

EXAMPLE 2: TURNING POINT: HABITAT SUMMER

It was a hot Georgia afternoon, and we were both sweating and tired. We had spent the morning on the roof laying shingles, and now we were perched on ladders trying to balance our hammers and the last of the plastic siding that had to go up before we called it a day. I didn't feel the heat or fatigue though; instead I was lost in our group leader's stories. There was the mission trip to Africa, the time she snow shod for several miles in Wisconsin, the myriad of jobs she held, the marathon she was training for—all of this and she was only 26 years old. As I listened to her and saw life through her eyes, I was ready to jump off that ladder and do something ... anything ... that would break my world open.

We completed the Habitat for Humanity house that week, and I returned to Dallas to finish my junior year. That spring break stayed with me through her zest for life—and two weeks later, I decided to spend the fall semester of my senior year in Paris.

Two years after those wonderful months in Europe, I realize that a semester abroad is not considered exceptional; rather, it is almost expected. Nevertheless, it affected me and changed my attitude towards life and the world, I lived with an incredibly kind French family, learned to speak a fair amount of French, and traveled to as many different countries as I could. I listened to the homeless tell their stories on the metro, watched my French sister celebrate her eleventh birthday, developed an intense love for museums, and walked the streets of Paris for hours each day.

Once I returned and had time to reflect, I realized how essential it is to push myself beyond my comfort zone. In the States, I had a full schedule—classes, the newspaper, refereeing, studying—so full, in fact, that there was no need to think about my direction. I was on auto pilot.

In Paris, that structure disappeared. I wasn't responsible to anyone or anything; I had days and weeks of empty time staring me down, and I was mortified at the thought of waking up and having no pressing reason to get out of bed. So I found reasons. I rediscovered that I can entertain myself and that I enjoy learning simply for the sake of learning. I asked questions because I wanted to know the answer, not because I thought I was going to be tested later.

I returned to the States for my last semester and that May accepted a position as a speech writer at American Airlines. With no business background, I spent the first six months reading everything I could about the industry and putting together several rough speeches and informational papers. Trying to sound like an infamous and brilliant airline CEO discussing a ferociously competitive industry that I knew very little about was one of the most intellectually challenging things I had ever done. There were edits and rewrites, but it was a satisfying experience to hear my words come out of Bob Crandall's mouth.

I have learned a great deal during my two years at American Airlines—about business, about people, about myself—but I am ready to add marrow to that education. I appreciate the options that law school presents, and whether I become an attorney, sit on the bench, or take up public service, I will have learned the foundation of how this country works, how it relates to its citizens and its world partners, and how it protects and prosecutes.

American Airlines deals with legal issues every day-from claims of predatory pricing to whether peanuts should be allowed on the aircraft-and as a writer, I learn the details and relay them to employees. I have come to the point, though, that rather than writing about decisions, I would prefer to be affecting them.

I read about battered women, educational shortfalls, and international conflicts, and that's all I do-read. Yes, I volunteer my time, but what happens when one of my literacy students tells me his employer cut his wages without explanation? I commiserate, suggest consulting a lawyer, and feel I have hit a brick wall because I do not know his options.

This is no longer acceptable. I do not fool myself with the idea that a law degree will empower me to fix all the world's ills, but it will give me the resources to jump in and try to make a difference. I often tell myself I will live, not merely exist. In this instance, I want the knowledge to act, not merely observe.