Mia Fasanella

When I first arrived in Benin I was not sure what to expect from a culture that I thought would be drastically different from my own.

However I began to notice that the people I saw on the streets and met, were not very different than people at home. The fast paced urban culture of Porto Novo was similar to our own culture in the U.S at the turn of the 20th century.

I could not help but think of my grandfather Ralph Fasanella’s paintings of 20th century America. What I saw in Benin brought those paintings to life. It reminded me that not too long ago the U.S was in a similar place. We should not think of ourselves as so different.

In many of my grandfather’s paintings of New York City you find children playing in the streets, working, and immersed in urban culture. The children I met in Benin were right out of his paintings.

I was especially inspired by a group of children who hung out near our hotel. They were experts at navigating their neighborhood. They lived, learned, and played on the streets of their community and because of that they have life experiences and skills I do not posses. For just about two weeks they extended my friends and myself into their world. They taught us board and card games. They led us through their streets with ease. They beat us at soccer.

The age and language gap between us did not make our friendships less significant. Because we were able to communicate across those barriers our friendships were some of the most beautiful I have ever experienced. My new friends inspired me in ways I do not yet fully know. They reminded me that learning happens everywhere, not just in a classroom. How well they knew their way around their world amazed me. What I learned from these children can no better be summed up than by the words of author Denize Lauture…

“To all children who, smiling and laughing,

laughing and singing, singing and smiling,

stand tall at the golden thresholds of their lives

and welcome learning and teaching,

and teaching and learning,

as the two most endearing experiences in life.”