I have always been a dreamer; the kind of dreamer that took my subconscious and imagination well beyond the realities of my home, my community, and even myself. I could not fathom that being a simple dreamer would lead to the manifestation of something so tangible and extraordinary. In passing, I had heard of headhunters, recruitment specialists who seek out individuals for employment opportunities in a variety of industries. I did not think much of them until the year I was hunted by a woman from London, offering me the experience of a lifetime. Apparently she located my resume on CareerBuilder, and contacted me three times before I finally decided to listen. To be quite frank, I thought this woman was (for lack of better term) nuts, and I did not believe her spiel of overseas employment in the beginning. It took some convincing on her part, and several weeks later, she flew me to Dallas Texas (along with 19 others from around the United States) for an interview with the Deputy Head of Sunderland Children Services and a panel of other professionals.

The interview was intense to say the least. I had to create and present mock intervention and family treatment plans, sketch proper genograms, describe the significance of diversity in service delivery, and answer a slew of questions related to child welfare issues and social work. Though I had experience with these areas both in school and my professional life, it was still a relatively daunting.

Needless to say the entire experience was incredible, and a part of me still did not believe it was real, even after I received the call offering me a two-year position as social worker in the United Kingdom. I was/am still a dreamer, and dreams like these just didn’t happen to little girls from an impoverished community in West Philly.
Reality consumed me some months later when I landed in Newcastle, United Kingdom in early March 2011. (That was the closest airport to Sunderland) Exhausted, and with my life packed in 10 large suitcases and bins, I took the deepest breath I could, in this new land, because I wanted to feel the air of my dreams pass through me. It was a pure feeling; exciting, overwhelming, and it was all mine.

I settled into in my new home, (set up by the agency) which was absolutely beautiful and right near the beach. It was not beach weather when I arrived in Sunderland, but I needed to watch the sky and the vastness of the sea as they met during sunset. So I walked and I watched. A perfect picture it was for the life I was about to embark for myself, immeasurable and gorgeous. Two weeks later my new employment began.

Child welfare as a whole is truly a universal practice. The issue of poverty, abuse, chemical dependency, and lack of services to meet the social need, does not alter much from America to the United Kingdom. Thus, I felt prepared and confident that the education I received through the CWEB program at Pitt, coupled with my experience since graduating in 2009, allowed me to provide the level of service delivery necessary for my new client population. Despite my new home, and this new world, I could be the Social worker I was trained to be, and that eased many of my initial apprehensions.

Sunderland Children Services operated on a multi-disciplinary approach to practice, which I was accustomed to. I worked closely with therapists, midwives, doctors, and other professionals involved with clients. Additionally, the agency had recently implemented Family Group Decision Making, which was very familiar to me through my internship at Allegheny County Office of Children and Youth. This knowledge would assist me well in identifying issues with families and facilitating the proper services.
There were some variations of course, specifically in the social climate in Sunderland. For instance, I encountered more domestic violence issues on my caseload than I had previously; to a point where 60 percent of the children on my cases were removed from their parents due to domestic violence in their home. Much of the domestic violence appeared to be fueled by alcohol abuse. Ironically, there was only one agency in the area to cater to the substantial issue of domestic abuse. It made my position problematic at times, especially when I could not refer some of my clients for services due to lack of space.

Other variations that I was not quite familiarized with included the high rate of heroin use, exponential unemployment rates, and overwhelming number of incestuous cases. Of course I have encountered drug abuse in families, but not much heroin use. I make a point to mention the unemployment rates because with a full caseload, (25-30 cases) I did not have one parent who was employed, or who has been employed within a five-year span. Considering the universal health plan and the dole (welfare), I was not very surprised by this. And as far as incest and sexual abuse, it appeared to be running rampant in many of the families on my caseload.

By far the most prevalent issue I faced as a Social Worker and a person was that of race relations. First off, I was one of 4 persons of color in an agency of approximately 300. Aside from that, Sunderland as a whole was disproportionately White British, and many people were not accustomed to seeing, let alone working with persons of color. I faced some impediments as a result. One client actually refused to work with me because I was an African American. He contacted my supervisor and demanded another worker because he was uncomfortable with me. I had only met him once. The community as well was not...
very adjusted to diversity. One month during the summer, I was actually pulled over by the police 4 times for no good reason. I could only deduce that they were not used to seeing a Black woman driving a brand new red car (which the agency gave me as part of my employment package)

Despite those particular experiences, I felt privileged to bring my expertise and know how to the job. During the initial interviewing, I was told that the agency was attempting to restructure and make child welfare practice stronger in Sunderland. Meaning that my ideas and creativity towards service delivery were welcomed and appreciated. I received regular and positive supervision, training courses, and various professional development opportunities.

Unfortunately, due to some personal family issues, I was unable to complete my two-year contract. I lived, worked and traveled overseas for a year and 4 months. Outside of gaining an implausible work experience, I was able to travel and see a world that was once outside of my reach. I ate pizza in Paris, shopped in Italy, and walked the streets of Scotland. I danced in London during New Years Eve, tried different foods, and met so many incredible people, allowing me to forge lifelong friendships. As a result of my returning home early, I have some small regrets, the kind where something deep inside me feels fragmented. Like starting a book that I didn’t get the opportunity to finish. But I now realize that despite my origins and my experiences, my dreams can carry as far as my imagination can envision. With this in this mind, the world and its possibilities are infinite, so I could never stop being a dreamer, especially when my dreams create such remarkable experiences.

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