

Leah Gardner



My Journey

By Leah Gardner, International Studies Graduate, United States

I am passionate about design. As a high school student, I honed my skills in painting, entering my work in competitions and for display at galleries. Wanting to put my skills to practical use, I applied and was accepted

to a five-year interior architecture program. I learned how to draft and use AutoCAD, render images with traditional and digital media, and apply the elements and principles of design. In my fourth year, I studied abroad at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea.

I had traveled to other countries before, but South Korea was unlike any other place that I had visited. By the end of my four months there, I was in love with the city of Seoul, and it was absolutely heartwrenching for me to leave. A year later, I graduated with my degree in interior architecture, but instead of finding a job in my field, I took up a teaching position at a private academy in Seoul. I was thrilled to be back in this wonderful city!

I immersed myself as much as possible into Korean life. I picked up a bit of the language; experimented with the food; and started following their music, movies, and television media. Most of all, I found myself paying more and more attention to politics. A short distance from this cosmopolitan city is North Korea. Civilian protection drills became a part of my life. The military and police were ever-present, honing their skills and conducting training exercises. I even visited the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to learn more about it. The Korean people put great time and energy into local and national politics, and I guess that energy rubbed off on me.

Most of all, I was heavily influenced by interacting with my students. Never before had I felt so connected to myself and other people than the time I spent with them. I was proud of them for being such demanding students and proud of myself for contributing to their education. Over time, it became clear to me that I was not destined for a career in design, and I needed to redefine my focus to international studies.

I returned to the United States for the express reason of entering a graduate program. I chose a master of international studies because it is designed to give students the skills needed for a successful career. I was also attracted to the fact that a student could specialize in practically any aspect of international studies—international education, regional or global politics, economics, and more. When I first started, I had a loose idea of what I wanted to do, but after getting my feet wet, I knew I wanted to specialize in sustainable development. Studying international studies has been exhilarating for me, and I feel that same connected feeling that I did during my time in Seoul. I know I made the right choice.

I now work on a US Agency for International Development (USAID) project that is addressing public health issues in the developing world, focusing on population, disease, and nutrition. I look forward to my future, and I am glad I started my journey.