduated from Simmons with a degree in international business and put herself out there for overseas work, but it wasn't always easy. "In 1963, the first question they asked anyone who happened to be female—it didn't matter what color you were—was if you could type," she says. Her first job was doing that at the U.S. Embassy in Paris. Since then, she's traveled all over the world as a U.S. diplomat, learning Greek and Turkish along the way, and earned a master's degree in public diplomacy from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

"All of my classmates were 21," she says. "I was 38. I thought, 'Oh my heavens, why did I say yes to this?' But I got a fellowship to go." The fellowship was for one year, and Elam-Thomas dedicated herself to completing the degree program in that amount of time.

"It almost killed me," she says with a laugh, "but I did it."

After that, she lived in Washington, D.C., and worked as a career counselor with the U.S. Information Agency—a move that wasn't planned but turned out to be a tremendous plus in her own career.

"It was the best thing I've ever done," she says. "I spent a year learning conflict resolution, trying to cope with Ameri-

cans of every size, shape, and gender who were not happy about the assignments they'd been given to serve abroad. I had to employ every conflict resolution skill I'd ever learned."

She also learned the value of going above and beyond her job duties, often spending off-work hours making phone calls to help people with their assignments, to great appreciation from those she assisted.

In 1994 she was part of the State Department's Senior Seminar that traveled through the United States to study how domestic policy impacted foreign policy. That, she says, was just as valuable as any overseas experience.

"I learned more about the Russian grain embargo by spending three days with a farming family in Indiana, not far from the Ku Klux Klan people," she says. "I thought this would be an interesting experience. The family said they had never met an educated African American before. The young husband of the family didn't have the best writing or spelling skills, which shocked her. In talking with them, she learned that most young farmers could never own their own farms because of the high cost of inheritance taxes. You learn a lot about how America functions by going from some of the poorest parishes [counties] in

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Louisiana to the boardrooms of the World Trade Center. I learned a lot about what middle America really thought, and let me tell you, it's very different from the perceptions of Americans on the East or West Coast."

She also met and became friends with many people who would take a similar path as she, and says 10 members of that 37th Senior Seminar class became ambassadors. Later, she worked in Brussels for two years and then at the State Department, where she spearheaded the integration of the U.S. Information Agency into the Department of State—which, she says, seemed like an impossible task, but led to personal interaction with the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and later, to her ambassadorship in Senegal.

"I'd worked 37 years and was ready to retire," she says. "Anyone in their right mind would have retired! But the legacy of my parents told me I should take on this task. The thought of a young girl from Roxbury, Massachusetts, being ambassador to any country was unbelievable—I was the youngest of five, my mother was a domestic and my father was an auto mechanic. I thought I should do this for my parents."

A major highlight during her time as ambassador was swearing in Peace Corps volunteers, which she says was always a humbling and great thing. Another was watching her staff react after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

"I remember going to all three embassy sites to speak with our 525 people about how we would be affected by what had transpired that morning," she says. "I have to tell you, I had never seen that kind of loyalty. They came to work every single day, no matter what threats might be upon them. That was incredible." One of her staff showed up at the office even though his father—a New York City firefighter—was missing.

"After his father was found [alive]," she says, "his father sent me a T-shirt with the New York Fire Department insignia and quote, 'New York's Finest.' I will keep that T-shirt forever. It's very special."

Now director of the diplomacy program at the University of Central Florida, Elam-Thomas says there's no doubt her study abroad experience propelled her career, and she spends countless hours encouraging students to go somewhere—anywhere—that will expand their own horizons.

"It gets students to look at the world from the perspective of other countries," she says. "If they want to be competitive in this workplace and they want to have value, they'll work internationally and they'll have colleagues in their offices from other parts of the world. Studying abroad helps them know what transpires in the minds, cultures, and histories of other people."

Harry Smith



IN TAIWAN, A VEIL IS LIFTED

Harry Smith

Emmy Award-winning broadcast journalist
and news anchor

THERE IS NO MISTAKING the deep, melodic voice of Emmy-award winning newsman Harry Smith, who is currently a correspondent for NBC. After decades of broadcasting, his voice is as much a hallmark as his niche of interviewing people from around the world to find the human stories behind generic headlines. But the world—at least most of it—almost never heard that voice.

Born in Illinois in 1951, Smith enrolled at Central College in Iowa, intending to get an education degree and



spend his career teaching high school and coaching football, maybe spending some time in divinity school along the way. And then, one of his theology professors told him about an opportunity to spend the summer teaching English in Taiwan, which was still a developing part of the world.

Smith had never been out of the country and jumped at the chance. As the story goes, everything changed.

"Taiwan was very much a developing country," he says. "It was not the Taiwan we know today. If it rained, the streets flooded and we'd walk on planks across the street. It was a hard summer, but it was a great eye-opener."

Assigned to teach college graduates, Smith spent his days drilling his students in vernacular English. It wasn't long before culture shock set in—and it wouldn't be the last time.

"I had one student who was really obsessed with Stanley Kubrick," he remembers. "There were different sorts of things like that which were odd. It was very much a police state, to be honest." A nearby student center was raided by police one night and teaching materials considered propaganda were confiscated; Smith was told another time

that a book he'd brought with him from the United States was banned and wouldn't be allowed.

"It was an eye-opener," he says. "There was really a whole bunch of world out there beyond anything like what I'd been exposed to. It's there to see and look at and explore, and I've been very fortunate ever since to get to see so much of it."

Smith graduated from college and went to work hosting an overnight jazz show on a local radio station. "I realized after a while that what I really wanted to do was more public affairs and news," he says. From the radio station he got a job in public television, then at a local news program in Denver, and then moved on to CBS in 1986.

"Americans are very myopic," he says. "We get somewhere else and that veil is lifted. My summer in Taiwan helped me investigate things differently, understand what my prospective is, and look at what another perspective might be. It opened my eyes on a whole bunch of different levels."

"It was," he says, "a lot harder than I anticipated. I think initially, I had this notion that I was going to have this amazing intellectual exercise. What I found was that the



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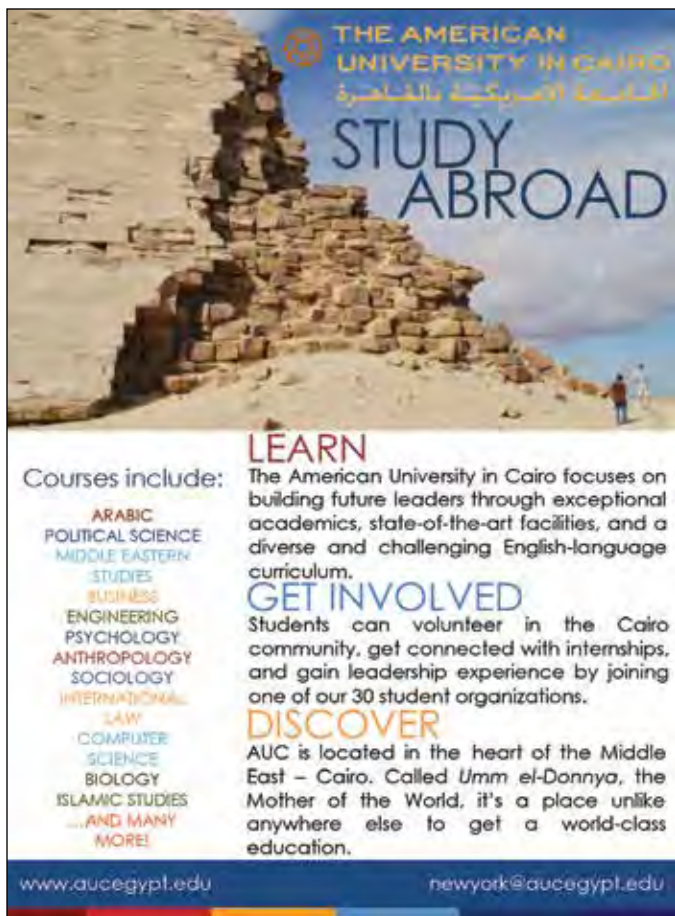
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biggest barrier between my students and me was cultural and what I expected 22-year-olds would be like. They weren't the same as I was."

Crossing over that cultural divide was much more difficult than I anticipated, and if I had serious culture shock on the way there, it was even more serious on the way home."

"I remember getting back the day before I was supposed to report for football practice," he says. "It was my senior year and I was sitting in my dorm room in Iowa listening to the crickets outside and thinking, 'Where was I? What did I just do, and how did I get back here?'"

That return shock, he says, has hit many times since.

"I came back from Haiti after the earthquake several years ago," he says. "It was awful, awful, awful, awful, awful. What you saw on television doesn't come close to telling the story. There were human bodies smoldering in the streets—terrible. And the next thing we knew, we were on a helicopter to the Dominican Republic, and then on a plane, and then back in New York that night going out to dinner with friends in this very busy downtown restaurant, having cocktails and being in the middle of this place that has so much energy. At one point, I wanted to stand on the chair and say, 'Do you not understand what is going on? Do you know that you can swim to Haiti from America?' I felt like that a lot of times coming back from different places."

At the same time, he says, the rewards of his career and travels have been immeasurable.

"I was in Mexico years ago working for CBS. There was a terrible story about a group of Mexican immigrants who were coming across the border on a train, and somehow the boxcar got locked and they ended up on a rail siding and a bunch of these guys died. It was 117 degrees in the summer in El Paso. We went to the town and talked with the family members of these people who climb on trains to go el Norte. We really felt like we were giving actual flesh and blood to a story that was, at the time, feeling like not much more than statistics and numbers and how many people were stopped and how many made it. We talked with these families and these people getting on trains, and they were just going to do the jobs that nobody in America wants to do. It's a real opportunity to get to do stories like that."

He credits his summer in Taiwan with much of that opportunity and perspective. "You go through this amazing growth experience," he says. "It was really hard. Conditions were not good. The food was awful, I had conflicts with the people I was trying to work with, and it was one really tough summer. But it stretched me and changed me and helped me grow in amazing ways." **IE**

KIM FERNANDEZ is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "All Smiles," which covered how dentistry programs are becoming more international with their curricula, in the July/August 2014 issue.