

BY RACHEL BUTTNER, BA'03

**A Namibian proverb** tells us: "Learning expands great souls." For students of Psychology of Africa: Decolonizing Love, Family and Forgiveness, learning happened in a Creighton classroom and came to life in the bush of Namibia.

Associate professor Jill Brown, PhD, crafted the honors seminar course — which is led by a different professor exploring a different topic every year — to her specialty in cross-cultural psychology and 20 years of research experience in Africa.

In 1996, Brown was assigned to Eenhana, a town on the border of Namibia and Angola, as a Peace Corps volunteer. She's returned throughout

the years to conduct field work in issues such as HIV and masculinity, child fosterage and the influence of environment on who a person becomes. These topics permeated Brown's course. Students examined the cultural bounds of psychology and how to conduct research "connected to and honoring the way Africans think about themselves and pass on that knowledge," she says. "What does it mean for me as a westerner to go to another place and extract information?"

This question guided the students' experience in Africa.

With travel funds from the CURAS Global Scholarship Fund, Brown, along with Lee Budesheim, PhD, associate professor of psychological sciences, and 11 students, made the 24-hour journey to Eenhana. Brown reunited with friends,

and the Creighton group split among two neighboring homesteads, staying with local families to do their research.

Brown called this method "accompaniment," in which students paired up with the men, women and children of the community to follow along in their daily activities — doing chores, eating, playing, working and more. From these interactions, students singled out stories important to the person and collected them through audio recordings as qualitative psychological data.

One student, Olivia Kennedy, connected with 7-year-old Naledi. "Something that kept coming up in our conversations was this concept of what a stranger is to her," Kennedy says, "because her definitions were different from my experience. So, I jumped on that." Kennedy interviewed others

in different locations, tribes and age groups to further explore and analyze their perceptions of "stranger."

The students collected an array of stories. Caitlin Martin shepherded goats alongside a herder boy, who emigrated from Angola; Ruben Quiros conversed in Spanish with a former member of the Namibian army who once lived in exile in Cuba; Dion Talamante interviewed a community advocate promoting basketball as an outlet for men otherwise drawn to trouble.

"The whole course was centered on the San (indigenous people of Southern Africa) code of research ethics of 'walking through the door' rather than looking through the window," Kennedy says. For the students — many of whom have never been to a country outside of the United States — it was a lesson in meeting people where they are.

"We had great conversations, challenging stereotypes and our assumptions that we have the privilege to walk into somebody's life and ask them questions," Brown says. "The participants own the knowledge. They own these stories." The students will finish out the spring semester compiling their research and producing podcasts from the recorded stories to share with the Namibian people.

Beyond Eenhana, the students spent nearly 45 hours on the road in the sparsely populated country, staying in both remote and urban areas. They joined a hunting and gathering expedition in the Kalahari Desert with the San people; saw native animals at the Etosha National Park; and spent time with a social worker tending to children living in the streets of Gobabis.

"It was hard to prepare for it because you don't get it until you're there," says Kennedy, who, inspired by Brown's career, plans to do graduate studies in human culture and developmental psychology. "These are people I've read about in books, but to see them run up and hug Jill (Brown), that isn't something you can translate in an academic journal."

