

STUDENTS PURSUE  
LIFE-ENRICHING  
EXPERIENCES  
BEFORE COLLEGE

# Gap Year

By Dawn Liles

TAKING PART IN A MISSION TRIP IS A POPULAR ACTIVITY for many Ballantyne youth, but taking an extended time before college to see the world and volunteer — a gap year — can bring a whole new level of awareness. Even Malia Obama is taking that route before starting Harvard in fall 2017.

Caroline Cary took a four-day trek to Machu Picchu in Peru as part of her gap year.

Photo courtesy of Mia McCue







# THE W I HEMIS

“It became customary to hear conversations in different languages as I walked across the ship.”

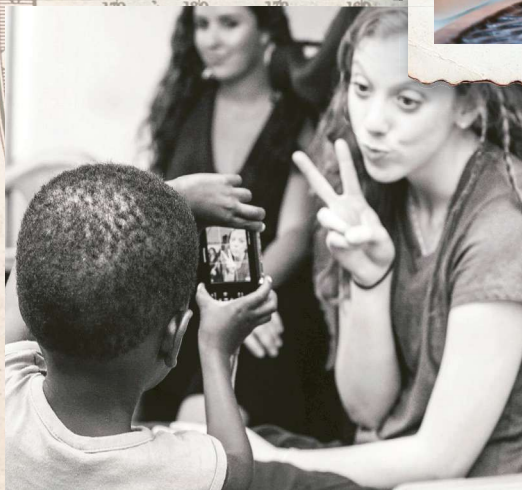
— Aly Dove



Davidson graduate Aly Dove, 22, spent a gap semester in Africa, on a hospital ship in Togo with the international charity Mercy Ships when she was 18.

She graduated high school a semester early and raised the required funds for a spot on the ship by working with kids' programs at the Morrison YMCA, supplementing her income with donations from family and friends.

Her position on the ship required working 20 to 30 hours a week, greeting guests and setting up rooms, while shadowing medical personnel and living in a 10-berth room with women from all over the world.



While working in Togo, Aly Dove taught African children how to use a camera. Her job was working on the hospital ship Africa Mercy, which provided free care to residents.



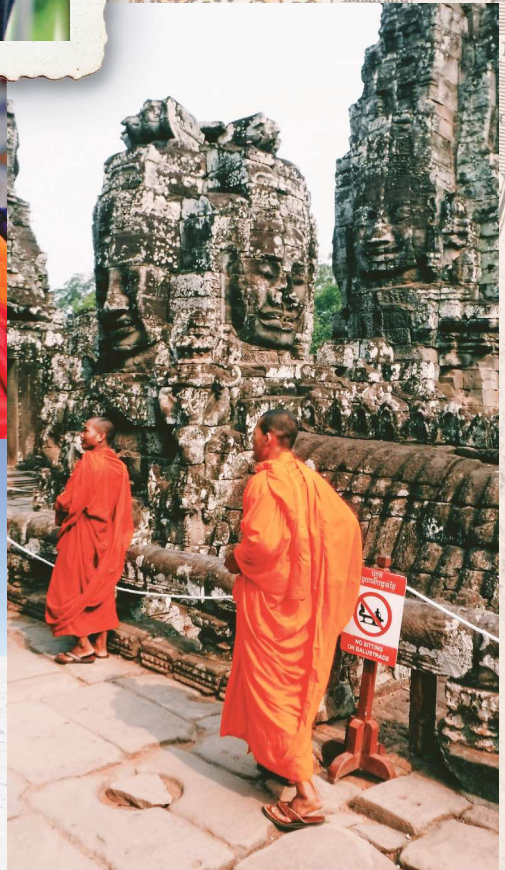
# WORLD

## IN SPHERES

"One of the neatest aspects of my gap year was the international community I experienced on the ship," Dove says. "It became customary to hear conversations in different languages as I walked across the ship."

Time spent on volunteer excursions working with local children off the ship was equally valuable. "As a photographer, I realized how power dynamics are shifted when the camera is placed in the hands of a child. Photography is instant and accessible, and the kids could express themselves creatively with very little training."

“Having time away to explore and meet people all over the world gave me a renewed love of learning.”  
—Caroline Cary



Photos courtesy of Caroline Cary.

Caroline Cary saw Buddhist monks in Cambodia (far right, moving clockwise); visited the world's largest salt flat, in Bolivia; enjoyed The Swing at the End of the World in Ecuador; and assisted this kindergarten student and others in Peru.



“I love to shop with friends but gave most of that up... to fund my trip.”

— Katey Shehan

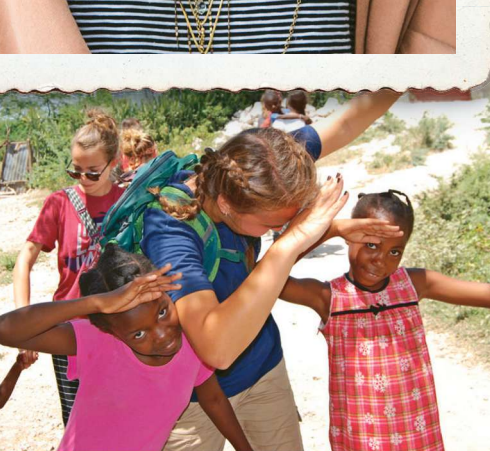
Photo by Ray Sreppay



Impact at Home

At Davidson College, Dove received a grant to begin YouthMap (Youth Marketing and Photography), which teaches disadvantaged young people about photography and the editing process. Students give back to their communities by taking photographs that local nonprofits can use in their marketing.

“The best thing I learned during my gap year is that you are there for a short time, so you can’t change anything for the long term,” says Dove, who now works for Outdoor Ed as an international program instructor in Massachusetts. “It’s better to take what



In high school, Shehan served on a Haiti mission team that helped build a school (bottom, moving clockwise), befriended a boy aiding his family by selling bracelets, “dabbed” with youngsters and presented goats to families to help them sustain themselves.



you've learned and make a difference back in your own community."

Rising college freshman Caroline Cary was ready for a new adventure after graduating from Charlotte Latin School in May 2015. "Charlotte Latin was very challenging academically, and I was exhausted after high school," recalls Cary, 19. "I needed to embrace learning again, and having time away to explore and meet people all over the world gave me a renewed love of learning."

She applied "early decision" to Denison her senior year of high school, and her parents said if she received a scholarship to college, she could do a gap year. She got her acceptance and scholarship offer and applied to Youth International, where she volunteered and explored South America for the first semester.

### Trek into the Andes

In Peru, Cary tested her physical and mental strength when she and others embarked on a four-day trek into the Andes Mountains, hiking through rainforest and blizzard-like conditions, finally arriving at the ancient Incan archaeological site of Machu Picchu.

"I have never been a hiker so pushing myself and reaching that goal was a very emotional experience for me," explains Cary. And she was finally able to use the Spanish she had studied for years at Latin.

Cary then came home to Charlotte, worked for two months and headed off to Southeast Asia with Carpe

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Diem Education for second semester. A highlight was spending time with teenaged Buddhist monks in Thailand. "Buddhism teaches us to live in the moment," she says. "Many distractions today keep us from this, but it is so important, and this lesson will stay with me forever."

Only 18 years old, Katey Shehan is already a veteran of four mission trips to Haiti through Forest Hills Church and several mission trips in the U.S.

A recent grad of Ardrey

On Katey Shehan's four trips to Haiti, she saw this boy from Minotrie each time.

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Kell High School, Shehan plans to go to Nicaragua in the fall with Adventures in Missions and then back to Haiti as an intern in the spring with Mission of Hope. She was accepted at Appalachian State and plans to enroll in fall 2017.

### Raising Money

Shehan's parents have provided emotional support but told her the financial piece was up to her. Mission of Hope volunteers raise money for their own lodging, food, airfare, clothing and medical expenses, which can be costly. Shehan has worked two jobs — at Mellow Mushroom restaurant

and the Morrison Y — and sold T-shirts. "I love to shop with friends but gave most of that up," she says. "But I'm able to save the money I need to fund my trip."

During her gap year, Shehan hopes to lead a group painting houses, planting fruit-bearing trees that the local people can eat or sell and helping distribute goats they can use for food, milk or to sell.

"The Haitian people are so relaxed and relational," she notes. "They share their stories and are so happy to see us. I keep up on Facebook with a lot of the kids I met there, and I can't wait to go back." 



### GAP YEARS AT A GLANCE

The American Gap Association is a nonprofit accreditation and standards-setting organization for gap years, recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission. According to the association:

- The trend of American students pursuing a gap year is increasing, with females more likely than males to pursue it.
- Within one year of completing a gap year, 90 percent of students are actively enrolled in a four-year institution.
- Many individual gap-year programs offer scholarships or tuition reductions to bring programs within financial reach.

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