Dear Friends of the International Center,

This summer I was privileged to spend five weeks studying Public Health in Amman, Jordan. This study-abroad experience has been far more impactful than my other travels; there is a world of difference between visiting a place as a tourist and living, studying, and especially volunteering there. I feel very connected to the city of Amman and the people in Jordan.

As part of the UCSD Global Seminar class, I spent two days a week volunteering in the healthcare clinics in a Palestinian refugee camp. The opportunity to shadow doctors and do research in United Nations Relief and Works Agency clinics was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I have never shadowed in a clinical setting in America, but even my untrained eyes could see the huge regional disparity in resources and healthcare. As an American, I take sterile, high-tech hospitals for granted, but in a Jordanian refugee clinic, the staff struggled against shortages of water, electricity, medicine, and funding. It was heartbreak- ing, but ultimately inspiring, to see how the doctors never gave up. They relied on their patience. I think this lesson in resourcefulness and flexibility will someday make me a better doctor, regardless of the region I practice in.

It was a huge culture shock to notice that no one used the restroom in the clinic, drank water, or even washed his hands. In time, I realized that these were all symptoms of the clinic’s water shortage. Once I realized this, I stopped washing my hands and used hand sanitizer instead, as the doctors did. Initially, the staff must have thought I didn’t care about conserving water! I learned the importance of keeping lines of communication open when visiting different cultures, because, albeit unintentionally, I could easily have come across as the stereotypical wasteful, arrogant American.

Working with Palestinian refugees put a personal face on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a subject that has never seemed particularly relevant to my life. It’s hard for a sheltered U.S. citizen to understand the impact of a conflict half a world away, but meeting families who have been forced from their homes made the issue all too real. Not only the patients in the clinic, but many of the doctors and nurses were Palestinian as well. The staff was extremely hospitable, generous, and welcoming, bringing home-cooked food for the students to try.

My favorite excursion while in Jordan was to the Wadi Rum desert in the south. The desert landscape was so beautiful, in a different way than anywhere else I’ve been. I got to ride a camel! We experienced Bedouin-style camping and the desert nomad culture, learning traditional dances under the stars. It was a day I will never forget.

I have lived, traveled, or studied in fourteen countries, but before visiting Jordan I never understood the term “culture shock.” The Middle East is a region with customs different enough from my own to really shake me to my core, and made me re-evaluate the cultural norms that I took for granted. I am so glad that I chose this challenging program in a region that pushed me to my limit—it was truly an once-in-a-lifetime experience that I never would have gotten at home. By spending this summer abroad, I have become less narrowly science-focused and more interested in politics, current events, and human rights.

I am so grateful for the Friends of the International Center Scholarship that helped me include this experience in my education. With many thanks,

Roxana Wiswell

I was so impressed by the maturity of Roxana Wiswell’s assessment of her experience in Jordan that I shared her report with Global Seminars Director Jim Galvin, who shared it with Professor Wael Al-Delaimy, who kindly shares his reflections with us.—Scholarship Committee Chair