

GROWERTALKS

Columns

1/31/2015

Learning About Leadership on the Other Side of the World

Layci Gragnani



This past November, I traveled with the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation to places that I never dreamed I would visit. During our three-week journey, we set foot in four countries: United Arab Emirates, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. We have a wide range of agriculturists in the group, as well as one fellow horticulturist, Matt Altman of Altman Plants. Our group of 26 individuals visited two United States Embassies, orphanages, farming operations, health clinics, universities, museums, community youth programs, food shelters, senior care facilities, furniture manufacturers and many African villages

located in extreme poverty, yet were full of smiles, joy and happiness.

The author and a group of young horticulturists from the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation traveled to four countries. Here, they pose in front of a statue of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Layci is in the front row, fifth person from the right.

After flying more than 55 hours and 25,400 miles with my fellow classmates, I'm a changed individual in more ways than I can count. One of our stops that left a lasting impression on my life was our visit to Chikumbuso, a grassroots project outside of Lusaka, Zambia. Chikumbuso provides free education for children and is a place for widows, orphans, at-risk youth and grandmothers to feel safe and at home. This remarkable place was started in 2005 by Linda Wilkinson, who's from Connecticut, and since then, has gained a tremendous amount of respect from the community and from leaders all around the world. Chikumbuso Community School began with just a few children and now educates nearly 450 children and provides more than 56,000 meals a year. It's a home to many women and children in the community who have very little to nothing at all.

We spent a few hours there and were able to interact with the children in their classrooms and hear some of the women's stories. All of the children were extremely polite, intelligent and grateful. It was heartbreaking to learn that there are 1.2 million orphans in Zambia that are under the age of 15.

At this time, we were about five days into our journey and when I was at Chikumbuso, this was the first time that I felt 100% safe on our travels. This stop was extremely memorable to me because it displayed excellent leadership skills, as well as a friendly reminder to be grateful for what I have in my life and appreciate each and every day that's given to me.

There were many other impactful moments on this trip, but Chikumbuso was one that got my wheels turning. A young lady from Connecticut had a dream of making a difference and because of that, she's changed thousands of lives and made a lasting impact on this community. After this visit, I couldn't help but wonder to myself—could I ever do something like that? I'm not sure that I would follow the same path as Ms. Wilkinson, but after this experience, I know that I can make a difference in my community and within our industry.

This was a journey that has forever changed each of our lives, stretching our thoughts, beliefs and comfort zones and challenged us in ways we never could have imagined. That being said, we should all be so thankful that we call the USA home. It's truly a beacon for freedom, individual rights, opportunity and prosperity that many around the world don't have.

I've discovered that there are many states that offer leadership programs with a similar format to the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation and I would encourage everyone reading this to research those programs. No matter how old you are or what level you're at in your career, there's always room for leadership growth.

I hope that I've inspired you by sharing my leadership experience. You don't have to travel around the world like I did—the opportunities for leadership growth could be within your own community. We're all busy with our day-to-day lives, but the investment into leadership courses will last you a lifetime and create endless possibilities in both your career and personal life.

For more information about this program, visit www.agleaders.org. **GT**

Layci Gragnani is Ornamental Marketing & Sales Director for Greenheart Farms located in Arroyo Grande, California.