A gap year gave me more life skills than 13 years of schooling

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In a few weeks, my 18-year-old niece will land in New York from South Africa and spend a few days with my husband and I before heading to Wisconsin to work at a summer camp. The trip is the start of a tour to the US and Europe to visit family and work. It's also part of a year-long break she elected to take, instead of going straight from the emotional and pressure-filled last year of high school into university.

The reactions my sister and her daughter have faced to my niece's decision to take a year off haven't all been positive. Much like the response to the news that Malia Obama was taking a year off before Harvard, some people saw her gap year as a waste of time and money, or as mere procrastination. But my gap year experience has made me a strong advocate for the chance to take a deep breath and get some space before making decisions that will determine the trajectory of your life.

In my final year of high school—more than a decade ago now—I had the opportunity to decide whether to go straight on to university, or to take a gap year with my parents' support. My father, an accountant and financial adviser who had me helping with bookkeeping from a young age, set a few conditions in exchange for his financial support to take the trip: I had to stay with my family in either Germany or Switzerland while attending a local language course, help them with housework in exchange for food and accommodation, and find a job within three months, or come home.

I knew the drill: my three older siblings had all made the same deal, and had spent their gap years learning German, spending time with family, and working gigs as graveyard gardeners, dishwashers, au pairs and factory workers, to pay their way and travel.

The year away quickly shocked me into understanding how diverse people's views and interpretations of the world could be. It turned me from a naive, sheltered and self-involved teenager into a much more open-minded person who understood how big the world really was. I also went from being a typical 17-year-old slob into a neat freak and organizing whiz in a few months. This transformation was in response

to the precise requirements of the housework I was doing in exchange for accommodations (think military-style ironing techniques), the limitations of my budget, and the planning for my solo travels. Hunting for a job in a different language with limited practical experience made me understand the value of earnestness, learn to gracefully deal with rejection, and empathize with job hunters in foreign environments. Being forced to find friends in a new culture took me out of my comfort zone, and made me more open to people's different interests, opinions and perspectives. I became close to my Swiss and German relatives—the main hope my father had for us taking these trips—and I am still in touch with them today.

Meeting new people and dealing with a different environment "builds your confidence like crazy," says my mother. "You're more adaptable to different situations and challenges." I asked my parents to reflect on why they decided to send us overseas, and how they thought the experience changed us. Both my parents had their own "gap years" after high school, although they weren't much of a break. My mother worked to earn money for her studies, and my father was conscripted into the South African Army for a year.

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My father said the year taught us a valuable lesson about money. "You begin to realize in a democratic capitalist society, and maybe in most other societies, if you want to move up in the world and get a bit more money in your hands, you have to have some kind of qualification, or you have to do something that someone wants," he says. "I think in having to find a job, to understand the value of money and how quickly it goes if you don't look after it and how hard it is to get, means you perhaps took a different view of your studies."

When we returned, my parents felt we were more equipped to handle any issues we might encounter at university and were able to commit to our degrees and complete them on time, as a result of what we'd learned overseas. "I do think you all came back in a much more mature state, in a much more capable state in making up your mind in what you wanted to do. The experience of traveling and having to do your own thing made you a lot more independent from us a lot quicker," my Dad says.

That's not to say it was a dream experience for us the entire time. My brother loved the travel, but said the experience was sometimes isolating. My sisters found the independence from my parents liberating but struggled with homesickness. I got quite ill while in backpacking in Barcelona, and had to drag myself to an emergency room with my symptoms scribbled down in Spanish by a youth hostel worker, in the days before ubiquitous internet and smartphone access. I wonder what that experience will be like for my niece now, in 2016.

Like others who take a gap year not solely for the purpose of working, we were privileged by our circumstances. We had the support of family, a ticket back home if we needed it, and the right permits to work overseas. I didn't realize the extent of that privilege when I left home—but by the time I came back, I understood and appreciated it deeply.

Now my oldest sister is getting ready to send her daughter off on a similar journey, to connect with family, interact with different cultures and languages, strengthen her relationships with family and hopefully experience that "there's more to the world than what you're familiar with when you grow up," my sister says.

Sasha and Malia Obama have experienced more of the world than most children could ever dream of. But Malia, like my niece and millions of other 17 and 18-year-olds, has had her days and decisions prescribed to her by her parents and society (and the Secret Service.) Getting the opportunity to break free and learn about the world along the way, on one's own terms, was one of the most valuable experiences of my life.