

Triston Smith, Second Year Ridley Flagship Scholar

I have the amazing honor of being chosen for the Ridley spotlight because of work that I have recently been able to participate in that is the effect of a range of opportunities granted to me. The most major of these is definitely being a Ridley Scholar; because of this blessing, I was able to attend my first choice school: The University of Virginia.

Coming into college, I believed that I would go on to major in Comparative Literature and/or Anthropology—far from the Cognitive/Neuroscience and Women, Gender, and Sexuality majors that I have chosen to pursue—and therefore wanted to begin studying abroad as early as I possibly could. In the past, I have done work with YUGO Ministries in Ensenada, Mexico, but these opportunities each lasted for just under a week—a timeframe that just didn't feel like I got to connect with the families we were working and staying with on the level I hoped for. Then I was, amazingly, chosen to participate in a J-term course for the 2015-2016 school year in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil! I knew that J-terms usually only last around two weeks, so I contacted the person that was organizing the living arrangements and begged them to help me find a place to stay for a longer time so I could truly tune into Brazilian culture. I ended up staying there for a total of four weeks and falling in love with the people, both the ones I was staying with and the general population of the region of Brazil in which I resided. However, the course did not have any kind of outreach attached to it, so I was still left unfulfilled.

Upon my return to the United States, I knew that I had to return to Brazil as soon as possible. However, going to UVA, I knew that I could not “waste” my summer on travel, not when I was expected to gain experience through work or internships year-round. I thought to speak to the professor of the J-term course I had taken, and he put me into contact with a colleague that has a Non-Governmental Organization in Brazil.

When I finally got my life together enough to reach out to him, he informed me that the NGO that he had started about 10 years prior was actually facing some difficulties and would likely, unfortunately, be shutting its doors before long. As odd as it sounds, I was incredibly lucky to reach out as the doors of TwoBrothers, the former NGO, were closing. Paul Sneed, one of the men essential to the founding of the original organization, was in the process of shifting focus and locality in Brazil. Thus, the birth of Conviva Brasil began, with plans to begin the American counterpart, Conviva Brazil, in the works.

With the burgeoning Conviva Brasil, websites needed to be updated: donation portals created, mission statements written, logistics sorted through, and plenty of photographs taken. Paul and I worked together to decide that the latter was the perfect point for me to lend a hand, and I was able to have an unofficial internship with, and aid in the creation and solidification of Conviva Brasil in Belém, Pará, Brazil. I got to work hands-on with a local capoeira group, but unfortunately not long enough to help teach the large (and growing) group more than a little English, and during the wrong time to offer help in any other classes. I was still lucky enough to take some photos for the upcoming website and get to know so many wonderful people.

Throughout my time there, I was reminded of how fortunate I am to be able to attend school regularly without the fear of having to work at the age of 12 or 13 to support my family—especially as a black male. I was able to see the unfair treatment of black people throughout the region I was in, but the place it tugged most at my conscience was the household via the recognition of the trials of dark-skin maids. After working for 8-10 hours, cleaning the entire house (even if it did not begin dirty), and cooking all of the meals, she is usually forced to eat alone and away from the table, and is often “given” her own bathroom in a rather hidden place of the house. I saw my brothers and sisters forced to work themselves past exhaustion for things that I can buy on a whim.

On the other hand, I also saw just how unlucky the “first world” is. I realized that just because we may be more advanced in the technology afforded to the general population, we have begun to throw away our communication skills and our ability to have deeper, more meaningful conversations with one another. I am incredibly thankful for the opportunities I had to speak with leaders, innovators, activists, and especially the kids that were finding their way with the help of Mestre Laika—the Capoeira instructor. I am also thankful that he helped me to learn better the value of athleticism, compassion, and the necessity for communication, both internally and as a community.