Spring Break TLO In China. By: Jenna Bryan

Spring break 2009 was a week I will always remember as the most life changing experience I have ever had. I was lucky enough to participate in the Study Abroad trip to China with the Brooks College of Health here at UNF.

My name is Jenna Bryan and I was born and raised in Jacksonville Beach, Florida. I’m a Health Administration major, with intentions of continuing on to a Masters degree in the same field. I had never traveled much farther than Texas, and most certainly had never experienced any culture other than our own. The trip to China seemed terrifying to me at first; a new culture, a new language, an entirely different way of life than anything I’ve ever known! But I was also intrigued, and incredibly excited. I would never have been able to attend without the amazing financial help from the University of North Florida Alumni Association Board. I will never be able to thank them enough for their generosity in offering such a wonderful scholarship.

The plane ride to China was the longest 14 hours of my life, especially since I hate to fly, but I would do it again in a heartbeat for another experience like this one. The second we landed in Beijing, we were greeted by Mark, our tour guide, who showed us to an incredible and much needed dinner. During our first day touring we visited Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. Both places were overwhelming in how important they have been in the history of the world. Especially Tiananmen Square, which was so much bigger than I ever dreamed, it was amazing to see where the world changing events happened so many years ago. One of my favorite places that we visited in Beijing, was the Birds Nest where the 2008 Olympics were held. The structure of the building was beautiful, and vastly larger than I ever would have thought. Standing in the middle of the field where I had watched so many great Olympians compete on television was indescribable. Another amazing day was the day we got to climb the Great Wall of China. For anyone visiting China I would say it is an absolute must to get to the top. The view was absolutely breathtaking, with the rolling mountains, and the wall stretching endlessly in both directions over the green hillsides. Being on the Great Wall was one of my most humbling moments in China. You realize how small and insignificant your life is in the grand scheme of the world, but in a way that completely relieves you from your everyday struggles. I began to think of my life as only a fragmented sentence in the epic novel of life.

I swear I think we ate every 30 minutes, but I can’t complain. I had some of the best food of my life in China… and some of the strangest! We ate at a restaurant one night in Qingdao called a “hot pot”, which is just that, a pot of hot boiling water. They give you live food like shrimp and mussels and you cook it yourself! I had never in my life seen such fresh and yet such startling food.

Qingdao was a smaller city with a hometown feel and I enjoyed it so much more than a big city. Beijing reminded me of New York, with its tall buildings and busy traffic. Qingdao is set on the Yellow Sea, which I put my feet in the second we got close enough. The Yellow Sea is the first and only body of water I’ve been to besides the Atlantic Ocean, so that in itself was amazing for me. We got to visit the Qingdao beer factory, which was a nice lighthearted and relaxing tour after the information overload and all the traveling we had been doing.
The best things about Qingdao were the hospitals we got to visit and tour. With translation help from Dr. Zhao, we learned so much about traditional Chinese medicinal practices. I had no idea things such as acupuncture and herbal medicines were such a large part of the Chinese culture and medicine.

The language was not as large of a problem as I thought it would be. Most people there speak at least two languages, if not more. So really, we were the ones who were unable to adapt to their language, and we were in their country. This was the other largest life lesson I learned while in China; other cultures are willing to accept ours, we should be more open and learn to embrace their culture as well as our own.

This journey to China has been a transformational learning experience that will influence the decisions I make in my education, career and life. I am grateful for the travel opportunity and for the financial support provided by the UNF Alumni Association.