

Transcript - Go Global ED Podcast: Episode 4 – Dr. Corey Holmes, Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad

[Intro] Welcome to the Go Global ED Podcast brought to you by the International and Foreign Language Education Office also known as IFLE at U.S. Department of Education. On the Go Global ED Podcast we speak with IFLE grant and fellowship recipients to highlight their experiences, discuss issues in international and foreign language education, share advice on the application process, and explore the long term value and impact of IFLE programs. In celebration of international Education Week 2021 and the 60th Anniversary of Fulbright-Hays, today on the podcast a member of the IFLE team, Matt Robinson, speaks to Dr. Corey Holmes, Senior Professional Staff member and Foreign Policy Advisor for the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Global Human Rights. Dr. Holmes was a Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad fellow in 2017 and 2018, and studied Zulu in South Africa. Let's listen.

[Matt] Corey Holmes, Welcome to the podcast!

[Corey] Thank you. It's great to be here.

[Matt] So why don't we begin by, if you could tell us a little bit about yourself, your background and what you do for your career.

[Corey] I'm originally from Detroit Michigan. I've been in Washington DC since 2012, I originally came here to work for the State Department, was there for two years, mostly in Africa Bureau and then I went on to Howard University to receive my Ph.D. And so after that I'm actually doing what I'm currently doing which is senior professional staff member foreign policy advisor for the House Foreign Affairs Africa Subcommittee.

[Matt] Well, and so you mentioned Howard University. It was through Howard that you went on the Group Projects Abroad trip to study Zulu is that right?

[Corey] So obviously I was at Howard University, but the program was through UPenn. So my *uSolwazi*, which is "professor," she reached out to my *uSolwazi* at Howard University, Dr. Mnyandu, and she basically was like, I need some students who can apply for this program, it's very it's a very exciting program. Ninety days, it's a commitment and he was like well let me see and so it end up being I think three of us, but I was the oldest. The other students were undergraduate students. Obviously, I was a grad student at that point and so that's actually how I applied to the Fulbright-Hays GPA.

[Matt] Oh Okay.

[Corey] And we still talk by the way, myself and Dr. Mbeje. Great person, great person.

[Matt] So why don't you take us back to how you started to get the interest in studying Zulu in the first place. Zulu isn't a commonly taught language, right? So, what interested you to learn Zulu?

[Corey] Right, right. So I always tell people that South Africa is my second home. With that being said I worked there from 2009-2010 so roughly around 14 months with the Ramberg Chamber of Commerce also the South African Chamber of Commerce and so obviously most people know that there are eleven official languages in South Africa, Zulu being one of what they would call local languages right, and so out of those indigenous or local languages, isiZulu is probably the one that's spoken most around the country. And frankly it's one of the few in South Africa, one of the few South African languages that are taught in American institutions, you know Kiswahili Tanzania and Kenya, Yoruba in Nigeria come to mind as well. But South African languages isiZulu and so it was actually taught it was offered South Africa like I said is my second home is my favorite place to be, I wanna live there when I retire and so it was just a slam dunk.

[Matt] So you must have had some command of Zulu before you started the program for GPA?

[Corey] Somewhat. The crazy thing about working there in 2009 was most people wanted to speak English right because you know a lot of places where you go overseas particularly when you're working with young people it's the cultural aspect right of speaking English. You know the hip-hop community the fashion industry so everything is in English right, and so when I would say hey I want to practice my isiZulu or other local languages because they're like I said there are 11 official but nine are local what they would call Bantu languages, Black African languages, and it'll be like 'no we can get to that later, let's let's basically let's help me work on my English first.' [laughs] Right? And so you know it was kind of a negotiation if you will: "Alright I'll help you with your English this week, and you help me with my isiZulu the following week."

[Matt] So I want to pick up on another point that you mentioned which was that that you your interest in South Africa is ongoing, and that you want to go back again. So you're very enthusiastic about your experience traveling to South Africa, what about the experience made it special for you?

[Corey] Wow, first and foremost the people right you know. South Africa is such a vibrant vibrant place to be musically you know I'm a jazz aficionado so jazz is richly ingrained in the culture there. The food the wine it's the best wine you know in the world, but also the politics. So for me when I first got there I was not into politics my first 2 degrees were in business, and going there really kind of piqued my interest in the political sphere if you will, kind of led me into what I'm doing today. And so going back I would say the people, culture and the politics. I was able to write a paper on former President Jacob Zuma who is now if anybody's following the news, they gave him six months for bribery, I never thought that would happen, and Mbeki, and hopefully we will discuss him a little later, who was the president right after Nelson Mandela, who I believe after Kofi Anan, this generation's African leaders, he's right up there.

Intellectual but why he was president most most of the citizenry couldn't really understand or grasp what he was trying to do, which was agency give his folks agency right, give his citizens agency. And so maybe we'll touch on that in the later question.

[Matt] So it sounds like your experiences there shaped your career afterwards and your interests. Was there anything in particular about the trip that, you know any experiences, that led you to that?

[Corey] So I was actually a Thabo Mbeki African leader which he affectionately called the change agent. This was where you had to apply to several courses whether they were in sociopolitical economics, global development or politics and the courses were held at Unisa University of South Africa in Pretoria. So I applied to that got into that very rigorous intensive courses and then obviously I got a chance to meet him in Pretoria at the University of South Africa, I was like "I'm here!" you know, and also while, going forward a little bit, when I received my Boren back to South Africa in 2018 to finish my Ph.D. one of the professors, he actually was one of my sitting advisors from the program, and so that for me kind of telling folks about my dissertation the effects of youth employment on Gauteng, which is the smallest province in South Africa, but obviously it is the economic hub, definitely the southern region not just South Africa the South African Stock Exchange is there as well as you know a plethora multinational companies.

[Matt] So, okay, you have a great trip to South Africa I'm just thinking, and you come back to the US. What happens afterwards? You know what, what do you do after an experience like this? Has it shaped your career has it shaped your life in different ways?

[Corey] Yeah, well for me so having a Fulbright gave me a chance to conduct preliminary research, so I wasn't yet on my full dissertation, I had I had just finished comprehensive exams and so the Fulbright-Hays gave me an opportunity not only to strengthen my isizulu but also conduct research at Unisa, UJ University of Johannesburg, meet with different professors at those institutions and so when I came back for me it was the start of the writing process right because in my mind I had an end goal I had a date of when I wanted to obviously graduate and you know start putting some of this theoretical stuff if you will in the practicality right. And so I came back and wrote everyday that's what it looked like 'cause at that point I was done with my coursework at Howard, so every day I picked a set time to write some days are better than others and any writer will tell you this, right, and we just hammered it out and basically that was six months I would say so six months so I got back in August so I think it was June-August program early June to mid-August so August through December was writing and I defended my drafts and ready for the second part of the dissertation

[Matt] congratulations by the way

[Corey] it seems like a lifetime ago now

[Matt] So how about more on the personal side? I mean, you did stay with a host family while you were there right?

[Corey] Right.

[Matt] So what was that like I mean was it memorable?

[Corey] My *Gogo*, so obviously that's grandma. So she had worked for the SA government but she was newly retired and her husband he still worked so we lived in kwa Zulu Natal so it's probably from Durban I would say almost two hours driving from Durban. He would leave every Friday I'm sorry every Sunday to go back to Durbin to work and stay the whole week so really I would only see him from late Friday and it was usually Saturday, Saturday and then some Sunday her grandson lived with them, he was a he was a treat. So he actually helped me with a lot of translations because isiZulu's a very technical language which I learned at the University of Zululand right you know I learned the basics at Howard University but obviously where it was created University of Zululand you know it's constructing sentences and paragraphs using different phrases and knowing when to use different phrases and so it's very technical, and it was very hard if you will right. It took a lot of practice and a lot of dedication and the young man helped me out tremendously I talk to the family not as often as I did when I first got back to the states I probably talked to them maybe two or three times a year now via email and it's mostly through his email right, but yeah I really want to get a chance to go back and see them because they really made my stay I mean they gave me 3 square meals I mean whatever wherever I wanted to go during the weekend over the weekend, they would say hey we take you we know that you're a young man and you might wanna get out. Yeah so I I really appreciate them and that and that's key to any great study abroad program right, not only the technical aspect right academic side of it but the right host family

[Matt] Yes, I mean that's a whole other aspect to the experience isn't it it's not just about the academics and the training right it's the cross-cultural experience

[Corey] Absolutely. Yeah definitely another key component to my fellowship was I got a chance to do something specifically like this, it was a youth radio station in downtown Johannesburg and it was definitely the highlight. So it was different highlight for different reasons, but I was so impressed by this youth ran organization new station radio station if you will because all you hear is South Africa and my dissertation says it, of the fact that young people don't have any opportunities, young people hold the highest unemployment rates, and then you have other folks in South Africa say well we don't have the human capital, we have a lot of jobs, but we don't have the human capital to fill these jobs. And so to see this youth ran radio station and they actually wanted me to, we actually gave me a 45 minute radio interview. It was amazing man it was it was amazing I was like and they were kind of looking at me like why you so like no this is this is special this is you know they, you met Mbeki, you met the president, you met this person. Yeah but no you don't get it like because there's the narrative of what you are don't do can't do won't do, and I'm seeing it. Right in front of me. Those stories aren't told often. I think

there was a question about you know 'what has the program done for you, what advice would you give to someone applying?'

[Matt] yeah okay

[Corey] For me the experience forever changed my lens the way I see the world right. You have new experiences you meet new people you learn different cultures and I was a little older but I would definitely say this for a younger person applying: you develop a sense of empathy and compassion as any semblance of entitlement kind of dissolves right you see that the world is not as I see it in my own little bubble compared to this situation because there are there's always a worse situation. So there's perspective there that I think a young person can gain from traveling abroad. Secondly see I'm a person of color, and you know in my in my day job you know we talk about diversity and inclusion at the state department USAID and the Peace Corps and all various agencies. What I would say on academic side is twofold, a lot of folks don't talk about exposure because this is what this kind of program does for someone who might not have come from a background that can afford it without a Fulbright, and so I would say for a young person particularly of color, you have to take a language anyway to gradually right it's part of the academic rigorous schedule. So I would say follow up with your language if it's not your Prof, with the department head, and see what study abroad programs are at your institution. For Howard University is the Ralph Bunche center right all things are housed there and so we have people who can show young students different opportunities that they can specifically apply for. But the student must it's the age old adage of I can lead you to water but I can't make you drink it and so I would say but you have to follow up you have to want it and once people see that you want it they will help you in abundance right and so for me it's, it's in 2021, I just want it to be equitable I want it to be fair. I think the process is transparent but I think a lot of times there are not a lot of people of color who apply and so that kind of skews the numbers but also let's not be naive and say hey those that don't apply don't get a fair shake for whatever reason right whether it's you know they didn't prepare like they needed to or didn't know how right they have the necessary resources to prepare, and so that's something that we as folks that consider ourselves stakeholders really need to take a look at.

[Matt] Do you feel that you had good support when you were in the application process?

[Corey] You know I had people looking over my essays and I consider myself an avid writer and still you want second eyes and possibly third eyes looking over your application 'cause they can see things you can't because you're so close to it and you want it so bad and so you need to step back and say hey take a look at this give me your thoughts and you know then I can revise it and make it the best application possible. And that's not necessarily to say that you won't get it right 'cause you know but at least put your best foot forward and be exposed, again for me the keyword is exposure so knowing about these programs applying to these programs not being afraid, apply, do you do diligence, follow up and then show passion and go for it, 'cause usually when people show passion for things they want they usually get them, usually a pretty decent percentage

[Matt] Corey Holmes it was a pleasure talking with you and thank you for joining us on the podcast

[Corey] Thank you Matt I really appreciate it. I'm a proud alum of the Fulbright-Hays GPA program, I always tell young people to apply to these different high achieving merit awards, and hopefully people will be seeing me in a university classroom near you soon.

[Outro] Thanks for listening to the Go Global Ed podcast, a production of the International and Foreign Language Education office at the US Department of Education. Be sure to follow us on Twitter @GoGlobalEd and subscribe to our newsletter to learn more about upcoming podcast episodes and other IFLE updates.

Guest Biography – Dr. Corey Holmes

Corey Holmes is the Senior Professional Staff Member/Foreign Policy Advisor for the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights. He holds a Ph.D. in African Studies & Research from Howard University in Washington, DC where he studied and completed a dissertation entitled “The Effects of Unemployment on Black Youth in Gauteng, South Africa.” He previously worked at the State Department as a South Africa Desk Officer and a Public Affairs/ Public Diplomacy Officer in the Africa Bureau. He is a recipient of the Fulbright and Boren fellowships, the Woodrow Wilson Foreign Policy Fellowship Program, and was a Research Fellow with the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute. Corey has blogged for the London School of Economics, and published papers at the National Association for African American Studies Conference in Durban, South Africa, and other South African magazines, newspapers, and publications. He is a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., and originally from Detroit, Michigan.