

# AFRICAN EXPERIENCE CHALLENGING AND REWARDING



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## By SULTAN JESSA

A Cornwall area woman says her long-cherished dream is to become a leader in the field of international development.

Ashlea Webber of Newington, near Cornwall, spent some time helping people in the former Portuguese-ruled Mozambique. Her vocation was a challenging and intensely rewarding experience, she said.

"Living outside of your comfort zone for so long definitely teaches you about what type of person you are and what type of person you would like to become," Webber told TC Media's Seaway News.

"Just because you're from a small town doesn't mean you can't travel the world or make a difference."

Webber is pursuing a master of development practice at the University of Waterloo where she will spend the next two years. She will be venturing overseas next summer to do more international development work on issues specifically relevant to the urban poor.

A former student of Rothwell Osnabrock High School in Ingleside, Webber graduated from the University of Ottawa with honours in economics. She later worked with an insurance and investment company in Cornwall.

Her father Harry has retired but mother Bonnie works for Elco Electric in Cornwall.

It was while working in Cornwall, Webber decided to pursue further studies at the University of Ottawa in newly instituted international globalization and development program.

After completing the program, she was placed with a host family in Nkando, Malawi, to work on HIV/AIDS programs and policies.

While seeking international employment opportunities, Weber heard about Aga Khan Foundation Canada and was selected for a monitoring and evaluation program in Pemba City in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique.

Through the Aga Khan Foundation, Webber gained valuable experience working overseas and specifically in Africa.

"The Aga Khan network has a reputation for bringing positive and sustainable change to some of the poorest nations in the world," Webber said the foundation offered her "an amazing career opportunity."

She chose to work in Mozambique because of the challenges posed in that part of Africa.

Since 1989, Aga Khan Foundation Canada has been helping to develop young Canadian leaders in the field of international development. During the past 24 years, more than 400 young individuals have graduated from this program. The eight month overseas internship has proven to be an effective launch-

ing pad for diverse careers in the government, non-profit, media and finance sectors.

In a recent survey, 80 per cent of fellowship alumni felt that participating in the program helped shape their career or study decisions. Each fellow spends the time in a country in Africa or Asia working with agencies and partners of the Aga Khan Development Network, one of the largest and most respected international development agencies in the world. Potential countries include Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Mali, Tajikistan, India and Bangladesh.

Webber worked on the rural support program which was initiated in 2001 as integrated program activities in economic development, agriculture, civil society, education, health and habitat. Her main task was to aid in creating tools to monitor the agriculture and livestock projects.

She arrived in Mozambique with two other Canadians, one from Brampton, Ontario, and the other from Winnipeg in Manitoba.

"At work, everyone was very warm and happy to have us there," Webber said. "We never felt as foreigners."

Webber's favourite moment while in Mozambique was a trip to Niassa Game Reserve with a gun escort to ensure visitors and locals are not attacked by wild animals especially the elephants that wander around freely. She was sitting alone on a deck reading when she

heard a faint whisper, "Ashlea, Ashlea, behind you."

She turned around to see a giant elephant just 10 meters away drinking out of the pool behind her. "Elephants are very territorial and do not think twice about charging you," she added.

She picked up some courage and rolled off the deck into the empty riverbed to escape what she thought was certain death. At this time, the elephant wandered off...without one thought of the Canadian visitor.

Webber later found out that elephants do not step onto anything they know will not support their weight.

"It was quite an experience to be so close to a gigantic elephant," she said. "This was one of the highlights of my time in Africa."

While in Mozambique, she met and befriended people from France, other parts of Canada, France, Portugal, Spain, England, South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Costa Rica and Brazil.

Webber's advice to others thinking of similar challenges is to educate as much as possible about the country and its customs and cultures.

"Also be sure to learn about what is safe to do and where is safe to go in your host country," she said it is important to remember why people go overseas to serve others.

"You did not go to experience the same comforts and everyday life that you experience at home," she said. "It's all about new experiences and learning all you can."

## An encounter with an elephant was the highlight!

