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## My Story of West Virginia

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## **My Story of West Virginia**

It was a hot, sunny day in Cowen, West Virginia, and I sat on the back lawn of First Baptist Church drinking an ice-cold bottle of water. I was surrounded by children playing, neighbors chatting, and the energetic sound of live bluegrass music playing in the background. With me, were my fellow peers from Siena College. The purpose of our visit was to emerge ourselves in the culture of West Virginia and learn about their way of life. Through conversations, observations, and reflection, I was able to learn a great deal from this experience, not only about West Virginia and the people there, but about myself as well. As I sat there on the grass, I noticed a young boy begin to walk in my direction. He was small, with curly brown hair, and he had a playful smile on his face. He couldn't have been more than three years old. As I watched him, I noticed that he was carrying a can of Coca Cola. I watched him shuffle his way to his mother, taking a large gulp of the sugary beverage.

Through my initial reaction to this observation, I will admit that I passed some judgment. This was not something that I commonly saw, and it took me by surprise. I wondered why this little boy's parents were allowing him to drink so much soda and if they understood how unhealthy this could be for their child. I was raised in a household that was very focused on a healthy lifestyle, and this observation challenged my own identity. I began to make assumptions about the knowledge that this parent, and West Virginians as a whole, had of nutrition. Before arriving in West Virginia, I had little knowledge of the state and the people that lived there. The only fact I knew was that it was the state with the highest rate of obesity. I wondered why this was and I created my own story based on this knowledge.

The telling of a story can have a large impact on a person's view of something. The perspective of the storyteller can alter how a listener hears and interprets what they are told. Sometimes, stories are the only basis of knowledge that we have of certain things. As we take in information from others, we tend to fill in the gaps with our own thoughts, creating our own version of the story. I created a story of West Virginia in my mind, and it was a story of obesity. I was aware that this state was facing a health crisis and I put West Virginians in one category through these initial, assuming thoughts, ignoring all else about their culture, values, and way of life.

Just as people do in every culture, West Virginians hold significant values that are unique to their way of life. Although West Virginians are very neighborly and hospitable in nature, they are not

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always welcoming to strangers, especially if the person is attempting to give them advice or tell them what to do (Barker 8). There have been individuals in the past that have gone to West Virginia with a preconception of what needed to be fixed. This state has often been the focus of much research because of its obesity rankings. Jamie Oliver, a British chef, created an entire television documentary based on his experience in West Virginia. He went there with his own assumptions about what needed to be changed, never truly considering the perspectives of those living there. He created his own story, having taken no time to learn the roots of the problems that exist there or the parts of the culture that are most related to these problems. This has been the most difficult part of this journey for me.

Throughout this experience, I have struggled with finding the story of West Virginia that represents my new observations. I took the initial information that I had learned about this state, and I created my first story, filling in the gaps with assumptions that may or may not have been accurate. It took me some time to gain a better understanding of what I was observing there, but I was eventually able to reach this with the help of a few key elements. Throughout our trip, we were provided with several articles that related to what we were observing each day. Through reading these articles, I was able to reflect on the information I was gaining, as well as process my own thoughts and reactions. I was also provided with the resources to transform these initial reactions into more cohesive thoughts and reflections through the help of professors and administrators who shared this journey with me. They challenged my initial thoughts and assumptions, guiding me to a more holistic view, considering aspects that I had previously overlooked. They helped me to rewrite the story.

Through this experience, my perspective of West Virginia was altered significantly. I learned to look deeper, and not only focus on the things that needed to be changed, or what was going wrong. With the help of others, I was exposed to a new way of thinking. I gained the ability to see West Virginia as more than what I had seen it as before I arrived there. With each new conversation and observation, I was able to gain a better understanding of what West Virginia truly is. Although it is a state with a high rate of obesity, it is so much more than that. It is home to people who have a strong love for tradition, family and the state of West Virginia. They take pride in who they are, despite the stories that others have created about them.

Novelist Chimamanda Adichie, says, “So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (Adichie, 2009). Far too often, one story is told about a people or culture, and this becomes the only identity that they are seen to have. Stories play an important role in our everyday lives. I was told a story of West Virginia, a story that led to a one-word definition of the people and the state. Obesity does

not define West Virginia. At first, I may have listened to this single story, but I have now created a new story based on my own observations, conversations with others, and internal reflection. There is so much more to admire and learn from this culture, if it is given the chance. Through this process, I have gained a much better understanding of West Virginia and its people, far past the high rates of obesity. I created my own story, and it is one that is much more representative of what West Virginia truly is. This is a lesson that I can take with me far past this experience. Within any aspect of life, it is important to be aware of the assumptions and beliefs that you hold for a certain person or group of people. We are often swept up into the stories that we are told by others, and we relay these stories through our own words and actions. We each have the power to create a story, but it is our duty as storytellers to ensure that the whole story is told, including each detail that makes the story true.

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