

## Traveling Internationally with EWB By Matilde Fernandes

When a student joins EWB one of the most interesting appeals of the club is typically the opportunity to travel abroad. As part of these trips students get to interact with international communities and apply engineering skills they have learned in the classroom. These are unique opportunities that other clubs don't offer their students and something that stood out to me when I joined the group my freshman year. After three years of being involved with the projects in the East Africa Program, I got the opportunity to travel to Malawi in January, 2023, with five other students and two professional mentors. I previously had experiences abroad; I grew up in Portugal and have had some experiences traveling and backpacking in Europe and in the US. However, traveling for tourism is a very different experience from traveling with EWB. When we travel for a project, like the one in Malawi, we typically go to remote communities that don't have easy access to infrastructure we are used to interacting with everyday. This could include things like paved roads, electricity, or running tap water. We also interact with cultures that are different from the ones we grew up with. This could mean different gender roles, food practices, or religions. I think these are all factors that make students nervous about traveling with EWB, and these are some of the things that also made me nervous when I traveled earlier this year. Because of these differences and nerves that students might encounter from our international trips, it's important for us to have conversations about the different cultural norms or interactions that we might have abroad. We not only want to make ourselves feel better when we travel, but we also have a responsibility to help make the communities that are welcoming us feel confident in the partnerships we have with them.

Leading up to my trip to Malawi, the travel team had meetings to make sure we were prepared for the technical surveys that we would have to do, but we also had these conversations about some of the differences that we might see in Malawi compared to the US. Our mentors have all traveled for EWB projects, so they helped us have these conversations. Despite all the steps we took to prepare for the trip, I was still nervous about the interactions I would have with the community and whether we would get all the information we needed from the trip.

When we got to the community in Malawi, which in our case was an elementary school, we took a tour and then started doing the technical surveys. We spent a week at the school collecting as much data as possible, but also having as many conversations as we could with both the students and the staff. Despite being nervous about these interactions, I realized that the most valuable thing from the trip that we could bring back to the rest of our team at the University was the perspective of the school and their hopes for the project. To my surprise, I quickly forgot about the differences I was so nervous about, and I started to understand that at the end of the day the students and the staff at the school in Malawi were just as curious about me as I was about them. The whole time we were there, we would play soccer with the students and worked with staff on the surveying. While we asked questions about their typical water and sanitation practices as well as their everyday routines and families, they asked us questions about the equipment and testing we were doing, the US, and our families. While it was

important to prepare for the trip, both technically and culturally, looking back I now know that I was nervous about expectations I created in my head. From this experience traveling internationally with EWB, I realized that in order to make the best out of opportunities you have to approach people, as well as projects and problems, with curiosity and creativity, instead of fear and worry.