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From Looking to Bearing Witness

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Cover photo and portraits of Fellows: David J. Weinstein
"From Looking to Bearing Witness" represents the third leg of the Sorensen Fellowship journey, undertaken by six Brandeis undergraduates who interned during the summer months in Ghana, Guinea, India, Kenya, Poland and Washington, D.C. After succeeding in a highly competitive selection process, Ibrahima Diaboula '16, Shimon Mazor '16, Elad Mehl '16, Ngobitak Ndiwane '16, Sneha Walia '15 and Shane Weitzman '16 completed a spring course related to their internship, and then spent eight weeks serving, witnessing, learning and growing in diverse communities, organizations and institutions. It was my privilege to accompany the Fellows upon their return to Brandeis in September, to support them to reflect on their internships, and to construct meanings out of their experiences. We engaged with the process of writing creative non-fiction in ways that would challenge and support them to grapple with the ethical dilemmas inevitable in such endeavors.

As the semester approached I turned to a friend and colleague, Dr. Terry Moher, who has been teaching writing for over 30 years, asking for suggestions of short works of creative non-fiction that could serve as inspiration for the class. Terry immediately offered to join me in working with the students. Together we have led in-class exercises, crafted assignments and read drafts. We have witnessed each of the six authors whose works follow, as they wrote and re-wrote, uncovering the ethical questions inherent in their experiences, and seeking to express complex and sometimes difficult truths in ways that would be sensitive to the people they had come to admire, to care about, and sometimes to love.

Once the papers were completed, the class discovered a common theme: the importance of building trusting relationships in order to facilitate transformations of the kind required for personal growth and for community development. Those of us who seek to support others might bring knowledge or expertise, but in the absence of trusting relationships, people cannot express their real needs. They will rarely make themselves vulnerable to those offering support. Readers of the works in this anthology will discover how building relationships of trust was key to the summer experiences of each of the Fellows, both in terms of the support they were able to offer and to their own learning and development.

Terry and I worked to earn and deserve the trust of the Sorensen Fellows, who shared their stories with more and more candor as they, themselves, discovered new layers of complexity. We hope that readers of this anthology will be moved by the pieces here – moved by the courage and resilience of these people from many parts of the world, whose lives and stories have been dignified by the heartfelt witnessing of the authors of these works; moved to appreciate the complexities associated with international service and development projects; and moved to think and act in new ways in the world. As a result of the stories told in this booklet, what will we choose to say, and how will we choose to act? The full meaning of the Sorensen Fellows’ journeys is partly up to us as readers.

Ibrahima Diaboula '16 is majoring in international and global studies and anthropology, and minoring in French. He was born and raised in Conakry, Guinea. His passion for national unity was sparked when he interned at the International Institute of Rhode Island, where he worked closely with refugees affected by the genocide in Rwanda. He attended the Clinton Global Initiative University, where he was awarded a semi-finalist position. For his Sorensen Fellowship, Ibrahima interned with Qui Veut Peut, a Guinean non-profit organization that focuses on children’s rights and education. His objective during this internship was to promote national unity, by bringing together children from different ethnic groups in a country which had been
experiencing considerable instability since 2009. Ibrahima’s work benefited from the various lenses he could use to understand the dynamics of his internship site. This “binocularity of vision,” or the ability simultaneously to witness phenomena through different perspectives, was afforded to him by virtue of being the son of a Fulani mother and a Mandinka father, and, as another dimension, by being both Guinean and American.

Shimon Mazor ’16 is majoring in economics and computer science. He was born in Kiev, Ukraine but has lived in Petah Tiqva, Israel for most of his life. After serving in the Israeli Defense Forces, Shimon worked in sales and marketing management, and volunteered in Paamonim, guiding and mentoring a family in financial debt. Shimon now serves as the supervisor of the WATCH Housing Advocacy Clinic in Waltham, where he was awarded the Louis D. Brandeis Social Justice Scholarship for his work collaborating with other students to prevent homelessness, supporting local community members with affordable housing searches, understanding Massachusetts housing law, and assisting with evictions and health-code violations. For his Sorensen Fellowship, Shimon interned with Kenya Social Ventures, consulting with small businesses and social enterprises in the neighborhood of Kibera in Nairobi. His writing demonstrates why expertise is a necessary – but not sufficient – ingredient for effective grassroots development initiatives.

Elad Mehl ’16 is planning to major in international and global studies and business. He is originally from Kfar HaOranim, Israel, but has spent many years of his life in Poland, Turkey, and Uzbekistan due to his father’s work as a diplomat. Coming from a Polish Jewish family, and living in Poland as a young child, he developed a strong curiosity about the culture and the Jewish life in Eastern Central Europe and in Poland particularly. Prior to Brandeis, Elad served in the IDF. Here at the University, he is a Community Advisor in East Quad, and also works in the Office of Advancement Services. Over the summer, he worked in the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, where he assisted with an exchange program for Polish and Israeli teenagers, translated notes about the history and preservation of Jewish heritage in various Polish towns, and located lost documents related to permissions for interview tapes and transcripts. He also played soccer in a newly reinvigorated Polish/Jewish league, and, in direct encounters, came face to face with the stories of his own family.

Ngobitak Ndiwane ’16, from Malden, Massachusetts, is an aspiring dentist majoring in health: science, society and policy. She is an English Language Learning coordinator and tutor at Brandeis, as well as a mathematics tutor to a local Waltham elementary school student. She has had the opportunity to travel to countries such as Ethiopia, Cameroon and Honduras, and is interested in addressing health care disparities both internationally and domestically. Ngobitak’s tutoring experiences, as well as her passion for improving health care quality standards, led her to an internship with Atorkor Development Foundation in the rural community of Atorkor, Ghana. In Ghana, she was a teaching assistant for elementary and high school aged children, as well as an intern at the local medical clinic. Ngobitak educated the students about oral hygiene and many different public health topics through lectures, creative writing, crafts and games.

Sneha Walia ’15, from Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, is double majoring in politics and psychology and minoring in social justice and social policy, and education studies. She is President of the Undergraduate Student Union, an undergraduate department representative for the Social Justice and Social Policy Program, and a member of the Steering Committee for this year’s ‘DEIS Impact “festival of social justice.” Sneha did her Sorensen Fellowship internship at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C., working with their College Access initiative in the Office of the Secretary of Education. During her internship, she was able to conduct research on college access needs, participate in meetings related to college access programs, and provide support for events coordinated by the initiative. Additionally, she had the opportunity to work on many events through different areas of the Department, including the National Summer Learning Day celebration featuring First Lady Michelle Obama, their summer series of “Let’s Read, Let’s Move” events, and a College Opportunity Summit through the Office of the Undersecretary.

Shane Weitzman ’16, from Leominster, Massachusetts, is majoring in anthropology with a minor in South Asian studies. He has a special interest in the confluence of gendered practices, religion, and the impact of colonial histories within South Asia. He has received the Brandeis Academic Achievement Award and a grant from the Brandeis-India Initiative. He also has had experience volunteering with Afternoon Enrichment, a Waltham group club that facilitates afterschool activities and homework help for local middle schoolers. His essay, “(Re)Imagining ‘The Illusion of Inner Sex’ in Livingston’s Paris Is Burning” appears in the 2013-2014 edition of Write Now!, a Brandeis University publication used in first-year writing seminars. In the summer of 2014, Shane traveled to Hubli, India to work with the Deshpande Foundation, an organization that employs a “bottom up” approach to inspire local entrepreneurship in service of helping to solve systemic social problems. He found himself teaching English, an initiative which aroused many dilemmas for him. He has woven together theories about hierarchies inherent in globalization with stories of his sensitive encounters with his students.
The entire staff of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life has supported the Fellows on their journeys. I appreciate Dan Terris, the Center’s Director, for offering me the opportunity to lead the fall course; Marci McPhee, Associate Director of the Center and director of the Sorensen Fellowship Program, whose commitment to the students is unwavering; Leigh Swigart, Director of the Center’s Programs in International Justice and Society, who led the fall course last year and offered very helpful advice; Barbara Strauss ’02, Senior Department Coordinator, who communicated with the Fellows throughout the summer and managed the logistics of the program; and David Weinstein, the Center’s Communications Specialist, who advised the Fellows on their photography and copyedited the final versions of their work. I especially appreciate Elad, Gobi, Ibrahima, Shane, Shimon and Sneha for their openness and their hard work, and Dr. Terry Moher, for her humor and her dedication to the students and to the craft of teaching writing.

Cynthia Cohen, Ph.D. is Director of the Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, and Co-Chair of the Brandeis minor in Creativity, the Arts and Social Transformation.

Sorensen Fellowship Program

The Sorensen Fellowship Program of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life honors Theodore C. Sorensen (1928-2010) for his lifelong commitment to public service and for his 10 years as Founding Chair of the Center’s International Advisory Board. Ted Sorensen was policy advisor, legal counsel and speechwriter to President John F. Kennedy. In 2008 he wrote, “We shall listen, not lecture; learn, not threaten. We will enhance our safety by earning the respect of others and showing respect for them. In short, our foreign policy will rest on the traditional American values of restraint and empathy, not on military might.” In focusing their internships and their writing on themes of empathy, respect and trust, the Fellows have paid fitting tribute to the public servant for whom the Sorensen Fellowship is named.
Ibrahima Diaboula ’16

Weaving the Essence of a Nation

From a Binocular View
There I found her, lying on her back, feet crisscrossed like a politician while listening to a specific radio station directed by a Fulani and for the Fulani community. I did not quite know what they were saying, but maman seemed upset. I remember hearing a few statements along the lines of “They are mistreating our people.... They are brutalizing them.... Something needs to be done. We need to do something.”

My mother explained that more than 19 Fulani merchants had been vandalized and robbed, some even critically injured. This opened my eyes, and I felt compassion for maman as I understood that whatever was being said on the radio directly affected her because of her ties to the Fulani ethnicity. Still I kept listening to this unknown radio station that seemed to portray Guinea as a nation that hates the Fulani people. Multiple times the broadcaster would shout out “Our people are tired of the sufferings. We need a Fulani leader to fix up this issue.” It became obvious to me that the purpose of this radio station was to encourage a robust Fulani alliance against the Guinean regime that is believed to be governed by the Mandinka. When maman put on a different radio frequency, I could hear papa’s mother tongue, Mandinka, and almost the same scenario of pride, division and oppression.

I felt like there was an ethnic tug-of-war going on, and that these two media outlets were perpetuating it. Everyone grouped themselves as “the oppressed.” From my understanding, the perpetrators were the elders (wise-men), the religious leaders, Guinean politicians, and even many friends of mine with whom I grew up and went to school during my childhood. The ethnic problems in Guinea have brought chaos, hatred and lack of structure within the country, communities and workplaces. In hopes of combating this phenomenon to promote national unity, I worked with kids between the ages of 13 and 17, bringing my binocular perspectives into this issue, both in terms of my lives in the United States and Guinea, and of my familial connections to the Mandinka and the Fulani ethnic groups.

The different ethnic groups in Guinea each bring something new that adds to the beauty of the nation. The customs that are embedded in these different ethnic groups make up the true wealth of Guinea. Some of these rich aspects of the Guinean culture are its languages, its various irresistible foods, and its textiles. These contributions, which come from the different parts and peoples of Guinea, make the country beautiful. The fact that this beauty is created from different ethnic groups and communities that are in Guinea make them more valuable than the abundant natural resources Guinea
has. I needed to teach my students the importance of understanding Guinea from both its inside and outside. The parallel I laid out to them was that it is essential to understand the ethnic groups in Guinea as components of Guinea. Essentially, the union of all groups in Guinea can make a much more positive and progressive impact on the nation, which does not mean abandoning one’s culture or roots.

The History of Ethnic Relations in Guinea

Far before colonialism and before the Republic of Guinea came about, the major groups that occupied the current Guinean periphery during the 1800s fought one another for land acquisition and supremacy. The Susu and the Forestier (people of the forest), mainly occupied Guinea. During this period of time, Africa was divided into kingdoms, and the notion of power was based on the number of territories one acquired. Since present Guinea had no concrete borderlines during that period of time, the Mandinka, who originated from the Manding Empire (present-day Mali), and the Fulbe, who are nomadic cattlers, both settled into Guinea, a place they now call home. These two ethnic groups did not get free passes from the people of the forest or the Susu; while the Fulbe, as nomads, managed their way smoothly into Guinea, the Mandinka used force to settle into Guinea.

The Mandinka were very powerful with lots of influence because of the impact of the emperor Soundiata Keita’s 14th century legacy throughout all of the western part of Africa. Soundiata is viewed as a legend, or a demi-God. After his decline, a group of people, led by his grandson Samori Toure, moved to Upper-Guinea where they lived and promoted Islam throughout the region. Like Soundiata Keita, Samori was a great warrior and an ambitious man. He is known for defeating his rivals and neighbors to gain more territories, which led him to form the city of Kankan, the center of his territories. The people he captured during wars were given to Europeans in exchange for goods. He kept a few captives for agricultural and commercial activities. His weaker captives were “incorporated into households” to clean and help with daily activities.1

Tall, slim, with a lighter complexion, the Fulbe came to Guinea as nomads. They often moved from one place to another to find a better place to develop their community and to take care of their cattle throughout Africa. Upon their encounter of Guinea, “they forced the Susu to relocate in a different area before they could settle in to form a centralized theocratic Muslim state.”2 They too fought neighbors and rivals for territorial acquisition, power and supremacy. Their captives were also sold to Europeans, in exchange for goods.

These ethnic groups were part of kingdoms before they shrank into smaller groups. They fought one another and defended themselves to preserve their communities as well as to grow. Yet the warfare between these groups became more intensive when the demand for slaves culminated. Europeans supported the conflicts between these communities or groups because they knew that there were going to be captives, whom they could possess through exchanges of small items like mirrors, clothes, and weapons, amongst other goods. Although the trades were unfair to Africans, both parties were pleased as they found exoticness in what they presented to each other. The Africans were curious and the Europeans needed manpower for exploitation. This enhanced the ethnic clashes because the different groups intensified the wars among each other. Therefore, for security and territorial reasons, the ethnic communities relocated by groups in each of the four regions of Guinea.

The Current Ethnic Problems in Guinea

When I was younger, sometime in 2007 or 2008, I remember running to my neighbor’s house and feasting with her kids. Everyone called her Tantie Tata, and she was good to everyone. We were not related, but she was like family to me. I grew up in that sort of environment – one that was built with love and compassion.
Right after I moved to the United States of America in 2009, strange mass struggles started erupting in Guinea. At least 150 people were killed and many others were injured during a confrontation between the authorities and political supporters. This incident occurred at a political campaign event where the candidates for the 2009 presidential election were present with their supporters. According to eyewitnesses, the soldiers went there with the intention to kill. There have been many interpretations of what happened that day, but what remains clear is that someone wanted to be in power, and he was ready to do whatever it takes to get there.

After that tragedy the politicians started motivating their people even more, promising that they would contribute heavily to their own communities before they would contribute to any others. All of the politicians fueled people’s sense of oppression. *J’invite mes partisans et frères à voté pour ma partie politique pour qu’ensemble nous puissions dévelopé ‘chez nous.* They told their people to vote for them, and that once in power those of their like (ethnic relatives) will taste honey. More clashes erupted in the countryside in Guinea. The tension between the Foulani and Mandinka specifically arose. All it took was a small problem before a conflict would break out. According to Pepe Guilamo, a fellow Guinean with whom I worked during my summer internship in Conakry, “Just like the white men divided us to control and rip us off from our resources, these politicians, and other public figures strategize their political agendas in a similar manner.” Guilamo insinuated that both president, Alpha Condé, who is Mandinka, and opposition leader Cellou Dalein Diallo, who is Fulani, encouraged their own people to support and vote for them as they promised to open the doors to opportunities to their people before anyone else.

**My Beloved Motherland – Chez Moi**

The small rocks on the roofs of houses confirmed the unique Guinea that I had in my memories. The atmosphere felt a bit different from my expectations. It was warmer than I remembered, and the flying dust kept on blurring my vision. It did not take me long to find my big extended family clustered together while screaming my nickname, “papi, papi.” I was happy. Granma’s little boy was home. It felt good to see my grandmother after five years apart, as well as to feel the fresh air and the dry sand of the Guinea soil.

My supervisor, Pepe Guilamo, originates from the forest region, and he seemed genuine. Before embarking on my summer journey with the students, we first discussed the current situation of ethnic relations in Guinea in order to know how to better approach the students about it without offending or making anyone feel unease. He explained the structure of Qui Veu Peut, and the work they have done in the past in terms of selecting the students and gaining the trust of their parents. He emphasized the importance of being clear to the parents as well as having their consent, which I understood to be important as I interacted with the kids.

At my first glance of Kipe Primaire Deux (KPD), a well-known primary public school in Conakry, I was shocked and confused as to how a public school could be so well-maintained. Public schools in Conakry have the reputation of being dirty, unsanitary, poorly maintained and disorganized. The smell of the restrooms could sometimes be detected in the classrooms. Without commenting on my surprised reaction, my supervisor took me to the welcome board where it was written, *Together let’s maintain this school, which our fathers and grandfathers left us – for we will leave it for the next generation.* This unexpected wave of change, and the uniqueness of the place and atmosphere, assured me that we had found the place and students where we could work on promoting national unity. The discipline at KPD made it easy to work with the students.

KPD was in my mind all night long. I knew that it was where I wanted to work. Upon my arrival at the school the following day, my supervisor and two teachers helped me select 30 students by taking into account that close to 10 would go away for vacation, or their immediate attention would be needed from their parents. The following day, we started working with 23 students who were uncertain of why they were back at school right after taking the national exam to go to high school, which starts with the seventh grade in Guinea. From the looks on their faces, I could sense that they thought of me as one of the usual aliens who often come through nongovernmental organizations to help them; except that this time that alien was black and looked Guinean. At first, I
From the looks on their faces, I could sense that they thought of me as one of the usual aliens who often come through nongovernmental organizations to help them; except that this time that alien was black and looked Guinean.

was not sure whether the students were scared of us – I recall from my childhood memories in Guinea that teachers have the tendency of punishing students whenever they behave out of the norms – or if this was a learning culture that was adopted at KPD. Almost half of our first day together consisted of Oui Monsieur - D'accord Monsieur - or Non Monsieur (Yes teacher, OK teacher or No teacher). Their calm atmosphere and mature characters clearly indicated that KDP is a school where students are taught to protect public property and respect their teachers. When issues are tense in Guinea, students are usually the first to demonstrate in the streets. Typically, they start by destroying their own schools, breaking windows and destroying public property. But this was not present at KPD.

The students and I talked about the conditions of a couple of big public schools in Conakry. Although there were groups of students who came in the morning and others who came at night, these schools had more students than there were seats available. Many people stood in the classrooms, in the hallways and by the windows to learn whatever they could see or hear. According to my supervisor, these conditions encourage fraud, corruption, and disorder. In some cases, students pay money to advance to the next level, and others are failed or punished by teachers just because they do not personally like them or because they have had an issue in the past. “The walls are written on everywhere, the classrooms have holes in them and the windows are broken. It is a total disaster,” says my supervisor. Our students knew this reality, yet never knew that they were an exception because KPD, unlike other schools, has been promoting change together, without distinction of ethnicity or gender. Without even realizing it, the students have exemplified nationalism in a unified fashion while at school.

“What did my brothers finish college and still have not found jobs?” – Boubacar

Boubacar Barry missed day two of week one because of family reasons. I was not aware of it. I called his emergency contact the same night to check on him. I came to find out that Boubacar Barry was an orphan who lived with his illiterate uncle who cares less for school. The lady who answered the phone when I called was Boubacar’s neighbor; she briefed me on Boubacar’s family situation and the hardships he faces. She told me that Boubacar’s uncle wanted him to work instead of going to school.

What happened the following day stunned me, however, as it was the most remarkable moment I had encountered since I had landed in Guinea. I wanted to find out more about Boubacar, and so to encourage him to speak, I told him stories about my childhood when I lived with my uncle for four years. Boubacar listened carefully to the funny and sometimes sad stories I told him. He smiled softly and told me that I was brave. He then said to me that he was grateful for his uncle who has been taking care of him since his parents passed. I did not imagine that a 14-year-old would speak so generously about his situation, despite his struggles. He was a boy who was always positively minded. Boubacar taught me that the negativity and hardships we often face should not stop or reduce our perseverance to attain and succeed in other things.

It was a rainy day, with less traffic than usual. The hot weather had cooled off, which allowed me to enjoy the beautiful air. I waited half an hour before the students showed up, one after another. As always, I asked all the people how they were feeling, and if there was anything they would like to share. Most students shared whatever was crossing their minds, except Boubacar. I had spoken to Boubacar’s uncle in person without his nephew’s knowledge the day before class. I understood that Boubacar’s uncle had nine children, three of whom were under five years old. He needed to feed them, and alone he knew he could not. He told me that he had decided to let Boubacar live with him because he wanted to give Boubacar a home in which to stay. I sensed that because Boubacar was older than his children, he felt that Boubacar could bring some financial contribution to the family.

Nevertheless, I asked Boubacar the following day at school to tell us how he was feeling, and how everything was going for him. He had missed class for the second time, thus I was intrigued to hear him out. He got up and told me in a very calm and relaxed manner, “Teacher, everything is going well in my life. My friends are good to me and my family treats me well.” I was still impressed by the fact that he refused to talk about the hardship he was facing at home, but even more by the way he hid it. He acted as if nothing was troubling him. I had some serious conversations with two of his teachers, but they were not concerned, understanding the need the uncle had.
that was making Boubacar miss out on his education. He was my best student. This brave young man left his village after both of his parents had passed to come to school in the city where he studied hard to have the highest GPA amongst his classmates despite the challenges he was facing at home. Boubacar did his housework before school, went to Islamic school, then to the KPD from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., and then assisted his uncle at his different daily jobs. I came to respect him.

Trying to get Boubacar to open up about his real story was not easy because he did not want to be portrayed as a pitiful person. His character reminded me of my paternal grandfather, who often told me that a man should not cry, nor be emotional. Nevertheless, Boubacar fixed me straight in the eyes and first said to me, “My parents died when I was three or four; I could not remember clearly. My uncle told me that my mother was a very beautiful Fulani woman, with the heart of an angel. She was a center of attention because of her beauty and everyone loved her. According to my uncle my father, his brother, was very rigorous and a man of his word; people misunderstood his serious personality to be a harsh, cold and heartless person.” Boubacar went on and told me that he grew up with his uncle who he thought was his biological father for a couple of years. From the look on Boubacar’s face, I could tell that he was getting nervous and emotional. “My uncle does not value education but he is good to me,” he said. This moment became engraved in me because Boubacar understood his hardships and felt that it was perhaps something to endure. He spoke with a cold face while attempting to make me understand that he is grateful to his uncle who raised him since his parents passed. I sensed in his narration that he defined the hardship he was going through as merely a phase of life.

Boubacar was the most active and brilliant student out of all of them. Yet I was concerned more about him than the rest of his classmates. At home he was surrounded by people who devalued education. Boubacar’s uncle thought that the Guinean system was manipulated in favor of people from the opposing ethnic group, the Mandinka. Boubacar loved school, but it seemed like he was starting to believe that even by achieving high education, he would still not be able to find a job and do well in life. I recall when he asked me on two different occasions about the reasons that are keeping his older brothers (his cousins) unemployed even after achieving college.

“Protecting and honoring my tradition” – Moussa
Throughout the selection process of the students we worked with at Kipe Primaire Deux, my supervisor and I noticed that the superintendent only invited his top students to take part. There were enough people to select four from each of the four most dominant ethnic groups in Guinea: the Mandinka, the Foulani, the Susu and the Gbèrsè. However the students the superintendent presented to us, with consideration of their characters and backgrounds, we felt did not seem to fit well with the mission of my internship, to promote national unity through education. Therefore we asked to have all the students join us, and we randomly invited each of the students we selected. Nonetheless, at the speed of the light a small boy came to me and told me he wanted to be part of it. He told me very confidently that he was the best student in his classroom, and that if I doubted him I could ask his mother. My supervisor and I laughed hard and then asked him what
part of Guinea his parents come from. He told us that both of his parents originated from Banankoro, which validated his selection. We realized from his strong Mandinka accent that he does not live in a diverse environment, and that his character, personality and background could help us reshape or consider some of the ways we wished to promote national unity.

Clustered in a pack of giants, small Moussa Keita squeezed his way out to shout and impose his presence despite his squeaky voice: "Moi Mr…Moi Mr!" (me teacher…me teacher), he would say! His strong persona did not go unnoticed because everyone quieted down and geared their attention towards him. While the majority of his classmates are between 15 and 16, small Moussa is only 13, yet cunning and strong like a lion. In fact his friends think of him as a small container with a big engine. His way of reasoning or doing in general is bigger than his physical appearance. He refuses to be intimidated but instead likes leadership and the spotlight. The confidence in his tone and his body language pinpoints his dominant character amongst his classmates.

Small Moussa is courageous and fearless when it comes to expressing how he feels, what he thinks and/or what he wants. For instance, when everyone was asked to introduce themselves and tell a little bit about their families’ structures, most students, except small Moussa, sweetened up their narrations to tell me what they thought I should hear, telling only the good things. After observing three of his classmates formulate stories that only illuminated the positive aspects of their families, small Moussa raised his hand to have the feu vert (green light) to tell his own story. "My parents originated from the same region, and they are both Mandinka, one of the most dominant ethnic groups…. My father travelled to his native village to marry my mother when he was ready in terms of the customs in his culture and because he was believed to have met his religious obligations." When asked about his extended family, small Moussa also added, "My uncle who now resides in Angola has four mixed children with his wife who’s from the Susu ethnic group. She practices voodoo. She makes my uncle spend all his money on her, while his siblings and other family members suffer."

Small Moussa’s feelings and understandings of his uncle’s situation and the isolation from the rest of the family seemed to come from his background. Those who influenced him, such as his parents and other family members, shaped his lifestyle. Thus the fact that his uncle faced rejection from most of his family members because he married someone out of his ethnic norms was legitimate to small Moussa. His strong opposition to his uncle’s marriage decision was due to the fact that he thought that marrying someone from a different ethnic group sabotaged his culture and customs, since that is what he learned in his surroundings.

Something new and important caught our attention while assessing small Moussa’s way of reasoning. We realized that only working with them at school would not make an impact in their lives or promote national unity. We needed to also involve the people in the communities of the students, since those people often shape their perspectives. In week three, we conducted a trial to assess how people think of other ethnic groups in the communities in which the students lived. We asked the students to tell us what they knew about each of the ethnic groups in Guinea, and then to ask the people in their neighborhoods for help. My supervisor and I knew they could not talk about all the ethnic groups without asking for help, thus we wanted to encourage them to ask others from their communities.

The results were great, because most people told the students about the histories of their ethnic groups, while emphasizing how they also felt about other ethnic groups. Essentially we made four trips in different neighborhoods where the students told people about the importance of protecting public property, as well as some of the resources that are available to them. We also emphasized the importance of unity, and how that can stabilize the country for progress and opportunity. Small Moussa’s honesty, courage and electrifying presence had taught me that to impact someone’s life is to look beyond his character and actions to rather assess his family and surroundings.

**Une Dame De Fer**

On the far left front of the class was seated Foulemaout Sylla, one of the only two girls who participated in my summer internship project. These young girls were so quiet that their presence in the classroom was almost unnoticed. Whenever I posed a question, they would say yes or no –
nothing more. At first, I thought that they did not know the answers to the questions being posed, thus I thought that I should not call on them. To my great surprise, Foulematou was going to teach me something new that I had not yet realized. One day I overheard her whisper the answer to a question I had posed to the whole class. I asked her to say it louder so that everyone in the classroom could hear it. Before I could even finish my sentence, I sensed that she was frightened already. She repeatedly told me that she couldn’t remember what she whispered to Mariama, the other girl. I became quiet for a moment to reassess her presence in this classroom.

I started focusing on both girls with hopes of getting them involved just like the rest of the class, especially Foulematou because she attended more often than Mariama. Foulematou never raised her hands for a question; I had to always choose her to answer. Most often, she got the answers right. I could tell she liked being the one who answered all the questions. The tiny little girl who sat in the corner was much more relaxed now. I grabbed this opportunity to get to know her better. Foulematou beautifully talked about her pregnant single mother who took care of her. She added, “I wake up at 6 a.m. every morning to sweep, mop the floor and wash the dishes. Then I have to memorize my assigned sourate (Qur’anic verse) of the day before going back home to prep for school.” While she was talking about her daily routine and family I could hardly process anything else because I was so impressed.

Foulematou defied every fallacy about gender roles and positioning within the Guinean society. Yet the sad thing about that is that she did not know. Not only does the Guinean culture and community categorize women as subordinate, women believe that they are subordinate. I remember when I was still young, expecting my future wife to be a good cook, to clean well and to stay home with the children while I would be at work making money. This was totally normal to me because that is what I witnessed most people do in Guinea. However, living in America has changed my viewpoint on gender roles, if there is any such thing. I have learned while going to school here, and also by interacting with people, that there is no specific way that women or men should behave or live towards one another, or amongst themselves. Like maman, many women’s unrecognized contributions to society are worth praising.

I worked with many students in Guinea, but three of those students had stories that changed my life, stories I could not ignore. Boubacar, small Moussa, and Foulematou each have aspects of their lives that explain the ethnic tensions in Guinea, and also the gender roles. Boubacar was a young man who loved education and accepted the challenges he encountered to achieve it. He knew the importance of obtaining education, but was worried that the system in Guinea wouldn’t allow him to succeed because of his identity. He started believing that his people were oppressed since his brothers finished college, yet were still unemployed. Boubacar gave me hope that there are people in Guinea who want change and want Guinea to progress and are willing to overcome that “oppression.”

From a squeaky voice small Moussa showed me that it is important to value and to possess a strong sense of
No one is to be left behind, especially not women.

identity. He valued his Mandinka identity before anything else. Despite that, I was impressed by his strength of character. If this boy were to be brought up with the logical understanding of his identity on a national level, he would contribute well to the benefit of the nation.

The tiny, calm, intelligent young girl that I misunderstood because she believed that her voice was secondary to those of the boys opened my eyes to realize the subordinated position in which women are placed in the Guinean society. Foulematou could, at first, hardly look me in the eyes or raise her hand to answer questions that she knew. She was brought up to behave this way, to hold herself back from expressing herself before others. I realized that she played a significant role during my summer internship because she did not only challenge the boys; she was among the best. One day she came back to class after missing the previous day. This was at the close of the program. I was rehearsing with the class the poems to present and what to do. Everyone seemed to struggle, but when Foulematou came, she picked it up right away and was able to articulate it better than the others who had been practicing. This marked me and made me think about my childhood memories in America. First I realized that the Guinean community, including my own family, enforced this tradition – the tradition of subordination of women. But living in America opened my eyes and I realized how much women contribute to the world we live in today. For Guinea to progress in prosperity and peace, women have to be part of it. They are Guinean, as well.

**Guinea Is Us – We Are Guinea**

There is no nation without a people. Many times I would stare at my students and envision the next generation that will uplift Guinea. Among these students perhaps the next president of Guinea will emerge, the prime minister or some generals of the army. Often I would think about the future of my students, who I have come to love as if they were part of my family. Today they are innocent, but how will they love as if they were part of my family. Today they are innocent, but how will they be when they grow older and are in the position of authority?

I worked with many students in Guinea, but three of those students had stories that changed my life, stories I could not ignore. Just like their elders and my elders, they might just focus on taking their “share” of the country when they can. That is the sort of mentality many Guineans share. It is understandable, however, considering that the second official Guinean president blatantly stated, “Le mouton se nourrit la ou on l’attache, tout en insinuant qu’il a aussi le droit de prendre l’argent de la caisse de l’état Guineen.” Without fear of or consideration for the critics against him, late President Lansana Conté told the people of Guinea that he would be using the resources and funds of Guinea whenever he felt like it because it was there where he could take it. This abuse of power and authoritarianism is very common within the government, religious and communal spheres. Everyone wants a “share” of the country as if Guinea were a cake. I remember during my middle school days being taught that the Europeans divided Africa like a cake when they discovered the continent. I remember how my teachers would picture the consequences of the scramble for Africa and how that has caused major damage to the whole continent. Yet these very people steal the resources and money of the general public once they are in a position of authority. Again, to them, as Guineans, it is acceptable to take and steal resources for themselves at the expense of others.

Promoting national unity first through an understanding of Guinea as a nation, not as ethnic groups, is essential to the formation of the people. Every Guinean should consider themselves part of a national Guinean identity. As I often told my students, we cannot ask from the nation when we are not willing to give back, or refuse to defend its interests. There cannot be the nation of Guinea without the people who live by its cultures and norms, and there cannot be the people of Guinea without Guinea. In a sense, nationalism can be seen in two different aspects. First, nationalism is viewing and defending Guinea, as distinguished from other nations. And second, nationalism is taking care of the inner-Guinea, which means to care and protect its people and public properties, amongst many other things.
I Am A Bridge

I have always considered my ability to speak more than five languages as a gift from God. I take pride in it. Yet I never realized how much impact the fact that my mother and my father are from different ethnic groups has made in my life and my identity. Perhaps it was because I was too young and naive to have realized my role in Guinean ethnic relations; or perhaps I needed to experience life in America to find my uniqueness within the Guinean community. It could be one or another, or both; I honestly am unsure. Whatever it is, I feel that I understand the notion of identity as a Guinean through a different lens than my mother and father. My mother, with a light-skinned complexion and thin body type, comes from a family that is completely Fulani. But my father, who is thick, tall and dark-skinned, comes from a Mandinka family. They have both blessed me with a vision they do not have. They see my binocularity as problematic because I see beyond their ethnic values and norms. I see a national identity, which is forged through the union of all the communities, ethnic and religious groups that represent Guinea. And I see this weaving as something beautiful that brings a particularity to a nation.

Being half Mandinka and half Fulani is something I am proud of. It makes me this bridge from which I have navigated all my life, as it helps me discover this rich and profound beauty that comes about through diversity. I speak both languages well and understand both groups’ cultural norms. I have lived with members of both communities for some time in my childhood. Therefore I have a strong understanding of both groups, which is why I would support keeping the cultures of both of these groups alive. Alain Foka, a Cameroonian journalist, stated in his archives, “No one has the right to delete a page in the history of a people for a people without history is a soulless world.” However, this does not imply that different communities should not coexist. And a mélange of cultures does not make those communities impure. In fact, setting aside ethnic beliefs in national contexts helps avoid conflicts. There is a much more collective yearning for a better life and a people who would defend their nation and fight for their rights together. Some people have refused to accept this notion of nationalism because they feel the government has abandoned them. They lack opportunities to earn a good living, the infrastructure is poorly maintained and the resources are not available to the people. Furthermore, many people seem not to understand their roles and rights as citizens. My internship, therefore, focused on teaching the young Guineans about the nature of nationalism.

My site supervisor and I selected students from different ethnic groups to promote and exemplify diversity and unity. Together we enumerated the different regions of Guinea, their populations and lifestyles. Students knew about the areas that their parents and family members came from. They were not as knowledgeable, however, of other regions. Thus my supervisor and I decided to teach the students about the four regions of Guinea and their components.

We started by giving an overall understanding of all the regions before we elaborated on each one of them. Each time we focused on a region, we asked four students to assist us. This was interesting because together we were able to mention and talk about certain aspects of the regions that were not taught in schools. For example, when we talked about the region of Zerekore, two of our students, Mohamed Minimono and Fanta Tolno, told us that the north end of this region had been a source of conflict between Guinea and the Ivory Coast from 1930 to 1935. According to Mohamed and Fanta, that part of the region had once been mined for gold and the people who lived there had used it to make sculptures and jewelry. This area is composed of many ethnic groups from different nationalities because it is located at the Guinean border. Thus when a conflict over gold erupted between the Ivorian ethnic group and Guinean ethnic group that were present there, the Ivoirians complained that their people were being killed in the Guinean territory. The French seized the area and ended the conflict. Mohamed and Fanta told us that they heard this story from their parents, who originated from Zerekore. Essentially, the fact that the students exchanged some knowledge about their homeland, which they knew individually, and which concerned them all, brought them closer to each other.

In our classroom, learning about the different regions and people of Guinea required a close look at the natural
resources present in those regions. Guinea Conakry is geographically well-positioned for trade and has more than enough natural resources to sustain its population. I asked the students to name all the Guinean natural resources that they could think of. Surprisingly they named them all, from diamonds, to bauxites, iron, gold, limestone and much more. They even named the most recent discoveries, such as oil. Therefore it is clear that people are aware of the natural resources Guinea has, but I wondered why there has never been a strong movement demanding a strict monitoring of these resources. The same way people complain about electricity, they should also complain about the management of those resources. The elite members of the government often control the exploitation of those resources. Thus it is arguable that the reason why so little comes out of the exploitation of natural resources is because members of the government take those resources for themselves. The Guinean population is aware of this corruption, but they fear to protest against it because the authorities themselves are corrupt.

Nevertheless, a thorough comprehension of Guinea was necessary to better grasp the notion of nationalism. To protect and respect the integrity of your nation is to love your homeland. The students and I talked about the importance of nationalism and how being a good citizen can be rewarding to oneself, as well as the next generation. My supervisor and I explained the importance of public properties and that those properties are there for the population, not the government. Through different scenarios, we explained and showed the students that every citizen has his or her obligations and rights. We role-played a scenario in which students put trash by their neighbors’ desks, as an example of bad citizenship. We mentioned the harm Guineans do to themselves by burning tires on the roads or destroying public transportation.

My summer internship served as an opportunity to show the students that it is important for one to know his or her homeland, and to defend it. It is important that the students know the different regions and ethnic groups, which does not mean Guinea is divided – rather, this diversity beautifies the nation and everyone is equal as Guineans. My ability to comprehend Guinea from two different lenses, from my experience living in Guinea and America, and as a person with ties to both the Mandinka and the Fulani ethnic groups, helped me better articulate the role that unity can play in the progress of the nation to the students with whom I worked. As we always said every morning before class, together we can progress. This was a slogan I developed with my talented students, whom I believe will be the next leaders of Guinea. My students and I believe that peace, prosperity and upward mobility for our nation can only be attained through acceptance, unity and sympathy, and that it is important that everyone partakes in this cause despite one’s gender, ethnic groups, beliefs or political stance.
From “Slum” to Neighborhood: Building Relationships and Regaining Trust

This group of women collaborates to create a vibrant and self-directed organization that serves to empower women in Nairobi, Kenya. Given their strong presence, joy of life and optimism, it is unimaginable that these women struggle on a daily basis with extremely harsh realities. They call themselves the Power Women Group. They come together to empower one another to win against their daily life struggles. Their biggest struggle is the fight to survive; these are women who are living with HIV, and their home is in one of the poorest places in the world, Kibera, a neighborhood of Nairobi, was named the second largest “slum” in Africa by the International Business Times.

My interest in working with community-based ventures such as the Power Women Group came from a deep-seated curiosity for unexpected and inspiring businesses that empower societies and find creative resilience in situations of inequality, discrimination, and poverty. I have spent the last five years accompanying small businesses and individuals who are struggling to maintain a balanced budget and fighting to stay afloat. As a young financial advisor, volunteering in a small town in Israel with a family of five that had severe debt and financial uncertainty, I became aware of how difficult it is to live in poverty and how hard it can be to escape it. Later on, advocating for tenant rights and affordable housing for low-income individuals living in metropolitan Boston showed me how widespread poverty is, and where it is more prevalent, such as in a community of new immigrants. During these experiences, I started noticing society’s approach to poverty and its role in relieving it. Trying my luck in the entrepreneurial world and interacting with a range of entrepreneurs showed me the role of entrepreneurship in motivating people and assisting them in reaching goals and raising their standard of living. I ventured to Kenya to learn how community-based organizations in one of the poorest areas of the world are making positive change in people’s lives, and to try to draw from my experience to provide solutions for the problems confronting these organizations.

In the summer of 2014, I was set to start working at Kenya Social Ventures (KSV), a fairly new organization with a goal to build on the strengths of local businesses and entrepreneurs, most of which are social and community-based organizations, in order to create and support more sustainable and influential organizations. KSV creates meaningful partnerships with a range of individuals and ventures and provides creative solutions to some of the struggles they might face. My role as the program manager was to communicate with the directors of the organizations and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their organizations. In turn, I had to create tailored programs for future volunteers and interns at KSV. Those volunteers would...
be working closely with the organizations to accommodate their greatest needs. Particularly, I had to work with three ventures that were all located in Kibera.

“Slum” Versus Neighborhood
Slum: Isləm
NOUN. a squalid and overcrowded urban street or district inhabited by very poor people
VERB. (slums, slumming, slummed). spend time at a lower social level than one’s own through curiosity or for charitable purposes. (Oxford Dictionary)

Before arriving in Kibera, I would probably not take issue with this definition and its implications; however, over the course of my internship I was able to get more insight into the way I understand the power imbalance I create by using derogatory language towards a human condition. Initially, judgments about “slums” clouded my ability to see what was in front of me. Coming into this experience with preconceived ideas and beliefs about slums and poverty, I made up my mind before even getting a closer look. This definition positions what “slums” are in the eyes of those who use that word. What might the impact of such definition be on the people who live in a place that was labeled “slum”? What does it mean for those like me, who are coming to work there?

Thankfully, as I started looking closer, and as my summer internship at KSV progressed, I saw with my eyes the people who were living within the Western depiction of abject poverty and tin huts. I remember passing a young girl in a red dress helping her mother with the house chores; I wondered if I was as gentle and caring with my mother growing up. I can still smell the sweet aroma when going to the local kiosks to buy my favorite food, chapati (a local pastry that, with its close resemblance to the Israeli pastry malawach, reminded me of my home). I remember seeing a group of eight-year-old boys with matching green uniforms embroidered with some logo, playing football by the side of the train tracks on a huge open field behind their primary school.

Kibera was not just comprised of “very poor people” of “lower social level,” waiting for Westerners to hand out charity, as the label “slum” led me and probably many others to expect. Kibera contained so much more, from the desolate to the entrepreneurial, representing all of the complex situations that Kiberans face every day. Kibera embodied a varied human fabric to which the definition of “slum” did not do justice. When I walked through Kibera for the first time, what struck me most were the smiles. They were everywhere, relieving the initial stress I felt about fitting in. I saw more smiling faces in Kibera than I had seen in a long time, and it made me feel less like I was “slumming,” as the Oxford definition had blatantly declared.

This contrast between my experience of Kibera and the definition illustrates my personal journey. Choosing to take a step back and observe something without passing judgment is a continuous challenge for me; nonetheless, it is an essential ingredient in my ability to critically consider the way we think about development work. More specifically, it demonstrates that development work needs to be restructured to be more people-oriented, emphasizing relationship- and trust-building, personal and deeper communication, and cultural understanding. Moreover, shallow observations about people and their situation might be detrimental for them, because it confines them in these definitions, establishes and cements their condition, and does not offer any way out.

Kibera Neighborhood, Nairobi
When I first landed in Nairobi, my friend (and former Sorensen Fellow) Abie and our driver Jacob picked me up and we set out to drive through Nairobi to familiarize me with the area. The drive to the center of town did not take long, despite Nairobi’s busy streets, overflowing with cars, bikes, matatus (buses), boda-bodas (taxi-motorcycles), and people. Everyone seemed to be moving in opposite directions, trying to compete to be the first to pass, sometimes defying basic laws of physics, but still maintaining some kind of flow. Although we were stuck in gridlock traffic, it seemed like everything was still advancing. Paradoxically, it was a peaceful commotion.
When I walked through Kibera for the first time, what struck me most were the smiles. They were everywhere, relieving the initial stress I felt about fitting in. I saw more smiling faces in Kibera than I had seen in a long time, and it made me feel less like I was “slumming,” as the Oxford definition had blatantly declared.

Nairobi is made up of vastly different neighborhoods woven together in a way reminiscent of colonial times. Westlands and Lavington, characterized by high-rises and expansive residential areas, reminded me of my hometown in Israel. Developers are creating modern projects for young families that offer increased standards of living and safety, while global franchises and local businesses are working intensely to join and fuel the development wave that Nairobi has seen in the last decade. On the other side of town, in front of some new luxurious real estate projects, Kibera’s plethora of unevenly joined tin rooftops are revealed, creating one of the more memorable landscapes I have seen. Increased development in Nairobi and other large cities, and continued droughts and floods in the rural areas, have resulted in major demographic shifts in Kenya, notably the rapid urbanization of cities and the creation of informal urban “slums.” Kibera is one such neighborhood, and it exemplifies the income inequality and related struggles that result from unplanned, accelerated urbanization. According to the official population census, Kibera is home to 170,070 people, but unofficial sources estimate the population at 500,000 to 1,000,000 – all living in an area approximately the size of Central Park in New York City. Most of the residents live on fewer than two dollars a day, which the World Bank defines as a benchmark for extreme poverty. On the other hand, as written in The Economist, “Kibera may be the most entrepreneurial place on the planet,” where residents work hard to provide valuable services and products to their community and fight to survive the harsh realities that characterize the area, such as disease outbreaks, food shortages, violence and crime.

I did not expect to see many foreigners in Kibera. To my surprise, people of all nationalities were walking around; some were tourists, equipped with their cameras and travel guides, others were researchers and non-profit workers who have been studying Kibera and implementing various projects. I wondered whether I also looked like one of them. I was told that locals have adapted to this influx of tourists in Kibera; non-profit initiatives and souvenir shops were opening everywhere. There exists a tour through Kibera called “the slum tour,” which brings tourists to visit social ventures, new initiatives and schools. The tour concentrates on the positive aspects of Kibera: the various groups that are working on economic empowerment, public health and sexually transmitted disease awareness, sanitation and education. Despite the goal of the tour, so I have heard, some tourists come to Kibera to appreciate their own privilege by driving around through the streets of the “slum” looking from within their air-conditioned SUVs at what is happening outside, occasionally rolling down the window for a passing child or other visual or auditory stimulations. In Nairobi, I have learned, such contrasts are unavoidable.
Her quiet reserve and smile were distinct and did make her stand out; I could identify which woman she was before I was introduced to her. Leadership and power, I learned, are assumed quietly in this group of women.

Kenya Social Ventures

After getting settled in my one bedroom apartment, my own little tropical paradise, on my second day in Kenya I met with the KSV team. I sat with Blake Simpson, Tony Ogeto and Nash Murugu for a detailed briefing about our operations in Kibera and the particulars of my project. Blake is a young entrepreneur from the state of Washington, who together with Tony, a Kibera-born Kenyan, founded KSV. Nash, also a Kenyan, was overseeing a partner project to KSV called Gaia’s Garden that collaborates with rural farmers to establish markets for them in Nairobi. Blake and Tony had developed connections with three ventures in Kibera with which I was set to work: Power Women Group, Victorious Bones Craft, and SEED Academy.

I first started working with the Power Women Group (PWG), which was created in 2007 to raise awareness for HIV/AIDS and provide a space for women affected by the disease to support each other in overcoming the difficulties in their lives. In the last year KSV had an intern at PWG who conducted interviews and wrote biographies and stories of the women in the group. Out of all that I had heard about the group, the story of one woman stood out in particular. It was the story of the head of the group, Everlyne.

Everlyne

Everlyne grew up in the Western Circuit of Kenya. As the firstborn of seven brothers and sisters, she is now in her late 30s and has four children. Similar to the other women in the group, she takes care of two additional children. She confirmed her HIV status in 2004 and since then she has been working towards empowering women like herself, mainly through work at the Power Women Group, but also through being a counselor serving as a facilitator of social change to fight poverty and violence in her community.

Given all I had heard about her before meeting her, I was expecting a woman with a powerful presence befitting that of the title organizer and leader of the Power Women Group. Yet when I arrived, Everlyne, in a very typical manner, was sitting peacefully in the corner of the room next to the other women. Her quiet reserve and smile were distinct and did make her stand out; I could identify which woman she was before I was introduced to her. Leadership and power, I learned, are assumed quietly in this group of women.

Eager to start implementing the project, we sat with Everlyne to discuss our suggestions. Everlyne, however, had a different plan for us. The group, Everlyne explained, had negative experiences with foreigners in the past. The problems stemmed from false pretenses of help, whereby foreigners took the group’s trademark and story and made a profit on their behalf without including the women, effectively stealing from them. Everlyne told Blake that she did want to work with us, but the process would have to be gradual. She felt that our respective organizations had to build trust before moving forward with projects like these.

It was clear that building trust was of utmost importance for the success of the collaboration, so we slowed down after this and started focusing on building relationships with the women rather than pushing progress for which they were not yet ready or willing. Instead of trying to analyze the group, I started communicating more with Everlyne, trying to grasp every
snippet of information she was willing to share with me. She was willing to share stories about the difficulties of life in Kibera. She once told me how she felt about living with HIV, how she was constantly troubled by questions such as how to tell her children about her status and how to provide for her family when she might not survive the disease. Between sentences she looked at me in a motherly manner, vulnerable and authoritative at the same time. She began accepting me into her life, while trying to maintain her strength so as not to be taken advantage of. I can only imagine how hard it must have been.

Complexities of Health Education
Kenya, like many other places, has a lot of stigmas about HIV/AIDS. Many people believe that the disease can be transmitted through any type of contact. This creates a huge challenge for people, but especially for women living with HIV, in finding jobs, interacting with others in the community, and most importantly, providing adequate living environments for their families. To break such stigmas, Everlyne and the rest of the women want to inform the public and raise awareness regarding the disease. “Having HIV doesn’t mean it is a death sentence,” she said. “In 2004 and 2005, people believed that if you are [HIV] positive it is the end of your life. But now you [as an HIV carrier] can still work on your own and take care of your children.”

PWG, therefore, is a transformative platform for women living with HIV, as well as for community leaders such as Everlyne. The women feel empowered by being part of a group of people with similar issues and hardships, and at the same time they earn an additional source of income and find new avenues to develop valuable skills. In addition to operating the store and selling their handmade crafts to tourists coming through Kibera, the group runs a salon to train women in cutting and weaving hair, and a daycare facility so that the women can have their children looked after while they are at work.

Everlyne communicates the main goal of the group as the commitment to change society’s perception towards women with HIV. The group wants to empower women to be brave about their condition and not shy about their HIV status, and it concentrates on rural empowerment and raising awareness in the women’s original villages. One way to reach this goal is by having each woman return to live in her original village and build a house there. Owning a house will allow her to regain her local status, therefore enabling her to advocate for her cause and be an agent for change.

Increasing profit and finding more revenue streams are important factors in reaching the group’s goal because this, in turn, increases their ability to afford to build these houses in rural areas. However, although increased profits are a means to reach the ultimate goal, we couldn’t immediately focus on efficiency and profit maximization. We had to begin by focusing on the women themselves, and the issues most important to them. Building mutual trust and maintaining reciprocal listening, rather than analyzing and examining them as a case study, were the first steps to a sustainable cooperation that focuses on the goals of the group.

Victorious Bones Craft
The next group I worked with was Victorious Bones Craft, a group of men who create beautiful artifacts and jewelry from recycled animal bones. In the very first meeting we had with the group leaders we were told that they were in need of dust masks to prevent respiratory problems from constant inhalation of bone dust, a by-product of bone processing. They showed us their masks and we started finding a local vendor who sells masks and searching to see if we could import even cheaper masks. Finally, we found a mask from a local shop that was both cheaper and of better quality than the masks the group was buying. We gave Jack, the Secretary of Victorious, a sample mask and tried to monitor its use over the rest of the week. Out of the five times we visited, they had not used the mask even once, and always put it on after our enquiries. This was very confusing to me. Was something wrong with the mask?

Determined to understand, I kept probing for answers to why they would not use the mask. If it was not masks that they...
needed, then what was it? What if the masks were just a story that we were told to get us to collect money for this cause? I did not know what to think. It became clear that the need was not the masks but rather the money to buy the masks, which, when given to the group, they would have probably spent on more pressing needs. Through previous experiences, the bone group had learned how to demonstrate a need and use it to solicit charity from foreigners. In their eyes, we were an opportunity to gather funds.

Adopting the lessons from PWG, we decided to take a different approach — to first build trust. Instead of suggesting a solution to the problems that we were presented with, we wanted to learn about the group’s goals for the future. The underlying problems did not take long to come to the surface. During a talk I had with one of the group leaders, he mentioned that the group would soon be evicted from their workshop because of the railway renovation project scheduled to take place in a couple of months. The project would affect not only their workshop but would involve evicting thousands of households and businesses that live and operate beside the train tracks that pass through the center of Kibera.

The men did not want to admit this problem to strangers; they previously had not trusted us with the knowledge of their informal status in the “slum” — most of the area below the tracks is informally settled and, therefore, they are all considered illegal squatters. Since the group depends on their workshop for their livelihood and the continuation of their craft and employment, determining the group’s next steps in light of the railway project was crucial. To address this concern, KSV and the group started working on raising revenue to be invested back into rent for a new location for their workshop. I found it hard to put myself in the place of the artisans at Victorious Bones Craft; the uncertainty of where to live and work constantly troubles them, for now without any resolution.

Lessons at SEED Academy
Student Empowerment through Education and Development (SEED) Academy is a small primary school located in the middle of Kibera. I would often go see the children when they were on a break from class. All 51 pupils would greet me. As always, they would cheer and chant the familiar “howayou” (how are you?), which almost every child says to a mzungu (white person) passing by on the street. They would swarm to surround me. Myriad hands would try to shake my hand. Those who succeeded did not let go — they tightened their grip and tried to swing using my hand. The children would recite from start to finish all the songs they knew, both in English and in Swahili. Playing with the kids was always an uplifting experience that offset the difficult realities of life in Kibera.

The SEED Academy offers affordable education to vulnerable children who cannot attend an official primary school due to lack of money. Primary schools in Kenya are “fully” subsidized by the government, but families incur additional charges for books, supplies, uniforms and food. I worked closely with Patrick, the founder and director of SEED, on the school’s feeding program, which provides a warm meal for the children. Patrick was concerned that he would have to terminate the program due to lack of funding. Patrick has gone through great difficulties to maintain the feeding program and he was disheartened when there was no donor to be found for the next term. Patrick established the school in his home, and in the free time he had between managing the school and taking care of his family he was attempting to finish a film and communications degree to be able to take on extra work as a wedding photographer. Patrick exhibited the humility and compassion that can only be found in people of the highest caliber.

SEED is located in a two-story shack that is very dark. Looking out of the window, I could see Kibera’s tin rooftops stretching out to the horizon, touching the new developments that are decorating the skyline. I wondered if the children were aware of the obstacles that Patrick was going through. Patrick and I had worked on the financial aspect of the school — mainly fundraising and the annual budget. Thinking about the kids made me realize that we might have been concentrating on the wrong things. Not only were money and funding on our minds; we dared to dream about opening a virtual library with computers, and creating a fund that would pay for the children to go to secondary school. Although all of these things are important, what we forgot about was what we had in our hands all along.
Rather than taking the asset-based approach to development and building on what we had to make progress, we were too concentrated on what we did not have: money and funding. With that said, I strongly believed that Patrick was able to give the children something of greater value. This community-based organization, the SEED Academy, which had evolved from the strengths and ambitions of the communities in Kibera, was in charge of bringing up the new generation of leaders. Patrick had the minds of 51 children to shape and to improve, and most of all, to teach how to learn – to instill in them the confidence to take the information presented to them, and know how to incorporate it and utilize it. As I saw Patrick investing all he had into the school, I could imagine a future where these children he had taken in continue in his path to overcome obstacles and make a true impact for themselves and their communities. In Patrick they had an inspiring role model.

Working with Patrick made me realize that, all along, we at KSV were concentrating on the “what” and the “how,” but we had forgotten about the “why.” We knew what we were doing; we were doing development work. How we did this was through education, gender and economic empowerment, and social entrepreneurship. But we did not know why we were doing all that. The “why” lies with the end result, which I realized is not just human beings for whom the basic needs have been met, but human beings who can tap into their own strengths to find the resilience to fulfill their own basic needs independently. That was our “why.”

Conclusion

Before I arrived in Kenya, I thought I knew the intricate details of the struggle of low-income businesses. In Kenya I found that understanding social and cultural aspects of people’s lives and their specific situations can offer a greater understanding of their struggles, and that there is no panacea for poverty. My preconceived notions of social entrepreneurship and development work in the business and non-profit world seemed to distance me from the people I was trying to work with in Kibera. Cultural understanding proved to be the key to effective cooperation between my team and the organizations we worked with. Therefore, understanding how people view their own situations, what their goals are, and how others view them, should be the basis from which development work starts. Through this approach, we ensure a better understanding of the individuals and may potentially have a greater impact on their situations.

These realizations came after a process of learning, interacting with people, making mistakes, and reflecting on my progress. Our work first started with the notion of analyzing someone’s strengths and weaknesses and understanding their needs so we could help them. We first thought that it was all about our expertise, about our analysis and our help. But the way we create effective development and progress is through collaboration, rather than a one-way stream of analysis or help. Creating the space for people to understand and decipher their needs, and working together in the direction of addressing them, was the more effective approach.

All the organizations we worked with in Kibera needed more money – there was no question about that. However, the Power Women Group was more interested in the well-being of the children under their wing and in advocating for their cause than in buying more materials, pumping up production, and selling and earning more. Victorious Bones Craft severely needed better cooperation and communication amongst themselves because, in the near future, the railway project would force them to close their workshop and come together to recreate the business elsewhere. The challenge is that their craft is their only source of income. They needed teamwork and awareness campaigns rather than dust masks, improved markets and diversified products. The SEED Academy needed to focus on building a curriculum, and on establishing sustainable processes to obtain funds and maintain relationships with funders, rather than looking for the means to buy stationery, set up a new computer library, or add another floor to the compound. Although the feeding program is still in dire need of funding, Patrick and the KSV team are creating fundraising campaigns to secure long-lasting support for the program.
Eliciting these answers from the individual organizations was not easy. I remember being surprised when I noticed that one of the first things people wanted from collaboration with a foreigner is financial support. The behavior of foreigners in the past and the belief that aid is scarce and fleeting causes mistrust, even if foreigners proclaim that they intend to stay and do long-lasting work. In the first month of our project the majority of the requests that we got from people were for financial support. As we delved deeper and strengthened relationships with them, the real needs started to emerge.

The key was in forming a strong relationship and drawing from people's knowledge and expertise to establish a sincere two-way conversation that would help them identify what their greatest needs are. While working on the ground and in close proximity, I realized that we cannot effect change without understanding people's issues on a personal level. Combining cultural understanding of the communities, relationship building, and effective communication will shift aid and poverty alleviation work from just good intentions to impactful change that endures over time.

After calling Kibera a “slum” throughout my stay there and to the faces of locals, I finally acknowledged my true misconception. I tried to redefine the word from my experience and to discard the old definition of being merely an urban place stricken by poverty and devoid of livable conditions, or a place within a city that is informal and illegal, dirty and rundown. These definitions can only come from those who try to distance themselves from it, out of distaste, fear or disinterest. Kibera might stay a “slum” in the eyes of those who cannot see past that label. As a result, the people of Kibera find the power to overcome the daily threats to their dignity. My experience has shown me that referring to Kibera as a “slum” or trying to encompass it in any one word is simply impossible. It is much more than that. I can attest to the multitude of faces, voices, stories, emotions and ambitions that come from Kibera, this community, which is labeled a “slum” by foreigners and by the government, and called “village,” “neighborhood” or “home” by those people who live there.

I came to Kenya thinking I had the expertise and experience to effect change. I kept concentrating on being efficient, painstakingly keeping track of notes, time and our goals as a team. I did everything that is considered “professional” by Western standards. That was my mistaken premise, and I now realize that becoming a trusted partner comes before that, and development organizations cannot succeed without this mutual collaboration. As we move from work that is concerned with differences, objectifying others, imposing fixes, exclusion, and privilege, to person-to-person approaches that build on the agency of people in maintaining their dignity, through listening, empowerment and building trust, we might start to transcend some of the differences and achieve worthwhile goals and effect positive long-lasting change.

Notes

6. Areas of a city that are developed in the absence of government planning are called “informal” and are often considered illegal. Those who live in those areas are usually considered “squatters.”
Introduction
Po-lin. “Rest here.” The legend says that during the 11th century, when Jews escaped the violence in Western Europe looking for a safe home, they reached the forests of Poland and heard the birds whisper “Po-lin” – “rest here” in English. Poland is pronounced Polin in Hebrew. And as the birds guided, Jews settled in Poland with favorable conditions under the Polish monarchy and stayed there for more than 1,000 years. Poland came to have the largest Jewish community in Europe. Poland changed Judaism forever with the rise of Jewish and Zionist ideological movements, became a center of religious learning, and included vital figures who contributed to every aspect of Jewish life. Bearing that in mind, I decided to jump into the still-molten lava of Polish Jewish life.

Piercings, Tattoos, and a Kipa
I did not know what to expect on the flight from Tel Aviv to Warsaw. The flight was half full and the population was generally older. There were a few soldiers behind me on vacation who made jokes about their embarrassment about going to Poland for vacation instead of Thailand, a popular destination for young Israelis. In front of me sat a very interesting looking man in his late 20s. He had a shaved head (unveiled when he removed his hooded sweater), a beard, piercings, and many tattoos covering his whole body. To my surprise, under the hood was hiding a kipa and on the back of his neck was written in very large Hebrew letters Shma Israel. He turned to me and asked me in Polish and then English if I was comfortable with where he had put his sweater. What I heard was, Welcome to Your Summer in Poland. He was so full of paradoxes, so daring and at the same time quite intimidating. He did not fit any particular stereotype. People could easily observe in him so many different images, mirroring the multifaceted identity of every Jew living in a non-Jewish country.

The New Old Town
The first thing I did was learn the way to the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the site of my summer internship. The museum looks stunning from the outside. The rectangular, turquoise, glass building won many awards for its inspiring architecture. I went on to see the old town, the university area, palaces and parks. Warsaw has a genuinely unique feeling to it. The city is so beautiful and convenient. I can see how people can fall in love with it. I walked by myself the whole day. I was worried beforehand that I would feel lonely, but I actually felt happy that I was by myself during the first day. I got to learn the city, think, and get comfortable without relying on anyone but myself. It was a refreshing feeling of independence. I walked for hours in the scorching

stare deep into his blue eyes, captivated by each word coming out of his mouth. We are sitting in our hotel room in Bielsko-Biała as the sunset hides behind the window. This is the right time. This is the time that I am ready to hear my father’s story about the survival of his parents, in the city from which both his parents escaped. It is not as if the story was hidden from me. On the contrary, I was encouraged by my family to seek knowledge of our history. But for years, I took the manuscript with my father’s story and set it aside until I was ready. The journey to Poland in the summer of 2014 was my way to open myself to bear witness to my family’s narrative.
sun. In the old town, there was a sort of improvised water fountain designed to ease the heat. The fountain sprayed everyone in the street with rejuvenating water. I saw kids running through it and older people joining them by revisiting their youthful joy; in such a picturesque old town it was simply a marvelous scene.

The old town was completely destroyed during the Second World War, and it has been completely reconstructed since then. I think that it is a remarkable achievement to be able to reconstruct destroyed history in such a delightful manner. It offers an interesting comparison to the overall reconstruction of wounded communities and history throughout time and human effort. In conversations I had with locals, many of them criticized the reconstruction of the old town because of its lack of authenticity, but does preserving an old town have to be authentic? Is it not enough to rebuild it with respect for what was there before? The Jewish community was also “reconstructed,” but does it mean it has to be the same? This question accompanied me throughout my entire journey in Poland.

In contemporary Warsaw Jewish influence definitely still exists, intermingled with characteristics of Polish culture. Prior to my arrival I received three official Warsaw brochures: one about the city in general, another about the old and the new towns, and the third about Jewish Warsaw. Why would a city with a Jewish population of less than one percent publish an official brochure about Jewish Warsaw?

What I learned is that Jewish life is so strongly intertwined with the Polish state that it cannot ever be erased from it. Even that first day, as I was touring the city, I noticed that one of the main roads is Aleje Jerozolimskie, or Jerusalem Avenue. I was standing on that avenue next to a huge artificial palm tree standing bold and strong in the middle of the avenue, installed there to resemble the trees in Israel, and serving as a token to the memory of the Jewish settlers who historically settled in Warsaw and specifically around the same avenue. Much of the tourism in Poland focuses on the Jewish history in the country, and it is extremely challenging for a country to preserve and acknowledge dark memories without being perceived in a negative light.

The relation of post-war Poland towards Jews changed over time. After the Second World War Poland was under the Soviet sphere of influence, and thus a communist regime emerged in Poland. In the beginning, Jews were often attacked by their neighbors, but were able to receive important roles in the communist construction of the country. After Israel’s Six-Day War in 1967, the attitude of the government towards the Jews shifted radically, as the Soviet Union changed their allegiance from supporting Israel to supporting the surrounding Arab states. Jews were seen as Zionists and therefore not loyal to Poland, and the anti-Zionist campaign of the Polish government led to the persecution of Jews, and ultimately caused a mass emigration of Jews out of Poland. Many of the Jews who did stay after the Second World War, however, were communist Jews who saw themselves primarily as Poles. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Poland’s communist regime fell, and the country changed massively under democratic rule. The new democratic regime wanted to disassociate itself from the communist commemoration of the Second World War, and so changed the historical narrative. Jews were also able to follow their...
religion more freely, and thus the political circumstances allowed for the Jewish community to reemerge.

Education? Yes, I Speak Hebrew

I came to the museum to intern for the education department and was assigned to work under the Israel coordinator. I introduced myself, and once she realized that I am fluent in Hebrew, she informed me that I would not be doing any of the things I thought I would. She provided me a list of applications for the Polish Intercultural Youth Encounters (PIYE) exchange program, and directed me to rank them by certain criteria and to be ready to recommend a select few in a meeting the following week.

The project is an exchange program designed to improve Polish-Israeli dialogue among university students. It was fascinating to read Polish students’ approaches towards problems and developments in Jewish life in Poland and in Israeli-Polish dialogue. Some focused on creating programs of cooperation while others saw it as an opportunity to explore a new exotic destination. Both options are important to reducing the historical burden between the societies. Hands-on programs facilitate discussion and thus bridge the cultures. The lighter view of an exotic destination depoliticizes the historical burden and has a naive and positive essence which can also be beneficial. It will also benefit the Polish image as Israelis just like me will get to live in Poland – an experience much different than the common memorial trips to the death camps Israelis often take. Just as my view of Poland shifted to more complex nuances than simply bad or good, the same might occur for the Israeli students who stay in Poland, thus allowing for a fair, well-rounded personal perspective to take shape.

My Summer Companion – The World Cup

The next week consisted of excitement for work and intense World Cup watching with the Polish residents of the hostel where I was lodging. The project in the museum gave me a strong feeling of satisfaction. On my way to the hostel, I would stop in a grocery store to buy bread, cheese and one of the many Polish beer brands. Then, I would sit and enjoy a lovely evening with my new best friend – the World Cup. There, along with strangers, we would comment about the games in a mix of extremely broken English and hand gestures. The end of the conversation always led to the lack of ability of both the Israeli national team and the Polish national team, which usually came with a beyond-frustrated sigh that meant “ah it’s so fun to bond over our shared disappointments.” The people in the room changed, but the recurring theme of working males in their 30s and 40s set the tone for my dates with the World Cup.

I learned a lot from these people about the perspectives of Catholic Poles of different social classes towards current Polish affairs and ideas about Jews. It was very difficult to communicate with them due to the language barrier. Whenever I was asked where I was from, I first examined how shady they looked. It is that confusing paranoia of anti-Semitism that has followed me since childhood, probably a connection to the way my parents were brought up, and the suffering of their parents. Then, depending on my five-second judgment, I would either say “Boston” or “Israel.” When I said Israel, the response was usually either that they had been on a religious trip there and that the country is beautiful, or “it’s horrible what they [the Nazis] did to you.” The second response I found particularly interesting. In this response they tried to put all the blame on a mutual enemy. They tried to rid themselves of guilt and in that way adopt a pacifying mutual victim narrative. I am not one to judge the personal narrative of the people I talked with, nor do I think Poland has one common national narrative about that period. Honestly, before going to Poland I expected much worse responses to the fact that I am Jewish, and thus the friendly responses were a pleasant surprise that shows a more open-minded era in Poland.

Welcome to Makabi

Sitting in the hostel waiting for another World Cup game, I unexpectedly got a phone call, already strange because no one but my boss had my number. The person introduced himself as Jan, an acquaintance of my father and a son of a good friend of my father. I had no idea who he was but was thrilled by the prospect of meeting new people. He told me that he was meeting a few friends in Plac Zbawiciela, the square with the large colorful rainbow structure, and asked whether I wanted to join. I did not want to sound over-the-top enthusiastic, so I calmly said that I would be happy to, but on the inside it was a celebration.

He introduced me to two of his friends and then asked me if I play football (known in the U.S. as soccer). I replied that of course I do. And he said, “Great, Welcome to Makabi.” And so my adventure with Makabi began on that crazy, surreal night. I followed him around and he explained to me things about Warsaw and about Jews there. We went on to his friends’ apartment to meet them, and I was introduced to an exciting, young, hip social group. More surprising was that all of them were Jewish. I never had imagined that there would be such an effervescent group of young Jews in Poland. Next thing I knew, I became a part of that amazing social group – a part of Makabi.

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The story of Makabi Warszawa begins many, many years ago, in a very different period in history. Makabi Warszawa was a Jewish athletic organization that had a significant role in Jewish life at its time. The Warszawian organization was formed in 1915, following similar initiatives of Jewish groups a few years earlier in other cities such as Krakow and Lvov. Makabi Warszawa at its prime had almost a thousand athletes participating in 18 different sports. The club participated in various national competitions. In football, for instance, Makabi played, at its best, in the second division of the Polish national league, a pretty impressive achievement for a relatively new team playing in a country where football was and still is an extremely popular sport.

In 1936 Makabi Poland consisted of 40,000 Jewish athletes. Forty thousand. All this was crushed to the ground with the invasion of the Nazis. Jewish sports, as well as Jewish life as it had been known until then, ended. These were the consequences of political and "racial" inflammation that happened in my grandfather’s generation. If a glimpse of Jewish life did survive the war and communism in Poland, Jewish sports completely ceased to exist. Officially Makabi Warszawa stopped its action in 1939.

The young social group wanted to change that. They wanted to reopen Makabi. It was not that all of them are huge nostalgic sports fans, but each and every one of them wanted to find a place for Judaism in their life. A few weeks after my first interaction with them, I went to another Shabbat dinner. Jan told me, “Do you see all the people in this party? They are all Jewish now but many of them were not born Jewish.” The suppression of the communist government and the Holocaust made many people fear exposing their Judaism, and thus prefer to create a different identity. Many of them have learned at a later stage of life that they have Jewish roots. That is a radical shift in their identity, and suddenly they are a part of a collective group they knew nothing about in a society filled with stereotypes about that group. The discovery of their Judaism, along with the need find their place within Jewish life, gave rise to such social initiatives. A lot of these young activists did not find their place in the official Jewish community, but wanted to support and create their own outlet for the Jewish community. In turn, they created Makabi, and while for them it fills the need for belonging, it also helps empower the community, creating another dimension for the Jewish community.

The flagship of the initiative was to be the highly publicized derby between Makabi Warszawa and ZKS Krakow, two teams halted by cruelty, playing in the same historical venue where the teams played 70 years ago. The match would take place right at the end of the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow. That was our first attainable goal. That was the main topic of conversation. And that was our biggest source of pride. The pride in making a bit of historical justice, and the pride in giving back to the community.

We molded into a team. We had two volunteer non-Jewish coaches who were beyond fantastic. The practice started with football and ended in a social gathering of the team. Ages differed but everyone felt accepted. That was the key for the beauty of Makabi. Every Friday someone would host a Shabbat dinner, and Makabi truly became a center for young Jewish life, beyond the boundaries of sports. Time went by, and the big event was rapidly approaching.

Two days before the match, we all arrived in Krakow for the festival and for preparation. The ZKS Krakow captain let six of us stay at his home while he was absent until the match day. Amazing hospitality, especially considering the fact that he did not know us at all, but that is the friendly spirit of rebuilding Jewish sports together.

The day after our arrival, following a dinner organized by the Polish Jewish youth organization ZOOM, we all went to do Havdalah in the hostel where some of the other members were staying. I am not a religious person, and I am not used to doing this tradition. Havdalah is a ceremony at the end of the Shabbat to separate the Shabbat from the mundane week. In the hostel we stood there, hugged in a circle, Jews and non-Jewish affiliates, all a part of something close to our hearts:
Jewish life. Players and supporters of Makabi sang happy Jewish tunes together, with some real words and some added-on soft mumbling. Random hostel guests looked and smiled in embarrassment, but we did not care because we were in the middle of something so powerful and collective. Makabi extends way beyond its football, it is a force of pure celebratory unity, and so everybody there was a part of Makabi.

Later, we went to the festival where we saw thousands of people of all backgrounds enjoying Jewish tunes in various languages. People were sitting near the windows of their homes in the Jewish quarter to get a glimpse of a performer singing in Hebrew. What a spectacle! The Chief Rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Schudrich, did a Havdalah in front of the thousands of people in the crowd. What immense release of pure optimistic energy to be able to share this lovely ceremony with the world.

The next morning was the big day! We could not wait to begin. We went to Kazimierz, the picturesque old town district where the field was located. Above us stood a castle and beautiful old buildings that serve as venues for historic continuation. The sun was shining, with boiling weather of 30 degrees Celsius. The local Krakovian sports news reported about a hundred viewers. We were wearing black shirts with the Makabi Warszawa symbol covering our hearts, injecting them permanently with honor. I was wearing a Makabi Warszawa shirt with the name “Mehl” on the back, playing a game in front of a live Jewish community in Krakow, the place where my grandfather had one of his proudest Jewish ceremonies, his bar mitzvah, and where he suffered for years in the ghetto, losing everything and everyone, but not his hope. Despite the seemingly small event in comparison to the huge World Cup that was being played in Brazil, the drive of each team would not fall short of any World Cup match.

The game didn’t start badly for us, but our shots were off, and the first half ended at 0-0. The fans were screaming and chanting songs praising each their own team, and at the same time teasing the other team with friendly banter. The Krakow team came prepared for the second half and scored two quick goals. One of our leading players helped us recover with two goals of his own. The second half ended 3-2 with our opponents in the lead. I thought the game was over, because I had yet to master the Polish language. I put my hands on my head as a sign of sheer disappointment – and then someone told me not to worry; we have a whole third left! A quick comedic moment of lingual misunderstanding. Little did I know that we were playing three thirds. Wow I was happy. We came back to the match in a storm, and quickly equalized. We gained composure and scored two more goals, leading to our 5-3 victory. We were on top of the world. We knew that we had made history happen, and no one could ever take that away from us.

We shook hands with the Krakow team, took a picture with them, gave flowers to their captain, thanked them, and went with
Until this trip, I avoided the Holocaust subject altogether because it was painful. I always felt as if the topic of the Holocaust is a dark cloud that I would not be able to treat with the right amount of respect no matter how much I tried, yet I always felt a bit guilty for pushing it aside.

This is only the beginning of something that has the potential to do a lot of good. We have long-term goals that will make Makabi accessible to people of all ages in a variety of sports. All of this in hopes of helping people to enjoy being a part of a flourishing community, and to feel they can easily connect to the community, even if only through sports. The focus is on building. One block after another. The idea is not to dwell on the past; it is to build on it in order to create something new and great to help the community. A Jewish community is not only a synagogue and religious studies. It is also sports, cultural events, music, arts, social gatherings, and communal accountability. These are only a small part of a whole world that was destroyed and needs to be created in a fresh and new way, changing the architecture but keeping the context. Makabi is here to create hope and unity, and thus “revival” is the wrong word. It never died, it just slept.

And now, Makabi has woken up.

The Depths of a Dark History

After the big game, I was looking for new adventures and learnings. Makabi's pace slowed down, and my supervisor in the museum, Nili, went to Israel for a month. I was still hungry for knowledge and so I went to the Virtual Shtetl department to meet Albert Stankowski, another acquaintance of my father. I introduced myself and told him that I would love to volunteer in his department.

In my new work, I jumped right into the depths of history. My work involved translating community cards with information about the history and preservation of Jewish heritage in various Polish towns. I also worked on a project involving the gathering and organizing of interview tapes and transcripts – identifying where they were located, finding out whether the museum had permission to use them, and locating lost documents. The museum did not have all the interviews, and did not have permissions to use many of these interviews. Many of the survivors have already passed away, and collecting the permissions for usage only became tougher. I contacted a few people and we found many of the lost interviews. All the data needed to be found and sorted, and so I had to go to the depths of these interviews to find out current information or leads to family members who are still alive. Once organized, the data was sent to the Polish Institute in Israel, in order to continue finding relatives to gain permission and thus make these interviews usable as historical accounts for the museum and complementary institutions. Our work was important because personal accounts give a glimpse into parts of history from the perspectives of the people who lived through it.

Collective memory is often created with an ideological or cultural bias. A thousand personal interviews shed light on historical incidents from many different personal points of view. The personal memories of the survivors represent the stories of these exact survivors. It is a unique and genuine way to pass history on to the next generations, in hopes of never allowing mass systematic inhumanity to ever happen again. Personal stories go beyond state borders, but they mostly touch individuals with a personal connection – and that is the challenging part. There is rich information in these stories about the Jewish communities before the war, family connections, courage, and of course firsthand stories of the Nazi killing machine; information vital to battling modern extremism.

Reflecting on all the stories of survival I read, I came to realize that I did not remember any one of them in particular. It all became a huge blur of stories that became secondary to my family's story, which I remember in great detail. I was a witness to these personal accounts by reading them, but witnessing is burdensome. I wanted to remember the details of these stories, but before every story I read I had to take a deep breath and put all my emotional energy into it. It drained my emotional energy, but I still could not remember the particular stories.

In order to truly connect and try to comprehend what really happened, I needed a family story. It is too much to
internalize the horrendous journeys of thousands. Until this trip, I avoided the Holocaust subject altogether because it was painful. I always felt as if the topic of the Holocaust is a dark cloud that I would not be able to treat with the right amount of respect no matter how much I tried, yet I always felt a bit guilty for pushing it aside. Now I was ready to challenge my maturity. I had taken the many pages written by my father on the flight with me, and since my arrival in Poland I had read a part every few days. The discoveries were endless, and I had to pause very often due to the overwhelming emotions. I wanted to prepare myself for my parents’ visit a few weeks later, when we would go and follow the footsteps of my grandparents in Poland and Slovakia, and learn closely about their stories of survival.

My personal connection with my father’s story was very painful, but as the museum asked me to record his story, I took up the challenge and made a recorded interview with him. Until now, I had only read the story. There I was, sitting with my father and listening to the words he had to say. Reading his story was powerful; listening to the tone of his voice and looking at the saddened yet sparkling blue eyes, watching closely the facial expression of someone familiar, someone I love and admire, was a poignant emotional experience incomparable to anything I had ever experienced. Listening to my father speak in such detail of the horrible times of his parents’ lives, as if he was reading the story he wrote. His parents’ survival and the Holocaust memory are so engrained in his brain that he could just read the story from his mind in an articulate and consistent manner. When you read a story, you can pause. Hearing him speak we formed a trusting relationship where you cannot stop. I was with him as he was with me in this powerful transfer of dark yet hopeful history. Reading and listening to his story, I joined his journey. I needed the ground of thousands of historical stories of survival to allow me to have the emotional capacity to explore my own family’s story of survival.

But what about entire families that were completely erased from the face of earth? Where will their voices be heard? A family relation to them is often non-existent, and thus their existence is deemed to be forgotten. Or the people with no family relation to Holocaust survival? The greatest challenge is opening up to the stories of the forgotten and the distant, but as an individual journey it is very difficult. Institutional commemoration provides a space for stories of people with no familial continuation, and provides space and access to a collection of stories. Institutions have the power to connect all the stories together, teach people who fortunately have no family connection to the Holocaust, and keep the stories of everyone alive.

The other project with Albert was translating the stories of towns in southern Poland that once had a significant Jewish population. I learned when Jews arrived in these towns, and obtained a somewhat better-rounded image of the good times and the bad times for Jews. I say somewhat because the focus was on the destruction of the community in the Holocaust as well as current historical Jewish sites (such as synagogues and cemeteries) that remained, with an analysis of their condition. Most of these Jewish communities had hundreds of years of history. Many of the towns had a very significant percentage of Jews in their population and the conditions for Jews generally went in waves of better and worse throughout the history. Jews often lived well and developed religiously and culturally with strong religious leaders, many newspapers and intellectuals, and formed strong central organization such as, for example, the Council of Four Lands from the 16th to the 18th century.

A bit before starting that project I read my family story and discovered that most of my family came from southern Poland. I was eager to know more about the places they came from. In order to finish my preparation for the trip with my parents, on my last day of work before the trip I translated the community card of Jaroslaw, the city where my family from both my father’s and my mother’s sides once lived. I was starting to count down the days until we would begin that part of my journey, and soon it came!

A Bittersweet Slovakian Birthday

We started in Krakow, the picturesque city where Jewish culture is highly commercialized and noticeable everywhere. We first walked around the Jewish quarter, marvelous in its image and preservation. My father stopped us next to a beautiful synagogue and said, “This is the synagogue where my father had his bar mitzvah…. Well, that is what I understood from him.” Nothing is completely clear, as his father’s generation did not share too many details about
One day he walked over this same bridge, and was stopped by the Nazis, who shot him down for the sole reason of being a Jew. We were standing in the same place. The same bridge that connects and divides the parts of the city as well as our hearts.

their past, and thus my father lives in a lifelong puzzle trying to figure out the truth, combining his father’s few anecdotes with hearsay, and connecting them to the locations we visited.

After enjoying a summer morning, and hearing the trumpeter playing his beautiful tunes at the end of every hour, we crossed the bridge to a different part of town, the place where the ghetto was. At the bridge we stopped. I read in my father’s story that my great-grandmother remarried after her husband died from an injury he carried from World War I. She married a German Jew who was forced to move eastwards and found a job in her shop in Bielsko-Biała. Despite looking German and speaking German, he was a Jew and thus automatically destined for immediate death. One day he walked over this same bridge, and was stopped by the Nazis, who shot him down for the sole reason of being a Jew. We were standing in the same place. The same bridge that connects and divides the parts of the city as well as our hearts. Surrounding us was all this beauty, a river underneath us, but so many lives were destroyed there. We went on to see a few more family sites, and continued to our next destination, Jaroslaw.

Both my father’s family and my mother’s family has roots in Jaroslaw, a small town in eastern Poland, which once had a significant Jewish population. It was named after Prince Jaroslaw, who had owned the land since the 11th century. During the 19th century, Jews were 25 percent of the population, among them my family. On my father’s side, his mother’s family lived there before moving west to Bielsko-Biała for employment purposes. On my mother’s side, her father’s family moved from Jaroslaw to build a house in the small scenic town of Kežmarok, in the Tatra Mountains of Slovakia. I never knew that my Slovakian part was based in Poland, as my grandfather and his parents were German speakers, but history creates surprising connections.

Jaroslaw was pretty, with many well-preserved old buildings. The Jewish history, though, was almost completely erased from the map. The town had two large synagogues, one next to the other. One is preserved and now serves as a school, and the other is an abandoned, grey, broken up building. My family was religious, as most Jews were at the time. It is hard to grasp the fact that they celebrated Jewish life right on that street, and now except for a little sad sign, there is nothing that remains of their culture in Jaroslaw.

We went to find the Jewish cemetery. We drove off to the outskirts of the town, to the surrounding farmlands, and there we asked around where the cemetery was, so that hopefully we could locate the gravestones of buried relatives. We discovered that it is only accessible through an elderly lady’s house, but no one would tell us exactly where it was, and no one seemed to be happy about us poking around. It reminded me of the Polish movie Aftermath, where in a similar kind of village two Catholic Polish brothers try to rescue Jewish gravestones that were used as road pavement during and after the Second World War, but in return faced a lot of hostile and violent reactions from the other town residents due to the inability of the townspeople to cope with their dark history. We gave up searching as we started feeling uncomfortable with the situation. We kept on joking that people will soon run after us with axes, but just as my grandfather used to tell these sour jokes, this was our sour joke.

The next destination was Kežmarok. My father navigated through the mountains confidently, and using his Polish, which is surprisingly similar to Slovakian, we were able to find everything we were looking for. My grandfather on my mother’s side was born and raised there, in that beautiful town. A year before my grandfather passed away, he left a brief note about how he survived the Holocaust. I only learned of that note during my time in Poland.

The river is flowing right next to the football field, just as my grandfather described in his writing. We went to his house, which, similarly to the story of my grandmother in Poland, was taken over by locals after my grandfather’s entire family was murdered. At the age of 14 he left everything behind, got fake documents with a fake name, and used his German language skills to work at a distant farm, and hide. My mother says that he always felt guilty for surviving the Holocaust while the rest of his family did not.

We walked around the town and could not comprehend how in such a peaceful place people were so evil. We decided to stay another day to understand the beautiful pieces of his childhood. We traveled around the mountains and the forests, and the thought that chased us was in which
I celebrated my 24th birthday in the place my grandfather could not stay for 24 years, and while our homes in Israel are constantly under threat. The emotions and worries chased me, only to be contrasted by the incredible scenery and the comfort of being with my parents on that day.

We left Slovakia, and after a day of enjoying stunning Zakopane, distressed a bit from the family emotions, we got to the industrial city of Bielsko-Biała. I saw a grey city that lacked any distinct character, and a place that I could never see myself living in. My father, on the other hand, saw an incredible historic golden city. He saw the place where his parents’ few childhood stories occurred, and thus romantically imagined them running happily throughout the streets. Bielsko and Biała used to be two towns that were separated by a very narrow river. Over time they merged into one city.

My grandmother came from Biała and my grandfather came from Bielsko. Despite the Jewish community being quite small, my grandparents did not know each other at the time. It might have been because my grandfather went to a public Polish school, as his mother could not afford to send him to the Jewish school where my grandmother went. My grandparents only met in Israel. Each had a brave and heartbreaking story by the time they reached relative safety in Israel. My grandmother realized when they met that she knew his sister. She recalled that he was known as a little rascal around the neighborhood, and had to be that way, as he was one of the only Jews in a Polish school; there was no way on earth he would let others bully him.

Our first destination was my grandmother’s house, which was also taken away by Polish residents after the war. Then, we went to find my grandfather’s house in the city center of Bielsko. The street names had changed, and pictures were rare, and thus we were not sure exactly which house it was. My father wanted to know as many details as possible to recreate the clearest memories. Though I thought at the time that the exact did not matter, in retrospect, these details are the most important, because that is the difference between a stranger’s home, and my grandfather’s home, the difference between fiction and reality. We found a tourist bureau in hopes of finding the exact location of my grandfather’s house. The lady working there made a few phone calls and took my father’s email address and said that she would research it and send him the exact information. I hope she keeps her word.

A memorial created in the memory of the Kežmarok Jews that died in the Holocaust.

There were two Jewish cemeteries in Bielsko-Biała; one was completely destroyed by the communist government after the war and the other still existed. The names of many important segments of Jewish history were gone. Our strength is in our words. Using them will preserve the rich life, capture moments, and keep us aware of the good and the bad that has happened, and thus they are our most powerful tools to try to make justice.
The End is Just the Beginning

This summer ended but my father’s lifelong journey of discovery is now my own as well. I owe that to my family and to myself. Witnessing did not come naturally to me, nor does it come naturally to anyone. Yet it takes a focused effort to understand and preserve history in order to avoid the repetition of the dark times. Personal stories preserve history with emotion. Not bound to the collective narratives, they nevertheless comprise a collective narrative. Collective narrative, in turn, is important in order to preserve history and memory on a larger scale. People draw upon both collective and personal histories to base their morals and values. History is in no way easy to process, but should not hold back the community. Instead, it will be much more beneficial if it serves as a seed for future growth.

I learned in Poland that it is possible to refocus the route of a community. The Jewish community in Poland serves as a social and religious center for many different types of people, each fitting in in their own way. The community could not possibly serve such a function openly under the communist regime, but times and circumstances have changed. The individual initiatives and organized communal efforts that fit the current needs and conditions of the community are the basis for its growth; but the present programs could never be completely detached from the Jewish community’s history. Conditions did change, and the community suffered a deep wound, and thus flexibility, acceptance and tolerance are essential for community building. Initiatives such as Makabi exemplify the essence of an accepting community; it is an organization that provides alternatives and reaches out to others. An organization that comes to better the community and provide a fresh stream of young social activism. Young Jewish social activism in Poland. Remarkable.

The Nazis did not succeed in destroying Jewish life in Poland, and that is the tiny piece of historic justice we are able to offer to the Jews that suffered in the Holocaust. The systematic killing of millions of innocents due to their religion or ethnicity cannot possibly ever be justifiable. Making justice is impossible. Yet, offering some peace of mind is possible. Makabi and the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews represent that possibility. They are the hope, the continuation of the Jewish people, and the continuation of Jewish history in Poland. That is what is in our power to offer to all the innocents who suffered or died. The most precious possession of a human being is hope. The worst thing is to take that away. The Nazis violated in the Holocaust the living conditions that give rise to hope. They attempted to kill off hope. The hope represents justice seeking, and therefore fulfilling the need for hope and celebrating existence in Poland, of all places, is a powerful response to generations of justice seeking.

Jewish peoplehood did not die, and continues as a strong communal center with many bases, all interconnected. This story is not about death. It is a story about hope.
A Journey of Hope: Discovering Ties Between Health and Education in Atorkor, Ghana

Ngobitak Ndiwane ’16

A Quest

As I inhale the salty sea breeze on a typically slow morning on my way back to our compound, I am not surprised that one of the few children I see is Zara. Everyone else is in school at this time. Zara avoids eye contact with me once again as I ask her why she is not in school today. Unlike her older sister Ruth, Zara dislikes school, and would much rather stay home and help out her grandmother. Though the family would prefer if Zara went to school, since she is never forced to attend, she often just stays home. As a result, she is about three grade levels behind her peers. At her young age of eight, she shows no zeal for wisdom, nor motivation or desire to learn.

The more time I spent in Atorkor, the more curious I became about how situations like this arose – how a disinterest in education among the younger population could somehow become so commonplace in a society. By teaching health to elementary and high school students and working at the medical center in the village, I sought to learn more about key development issues in the community, specifically relating to health and education. On a journey to explore underlying educational and health care disparities in the village, I slowly realized that the complexity of these issues stemmed from far beyond the work of one non-profit, but was rather deeply rooted in country-level lack of resources.

Finding Purpose

Before leaving for Ghana, I had a certain experience in mind. Though I was not completely mentally prepared for the journey ahead, I thought I was ready enough. I took a leap of faith by going to Ghana, by leaving my friends and family behind for the summer, to join a new community and become accustomed to an unfamiliar culture. Of course I was scared, but I guess there is no better way to get over one’s fears than to dive into the intimidating situation in an attempt to quell the built-up anxiety. My interests lie within the realms of global health, social policy, public health, and education, and I wanted to simultaneously pursue those interests while abroad in Ghana. I sought to work with Atorkor Development Foundation, a non-governmental organization based in the Volta Region of Ghana, that aims to transform the impoverished village of Atorkor into a self-sustaining community by providing the villagers with a basic school, vocational school and medical center to enhance educational and medical conditions.

As a university student studying public health and aspiring to apply to dental school in less than a year, I am extremely interested in studying health conditions through a global lens and exploring new and innovative ways to combat health care disparities and inequities. I wanted to learn about how to be resourceful and work efficiently and effectively with the resources with which I was presented. I went to Ghana to teach, but more importantly, to learn. Growing up in the United States all my life, I sometimes take for granted the health care access that I have, and through traveling to different nations, I have seen firsthand the different health conditions. Inadequate access to health care services is a major issue in...
low-income countries, and even in many areas of higher-income countries such as the U.S. By going to Ghana, I hoped to gain an inside look at how health care is accessed and delivered, and why some subpar health services exist in communities like Atorkor, Ghana.

Finding a New Place
Arriving at the airport in Ghana, I was thankful that I had made it to my destination safely. As relief flooded my body, I tried not to stand out as an American as I went through customs, though this was hard to do while holding an American passport in my hand. I liked the fact that I blended in. This made things for me a lot easier. As I started leaving to wait for my ride, I soon saw Nathaniel and Dahila, my supervisors for this internship, waiting for me right outside. I tried to seem enthusiastic and happy to see them, but nevertheless, I think they could still see the fatigue written all over my face.

Everywhere smelled like dirt, and I loved it. It was a familiar smell, of not ordinary dirt, but Earth. Soil. Rebirth. Hard work. Happiness. It was almost as if I had been there before. I looked like I could be from Ghana; I just had to play the part. Though I anticipated what some of the culture would be like, little did I know about all the lifestyle variations that I would encounter in the village, as well as how teaching health in this community would be so much more complex than I imagined due to cultural and economic differences.

Finally arriving at the village was overwhelming. There were two other volunteers who would be working with me during my time in Atorkor, Jade and Zachary. Jade carried my heavy bag up a narrow and steep spiral staircase that led to my room, a kind gesture that anticipated her sweet and caring personality. It was a small room with a tiny desk, a plastic chair, a bed and a small rack with clothes hangers. It was not that much, but it was more than enough for me. I had to sleep under a mosquito net, which covered the whole bed. When I opened my window to see my view, I was a little surprised to see a small burial ground, filled with tombstones. After a minute, the surprise went away because I felt like this cemetery was in its appropriate place. After all, it was there before I was, so I figure my opinion should not have mattered anyways.

I lived with Zachary and Jade at the village chief’s house. The chief, Samuel Adjourlo, founded Atorkor Development Foundation (ADF), and currently is a practicing dentist in London. This was ironic since Atorkor does not have a practicing dentist, yet their chief works as a dentist elsewhere. Nevertheless, his home is used for housing volunteers from overseas – it is one of the nicest houses in the village. Attached to where I stayed was another small building that housed the chief’s extended family members and their children. We had a cook named Rafaela who prepared our lunches and dinners. I had the opportunity to get to know Rafaela better over the course of my time there, and she greatly contributed to my happiness at ADF.

That first night, I ate a small dinner of vegetable rice, fish and papaya and chatted a little with my new family. I then had a brief group meeting with some of the Atorkor Development Foundation administrators, and found out that I started work the next day at 8 a.m. sharp. I would be working at the clinic in the morning, and then the school in the afternoon. I did not know specifically what I would be doing, just that I needed to be present.

Finding Health Care
Sister Ama and Sister Belda are two nurses with whom I worked daily at the clinic*. Sister Ama has been involved in the health care system in Ghana for 32 years, while Sister Belda, who is younger, has only been a nurse for three years. Along with caring for patients, their daily duties included issuing health insurance cards, recording insurance information, and cleaning the clinic. Sister Belda also did home visits to see babies who were sick or underweight, held family planning workshops to provide sexual health education for adolescents and young adults, and provided pre-natal and postnatal care for pregnant women. I spoke with the nurses about their opinions of their jobs and both had suggestions for
improving the Atorkor health care system and the clinic. Some suggestions included more assistance for the nurses and more staffing, such as the addition of a midwife. They also suggested an extension of the clinic so that it could include a lab.

In Ghana, most people had government health insurance and used this insurance to pay for their health care, while others paid in cash. The amount of insurance coverage depended on the health condition. Sister Belda explained to me that the biggest health problems in the village were malaria, diarrhea, respiratory tract infections and hypertension. Sister Belda wished she had more opportunities to talk to villagers about their lifestyle choices and how these choices impacted their health, and also more chances to give family planning and sex education talks to schools and adolescent groups at churches.

Sister Janice, another nurse at the clinic, had been working there for two years. She explained to me how the government hired the clinic workers and paid for the clinic supplies. She told me the clinic needed new chairs, as many of the chairs were broken, and how the clinic would also benefit from more up-to-date supplies such as stethoscopes, blood pressure apparatuses, and weighing scales. In the Volta region, nurses were trained in Ho, but doctors usually had to leave the Volta Region, nurses were trained in Ho, and there were no doctors at the Atorkor clinic. Because of the lack of doctors, the clinic was not allowed to see emergency cases and the nurses were only allowed to refer patients. Since the hospital was about 30 minutes away by taxi, and not all villagers had enough money to pay for taxi transport, this created a significant health care disparity in terms of adequate access to care.

Because the clinic did not deal with emergency patients and the village community was relatively small, the clinic only saw about 25 to 30 patients a day, and the days were usually slow. Nevertheless, Sister Janice explained to me that more villagers were using the clinic now than in previous years. Most villagers who were sick came to the clinic rather than using traditional medicine because the majority of the villagers were now Christian, hence, there were fewer people with indigenous beliefs than there were many years prior. When the patients came in, I would help weigh them on the scale and take their blood pressures and temperatures before sending them to Sister Janice, who gave them their prescriptions and medications.

For every patient, an insurance claim form had to be filled out so that the insurance could pay for the treatment. Most patients had insurance, so only a couple of patients a day were expected to pay with cash. The insurance office was in Keta and villagers were expected to renew their insurance card annually. Sister Janice told me children up to five years old received a five-year insurance card for a cost of about four Ghana Cedi, or the equivalent of 1.25 in U.S. dollars. The cost of the card differed depending on whether the citizen was a government worker, non-government worker or elderly. Elderly citizens had the cheapest rate of two Ghana Cedi per year for each card, or roughly .60 in U.S. dollars. Though the government provided universal health care, depending on the cost rate health care was still unavailable to some villagers.

Every Tuesday at the clinic the nurses held maternal-child health day, during which new mothers in Atorkor and neighboring villages would bring their children up to five years old to have them weighed and to receive their immunizations. The clinic would be held in different surrounding villages each week, and the schedule would rotate between the villages of Atorkor, Srogboe, Whuti and Akpolorortorkor before starting the rotation again each month. On the morning of the maternal-child health day, women and babies started to congregate at 9 a.m. and usually spent the whole morning and sometimes even part of the afternoon waiting to be seen by one of the nurses. Since there was often no specific order or systematic organization of patients, some patients who arrived early would still be among the last ones to leave. Mothers of newborns received a Children’s Health Record Book that they then had to bring with them every time they visited the clinic or a hospital. In the book, the nurses wrote down the baby’s weight and which medications the baby received on that day. When looking at the book, I would notice that some mothers would bring their children every month, while other mothers...
brought their children only sporadically. Since mothers often walked to the clinic or had to pay a taxi to reach the clinics, I assumed factors such as weather, cost, or other obligations such as cooking or caring for other children probably interfered with attending maternal-child health day.

At the clinic, it was usually my job to weigh the babies to make sure that they were at healthy weights. Almost all the babies were underweight, and because of this, in the health records, the nurses considered all babies who were moderately underweight to be “healthy weight,” and only babies who were severely underweight were considered “unhealthy.” Though I knew that the nurses did this so that they would only have to give special care to the babies who had the highest risk of health problems, the system of essentially ignoring the underweight state of virtually all the other babies was still unsettling.

The babies would be hung from cloth diaper bags on devices resembling meat scales in order to be weighed. The mothers would have to bring their cotton diaper bags, and they would undress their children and then hand them to me, so that I could hang the bag on the hook and take the baby’s weight. Many of the younger newborns would just hang quietly, unaware of what was actually going on; however, many of the older babies would start to scream and cry as soon as they were hung, bouncing up and down on the meat scale, making it impossible for me to get an actual weight. These were the times when I would simply just make up a weight based on the baby’s size, to protect the child’s safety. Once when I was weighing a baby, he was crying and bouncing out of terror so badly that he flipped over and would have fallen on his head if I had not caught him. If I had not been paying close enough attention, this situation could have resulted in a serious or even fatal injury.

It is conditions like this that upset me. Though this was an extreme case and situations like this did not happen often, it is still a safety hazard that needs to change. It is imperative for newborns to be able to be weighed in the safest manner possible, without the mother or health care provider having to worry about whether the baby will fall off the hanging scale. These scales get the job done; however, it would be beneficial to have a soft safety mat or cushion under the scales, to protect the babies from severe injury in case of an accident. These mats could be handmade or sewn using cloth and filled with cotton or foam and placed under hanging scales to provide a safety cushion for babies during the weighing process. Small changes such as these could greatly improve the safety of children during medical examinations, without having to completely modify the existing system.

One day during the maternal-child health day, I was able to see another clinic being run for those who have walking disabilities. I saw an elderly woman crawling on her hands and knees to go to the clinic to receive medication. This woman, despite her health condition, was still resourceful with what she had and determined to seek health care. This image sometimes comes to my mind when I think about health care conditions in Atorkor. I think about this elderly woman and how much better her quality of life would be if she had a wheelchair, an item that I never considered a luxury until I saw someone crawling on a rocky, dirt road. More people all over the world need to be made aware of injustices like these so that these inhumane conditions can eventually change.

There are people all over the world in small village communities like Atorkor who have to suffer on a daily basis. The least I can do is let these stories be heard, to promote awareness about the conditions in these communities, in hopes that these issues can be brought to light and addressed by the Ghanaian government.

Finding Answers

In September 2000, 189 heads of state gathered at the United Nations in New York at the Millennium Summit and adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): eight goals set out to encourage all countries, rich and poor, to focus on development problems. These goals were about human rights – the right of all people to health, education, shelter and security.

Though Ghana has incorporated the MDGs into the national development framework in order to reduce poverty in the nation, there are a few shortcomings,
partially due to wide disparities in regional and district poverty levels and a socio-economic divide between the north and south of the country. Ghana’s status as a middle-income country with fast gross domestic product (GDP) growth has not significantly improved human development indicators. Specifically, though Ghana has made large improvements in reducing extreme poverty and hunger and increasing access to primary education, child and infant mortality remains high, and maternal health needs significant improvements as well. Though overall in Ghana, many aspects of health, education, and employment conditions are slowly improving, in smaller communities such as Atorkor it is harder to obtain accurate and up-to-date development information. For this reason, while at Atorkor Development Foundation I set out to learn more about the social conditions that the villagers live in daily, to see what changes, specifically with regard to health and education, were most crucial to improving living conditions.

Over a 10-day period, Jade and I conducted a community-wide health assessment to screen the villagers of Atorkor for different health conditions. Two young Ghanaians, Afi and Kwame, assisted us with translation to allow for easy communication and to limit the misunderstandings that would arise from Jade’s and my three-word Ewe vocabulary. For the first week, we set up a table and a few chairs under a large tree, to shade us from the typical sweltering Ghanaian heat, as we waited for villagers to arrive and get screened. The purpose of the screening was to collect both demographic data and health data from the villagers to assess current health behaviors, problems and risk factors. This information was collected with the objective of creating a health needs assessment profile so that the Atorkor Development Foundation and the Atorkor Medical Center could better meet the health needs of the community and focus more attention on future outreach programs to address the most pressing health challenges faced by the village.

For the second week of the health screenings, we traveled throughout the village, going door to door, to collect the health assessment information for those families that did not participate in the screening during the first week. The assessment form consisted of 13 questions asking for both demographic data and medical data from the participants. The screening covered a wide range of health topics, including immunizations, malaria, nausea/vomiting/diarrhea, respiratory illnesses and asthma, malnutrition and anorexia, hypertension, headaches, chest pain, diabetes, pregnancy and HIV. We also used an automatic blood pressure cuff to take blood pressures of family members 18 years and above. For the majority of these topics the information was self-reported and thus some of the reported data was probably inaccurate. Nevertheless, the screenings gave us more insight into the health conditions of the villagers.

In total, 1,351 individuals resided in the 190 houses surveyed and out of these 1,351 individuals, 814 (60.25%) were adults and 535 (39.75%) were children. The average age of individuals surveyed was 26.49 years. Additionally, on average there were 7.5 individuals residing in one household, with the number of individuals residing in a household ranging from one to 26. The homes were mostly one floor with a few small rooms, and were constructed with either cement or straw.

The villagers were asked about whether their children were in school and reasons their children may not be enrolled in school. The school enrollment rate was relatively high, with about 90% of children over five attending school. Out of the households that did not have their eligible children in school, 27.27% were not in school for financial reasons, 9.09% were not in school due to the family choosing not to send them and for 63.64%, the
Despite some limitations of the study due to response bias, I learned more about the villagers’ perceptions of health care through these community health assessments, which allowed me to get a better idea of how these health demographics influence development in the community.

family wouldn’t provide a reason for why their children were not in school. Though financial constraints were the primary reason for lack of enrollment in school, the 40% response rate to the question may suggest that villagers were either embarrassed or hesitant to admit why the children were not in school.

Out of the households that had their children’s vaccinations up to date, 92.86% of them stated that they had their child’s vaccine records, while 8.57% of them did not have any sort of vaccination records for their children. Despite these numbers, villagers did not bring their children’s immunization books with them, so there was no proof of whether records were actually up to date, or even existed at all.

Furthermore, out of the 190 households surveyed, 79 (41.58%) were not affected by malaria, while 111 (58.42%) were. Out of the individuals residing in those households, 225 of them had malaria within the last year. This accounts for 16.65% of the surveyed population. Finally, out of the households that were affected by malaria, 89.19% received treatment, while 10.81% did not receive treatment. These numbers illustrate the pressing issue of malaria in the region, and the importance of malaria prevention measures, such as mosquito nets and insecticides, that the clinic should be aware of in order to make sure that the population is adequately protected.

The average blood pressure of the surveyed population was 141/80, which is a little higher than the universal average blood pressure of 120/80. Out of the surveyed population it was found that 44.05% had high blood pressure, 54.62% of the population had normal blood pressure, and 1.3% of the surveyed population were at risk due to obesity. Though high blood pressure is a relatively common condition worldwide, this 44% high blood pressure level in the population still contrasts with the U.S., which has a lower rate of 31% of high blood pressure in the overall population. In more urban areas of Ghana, the prevalence of hypertension reaches 54.6% of the population. Many people living with high blood pressure in Atorkor do not even know they have the condition, but if the government could work with more health institutions in the country to instill a yearly screening program for diseases such as this, more advice and counseling could be given to patients to prevent this condition from worsening and causing further health problems in the future.

We found many inconsistencies in the self-reported data that contrasted with the actual statistical, pre-existing demographics of Ghana. Out of the 190 households surveyed, only two of them reported having a resident who was either malnourished or anorexic. While teaching at the Atorkor Basic School, working in the Medical Center and even just walking around the village, I would encounter malnourished children who were much thinner than a child of the same age in the U.S. would be. From this, I realized that the villagers probably had a different definition of malnutrition than I did. Maybe to them, being “nourished” meant simply having enough food to feed everyone in the family something, rather than having enough to feed everyone what they needed. Or maybe it meant just having access to food, regardless of whether it was “healthy” or not, as others might be even worse off. Or finally, maybe if everyone around them pretty much looks the same and eats the same foods in relatively similar portions, being undernourished starts to become a norm, rather than a disease.

We also found that 185 out of 190 of the surveyed households had never had HIV testing (97.36%). Due to the stigma of HIV, I feel as if this question was heard as “Do you have HIV?” and not the true question of “Have you been screened for HIV?” It appeared that as soon as anyone heard “HIV” they started saying no and shaking their heads, without giving our translators the chance to ask the entire question. It seemed unlikely that so few villagers had an HIV screening, as in 2013, it was reported that 220,000 people in Ghana were currently living with HIV and that there were 2,400 new HIV infections in children in 2013. Despite some limitations of the study due to response bias, I learned more about the villagers’ perceptions of health care through these community health assessments, which allowed me to get a better idea of how these health demographics influence development in the community.

Finding the Sea
The beach was a major part of Atorkor’s economy. Fishing was the biggest occupation in the village – even though the ocean had recently been overfished. One day while walking through the soft sand, I
passed a long line of fishermen, all working on repairing a large fishing net. The nets were so long and beautiful, intricately woven. The nets, colored various shades of blue and all bundled up, reminded me of billowing clouds. The beach was also lined with many small fishing boats scattered throughout the sand. During my first visit to the beach, these boats were one of the first things that caught my eye. They were hand-painted with beautiful colors, usually containing the iconic red, yellow, green, and black representing Ghana. Oftentimes, the boats also had Bible verses painted on them, which was not surprising given the predominantly Christian demographic of the village. The fishing nets were usually draped around or inside the boats. Palm trees also line the outside of the beach, a feature so prominent in Ghana, but nonexistent in the Greater Boston area, where I live.

I found the beach to be breathtaking, but I often wondered if the locals felt the same way. I felt as though in their eyes, the ocean was just a source of income: a means of survival. I could sit and enjoy the ocean and appreciate its beauty because as a foreigner, I had no other relationship or feeling about the sea other than one of admiration. The ocean ebbed and flowed as it should, and when I was tired of watching it, I could go home and go about my business completely unaffected. I did not have to depend on the ocean, just as it did not depend on me. We just coexisted. Many locals on the other hand, had a completely different relationship with the ocean. If the waters were too rough, it became difficult to navigate. If the fishermen did not catch any fish, they would not have sufficient income or their families might even go hungry that night. Their view of the ocean was not as simple as mine; they did not usually go home unaffected by it, as I did. The beach was not just sand and water, a source of relaxation, but rather their source of income.

Finding Rafaela

Rafaela, a young Ghanaian woman in her late 20s, is the niece of the chief of Atorkor. She grew up in Atorkor, and has lived there all her life. I met her when I first arrived at the village. She always had a warm, welcoming smile; I found it very easy to talk to her. During my first week there, Rafaela took me to one of the local shops so that I could get beads for my family and friends back home. I have a love for African hand-painted beads. I think their bright colors and intricate designs are absolutely stunning. However, everyone in the village spoke Ewe, a language of which I barely knew five words, so I asked Rafaela to accompany me. She agreed without any hesitation. Rafaela was fluent in both English and Ewe, and as I continued to go to the woman who sold the beads, Rafaela always went with me to haggle for the best prices. I appreciated Rafaela’s kindness and openness—especially towards someone she barely knew.

During my first week at ADF, I had the pleasure of interviewing Rafaela about life in Atorkor and about the Foundation. She told me most of the jobs in Atorkor come from fishing, farming and trading goods. I learned that about 80% of villagers go to church on Sundays, and that when funerals occur they often take up most of the weekend with drumming, singing and music. She told me that everyone in the village speaks Ewe, but mostly only the younger children can speak English, since they learn it in school. Few adults speak English, and most of the ones I met who speak it are either administrators of ADF, or schoolteachers. Overall, about 50% of the population speaks both English and Ewe. Few villagers travel to other parts of Ghana, so they do not speak other languages such as Fante, Ga or Twi.

Rafaela recounted to me what the village was like before ADF was established. She spoke about how most of the children were poor and could not afford school, and people had to go to a neighboring town, Anloga, for healthcare. ADF was able to sponsor children to go to school and buy books and supplies. ADF also established a medical center so that villagers would not have to travel out of their way to obtain health care. Despite what ADF has accomplished to make Atorkor a more sustainable community, Rafaela believes

Non-profit organizations in small village communities like Atorkor often face the challenge of dealing with issues that are more complex than the scope of their projects, problems that require the partnerships of government, health and business organizations in order to yield tangible solutions.
that there are critical needs of the village that still need to be met – specifically with regard to finding employment for more women and increasing microfinance and entrepreneurship. There is still more that needs to be done to help the village, such as more job opportunities promoting creativity and innovation, and low interest rate loans for graduating students to help fund start-up businesses and companies. Ghana’s government has a large role to play in creating these opportunities for its youth, to give them hope for the future. The students need to know that their education is not all for nothing, and that employment is actually an attainable goal after graduation, not just a lost dream. Non-profit organizations in small village communities like Atorkor often face the challenge of dealing with issues that are more complex than the scope of their projects, problems that require the partnerships of government, health and business organizations in order to yield tangible solutions.

Finding Common Ground
Teaching at the basic school allowed me to challenge myself in new ways and build relationships with my students. Class sizes were overwhelming, with often more than 70 children crammed into a single classroom. When I entered the classroom, all the students would stand up and greet me with “You are welcome, Madame!” – a gesture I never quite got used to. In the classroom of boys 12 and up, a young student named Micah was always the first to raise his hand, the first to answer questions, and the first to offer to help. Many of the other students were shy. They sat quietly and some seemed to not even acknowledge my presence at all. Teaching offered me an inside look into the classroom dynamics of the local school in the village. Similar to a U.S. classroom, often it seemed as if the same students were consistently raising their hands. I soon realized that many students chose to remain silent not because they did not understand the material being taught or were indifferent and uninterested, but because they were intimidated by my presence. They were afraid to speak to me, even more so in English, because they were embarrassed at the idea that they may not speak English that well. It was barriers like these that I was trying to break every day while teaching.

One day, after teaching my group of boys age 12 and up, the boys went racing out the door to go to their next class. Jade, another intern who was also teaching at the basic school, had stopped by my class since her group of girls had gotten out of class a little earlier. I remember the group of boys running up to us after class, which often happened after teaching with all the age groups, so this did not surprise me at all. One boy shouted, “Can I touch your skin?” I let out a shy laugh and soon got mobbed by a bunch of kids lightly pinching my skin. But we look the same. I’m just like you. Skin color is not important. Various thoughts raced through my mind, but I struggled to find the best explanation.

During my time in the village, I had a lot of time to think and reflect on my experiences. With my dark skin and African heritage, I had hoped that I would not attract too much attention while I was there, and that I would be able to fit in and relate to others around me. However, looking back on my experiences, I realize just how much I stood out.

I remember the first day I taught my group of teenage boys. I remember standing in front of the class and shaking with nervousness, unsure if the children could even understand a word I was saying. I remember doubt, uncertainty and confusion. For the younger age groups I was given a translator to assist in teaching; however, for the older groups, I was expected to teach without a translator so that the students could practice their English. The lesson was about basic hygiene and puberty. I had underestimated how much the students actually knew about health, and they ended up teaching...
me more that I taught them. I left the classroom feeling embarrassed and disappointed in myself, unsure of whether I was really capable and qualified to teach a class of more than 70 teenage boys.

In another one my classes, a large group of girls ranging from 9 to 12 years of age, I had to give a lecture on safe water. At the end of a lecture, I usually asked the class if they had any questions. That day, one girl raised her hand and asked if it was ok to cook with rainwater. I laughed nervously, embarrassed that I had never considered the fact that some villagers had to cook with rainwater due to lack of running water, and that at the time I did not have a definite answer to the question.

During another week, when I was teaching oral health, I realized even more cultural differences while teaching my group of children age six and under. The students knew how to brush their teeth, but when asked what a dentist was, they were unsure of what I was talking about. After teaching an older group that week, we gave out toothbrushes to students, and I remember being shocked while looking at a long line of young boys, pushing and shoving each other while they eagerly waited to obtain their new brushes, as excited as little kids waiting in line for a ride at Disney World for the first time.

These were the moments that reminded me that I was different. Though I did not look like an outsider at first glance, I was one. I dressed differently, walked at a faster pace, and had a funny American accent. I had been learning more about the culture every day, but I then realized that even if I were here for two years rather than two months and learned to speak Ewe, the local language, I would still not know enough about the culture in Atorkor. Many villagers had lived their whole lives without ever leaving Atorkor or the neighboring villages and towns; I had the privilege to come and go as I pleased. I would never see the village as they saw it.

Finding Barriers to Sustainability

While in Ghana, I was able to enhance my health knowledge and teaching skills while simultaneously learning about the educational and health needs of the village. I was initially curious to see the state of oral health in the village of Atorkor and whether villagers had access to dentists. From talking to locals, especially children, I realized that there was virtually no access to a dentist in the area. While teaching oral health to students, I realized that most of the younger students did not even know what a dentist was, making it almost impossible to explain to them why oral care was important. Some students did not have toothbrushes, and many students used their toothbrushes for longer than the recommended 3-month period due to lack of money to purchase a new one. Fortunately, for those who did have money to purchase oral hygiene products, the toothbrushes and toothpaste were widely available to villagers for reasonable prices. Looking at the teeth of many older children and adults, while some had straight teeth, many more had several misaligned, missing, and decayed teeth. I realized that though the older children and adults recognized the importance of proper oral hygiene, there was inadequate access to professional dental care in the village and the cost of purchasing toothbrushes and toothpaste was not necessarily a priority for families struggling to purchase food items.

I was interested in finding out how ADF affected access to care and treatment in the village. Through my internship, I found out that ADF partially funded the clinic, but the clinic received the majority of its funds from the government. The clinic was the only place to receive health
care in the village; for serious health injuries or diseases, one had to visit Keta, a bigger city 30 minutes away by taxi. Despite not being able to provide emergency care, the Atorkor clinic still played a vital role in preventative health care measures and immediate treatment for easily curable illnesses such as fever or malaria. Students in the village were knowledgeable about preventative health and different health conditions and diseases, as I was able to see from teaching at the basic school. The curriculum and teachers did an excellent job at making sure the students knew about different public health topics and preventative health measures such as safe water, proper nutrition, exercise and oral health.

In addition to the language barrier with the younger students, teaching in overcrowded classrooms did not create the best learning environment; however, these experiences challenged me to work harder to build the students' trust and develop meaningful relationships with them, despite the cultural barrier. I often wondered about the best way to promote preventative health behaviors to people who knew what was required in order to live healthy lifestyles, but lacked the money to purchase preventative health items such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, or healthy foods like fruit. This is a concept that I am still struggling with. It was hard to give health advice while knowing that economic and financial hurdles in access to health care, medication and dietary options limited the practicality of the advice that I was giving. Towards the end of my time in Atorkor, I realized that a larger structural change needed to happen in this country in order for the village to continue moving forward. Though ADF is trying to promote sustainability, the government must also do its part in promoting health, educational and economic opportunities in its small villages that often go neglected.

A Treasure: The Promise of the Phoenix
My journey to Ghana was accompanied by my own intellectual and emotional journey of experiencing a new culture and pushing myself to teach and interact with different community members in the fields of health care and education. Through my struggles and moments of doubt, I found myself. I discovered my weaknesses as well as my strengths, and had successes as well as failures. Being in Ghana taught me new ways to see the world and helped me further realize that there are many ways and strategies to accomplish the same goal. I became more patient and more optimistic, and I hope that I can only continue to grow from this experience.

I know Ghana based mostly on the experiences that I had during my short time there – through the people I met, the landmarks I saw, and the interactions I had in the community. The red, yellow, green and black of the national flag remain engrained in my memory, a symbol of national pride. I remember the feeling of the loose, grainy sand between my feet as I would walk to the clinic and basic school. And I remember not only the smell of dirt, but also that of the sea. I often think about my students and I try to imagine their futures, which I assume will probably be so different from mine. Given the economic circumstances of the villagers, it is a lot harder for them to travel to other countries and experience different cultures, a privilege that I have and hope to take advantage of. Most of the people I met in Ghana were so kind and friendly; I want to know where their happiness comes from. I want to learn more about their culture and explore their foreign world.

"You are different from the other volunteers who come here, it is so easy to open up to you," said one of my students. Two months prior, I would have never imagined myself there, sitting in the compound of my house, drinking Sprite and Fanta with some of my favorite students on the day before I was supposed to leave and start my journey back to the U.S. It was amazing how much changed over the course of just a couple of months. Through the companionships that I made, I know that my presence made a small difference in their lives.

After working at a development foundation for two months, I am still unsure of what the word “development” actually means. In a world that is constantly changing and advancing, is anything ever fully developed? How do you measure something like development, something that is not tangible? Isn’t there always room for improvement?
When Mr. John Mahama, President of the Republic of Ghana, came to Brandeis in October 2014, I had the privilege of asking him about what is being done in Ghana to combat the high youth unemployment rate in the country and to promote entrepreneurship and creativity so that more jobs could be available for young graduates. He told me about different initiatives being started in Ghana to promote education, jump-start entrepreneurship, and increase the number of private sector jobs in the country. Despite this, these new initiatives will surely be very competitive, and the success of them is obviously unknown at this point. Furthermore, these new jobs may just be available to people living in larger cities; communities like Atorkor with frequent power outages and limited internet access may never hear about such opportunities.

Nevertheless, President Mahama believes that development is something that the continent of Africa is actively working towards. He ended his speech at Brandeis by stating, “Africa rising” is meant to capture the idea of hope and promise on the continent, like the mythological phoenix that rises out of its own ashes and soars. What better way to tell the world that the continent will never be counted out; it will find a way to rise again.” To keep Africa rising, small villages and communities must not be forgotten. Instead, governments should try to ensure that opportunities are reaching even remote areas, not just the most populous or booming areas of different countries. I believe that development is not necessarily a permanent state of being, but rather an ongoing process – it is having the motivation and willpower to keep moving forward, no matter what the odds may be.

After two months of joy, tears, happiness, loneliness, success, failure and lots of sand, I left Atorkor with even more questions and concerns than I had when I arrived. As I wonder about what my purpose there was and reflect back on my experiences, I see tremendous growth. I have become more knowledgeable about the cultural differences in education and medical care in Atorkor compared to higher income nations, and I have gained some insight into what development truly is.

I used to believe that development was something that came at a definite point, a concept defined by a specific set of criteria that one could check off once completed, almost like my mother’s Saturday morning grocery list. Now I realize that development is an idea so complex, as broad and far-reaching as improvements in government, health, education, entrepreneurship, and so much more. It is a concept that does not necessarily come at a defined point, but rather is a global ideal that we are constantly striving to achieve. Development cannot be achieved in two months, two years, or even 20 years. It is an ongoing process that is never complete until there is virtually no room for improvement.

I am both hopeful and optimistic for what Atorkor has in store – this village that helped me to develop into a better teacher, a keen listener and a more culturally competent future health care provider.

Notes

1. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals mentioned.


3. One of Ghana’s 10 administrative regions, located east of Lake Volta in Ghana.

4. “Clinic” refers to the Atorkor Community Medical Center, a health center that serves Atorkor and the surrounding villages.


8. Language spoken in the Volta Region due to the native and largest ethnic group in the region, the Ewe people.


12. “Basic school” refers to the public elementary and high school in Atorkor that the majority of children attend. This school is partially funded by both ADF and the Ghanaian government.
Believe: Balancing Hope and Power at the U.S. Department of Education

Sneha Walia ’15

AppreciateED – Picnics and Power

Over lukewarm potato salad and burgers, Department of Education staff fawned over Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at every office picnic. Despite the unforgiving sun of midsummer in Washington, D.C., which was especially scorching during the noon – 2 p.m. monthly AppreciateED picnics, staff members would inevitably creep away from their desks just before noontime to catch a glimpse of the man in charge. Tall and grounded, the former professional basketball player turned education professional would make his rounds to shake hands and take pictures. Though they were colleagues, his status of first among equals was never more apparent than in those lunches.

We as interns were no different. We, too, stood a little straighter and smiled a little more earnestly when he walked by. A laundry list of his accolades – Race to the Top, Teach to Lead, FAFSA data tool, and so many more – whizzed through my head at each sighting of the boss of all things education. During our brown bag lunch with him, during which he gave us as a collective hour of his time for information and to take questions, the group was decidedly less awestruck. While maintaining complete respect, student interns one-by-one expressed their concerns. They asked the burning questions that two months at the United States Department of Education were unable to provide them answers to, that they hoped that the head of the operation could advise on. Why are teachers unprepared going into the workforce? Is the skyrocketing cost of college shutting students with financial need out of college? How do we actually engage with schools to make college-going a priority before students have already given up on themselves? How do the Department’s public relations affect its ability to help schools at all?

The answers, like many we had received over the summer, complicated my initial perspective of Arne, and his department, as the one with all of the answers. Many of the problems that we grappled with intellectually were being grappled with institutionally by the Department, and by other actors involved. None had an overarching solution yet.

There is a perception that political power manifests itself in policy and flows like water in Washington, D.C.. That everyone who dresses in a crisp black suit and shined shoes carries a briefcase bursting with political capital. They ferry that capital over to their respective government institutions, and make choices to do with it what they will. The capital, dense as gold, seems endless. In reality, there is only a finite amount of political power, spread thinly over the city, like a veneer that offers little protection. Each individual’s or office’s efforts to make a difference are curtailed by other players who want to make alternate choices. In this way, balancing power can make change agents powerless to make positive change.

As the Department of Education, under the leadership of Secretary Arne Duncan and the overarching authority of President Barack Obama, assesses responses to the nation’s most pressing education problems, it is constantly in combat with the groups that it works to improve. From early childhood through higher education, institutions, inequities, and individuals act as roadblocks to the success of any one group. Congress’ ability to pass laws that affect any number of those groups further limits the Department’s ability to make
moves to do the same. Particularly from what I saw with regard to higher education, the desires to make positive moral change and to do what is financially sound seem to be competing interests. While neither aspect can improve without the success of the other, they seem mutually exclusive in practice. The challenge now, for the Department of Education and anyone interested in the future of American education, is making education accessible and equitable in a country that decided, long ago, that education was a privilege that not everyone could be afforded.

Having been raised by two immigrant parents, one of whom was a teacher, it had always been assumed that I would attend college. I was made aware that sacrifices would be made, as needed, in order for me to receive my bachelor’s degree, and that the hope was that I would eventually earn a Ph.D. and make a change in this world. My parents would make me do extra math on the weekends from books my mother brought home from the middle school where she taught science. Together, they put me through out-of-school tutoring, and SAT prep classes, and made sure I accessed the best resources my school provided to learn more about the college application process.

Despite their emphasis on education, however, my parents had a complicated relationship with education as a career. My mother was personally aware of the value of teaching and how much change a teacher could effect, but was realistic about the pay teachers received and the subsequent financial difficulties aspiring teachers faced. I, in turn, decided early that I did not want to pursue a career in education. However, upon coming to college, I realized that a career working in education as a teacher and then perhaps as a policymaker would be the path that would make me happiest.

I knew anecdotally that there were students who had less support than I did in fulfilling their aspirations of college. However, I was never confronted with the overarching structural problems that allowed this to continue. In discussions of societal barriers to education, many of which stem from poverty in communities and resulting negative cycles, I wondered where the key would lie to changing the system. It made little sense to me that the press of a metaphorical oppressive hand could be so much stronger than the collective action of the government of a society that worked to raise it up. I decided, then, to intern at the Department of Education in order to see, firsthand, where policymakers thought the issues lay and how they sought to solve them. In my view, they would have the best insight into how solutions could be found to the pressing problems that affect all aspects of the education system.

The conflict that the Department faced, which became more apparent to me every day, made me question the ability of any actor to make progressive change in the education system. Placed in the college access program and eager to engage with college access and the myriad of social issues that made it a continued problem – poverty, lack of familial support, lack of resources for school counselors, dangerous communities, and setbacks in early grades, to name a few – I was struck by the seemingly endless stream of conflicts without solutions. This understanding that even the most illustrious leaders in education lacked all of the answers gave me pause. I was a scholar of politics and education, the daughter of a teacher, and a fellow charged with enacting social justice. I felt passionate and academically prepared, by classes on education and significant involvement in campus programming related to social justice, to effect change in college access. However, my lofty intern dreams and ideals were complicated by my questioning the effectiveness of my position as an intern in a department that faced so many barriers to its effectiveness. I began to wonder if I was working towards social justice at all, if it was ethical to say that I was enacting social justice with my meager efforts to aid others in correcting a system that lacked a clear fix.

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Teneisha was older than us, more experienced at the Department. A spring intern who extended her stint through the start of summer, she first occupied the role of a mentor and an ally to me rather than a colleague. She showed me how to add programs to the expansive map in Greg’s office, how to make the recorded audio from conference calls 508 compliant, and how to navigate the many acronyms that the Department of Education had to offer.

Though she was a rising senior at Howard University, at the same grade level as me, Teneisha was older by a few years and much wiser in experience. She was open about the fact that, outside of her internship, she worked hard for what she had and held responsibilities that I knew that I certainly didn’t have to work with. I tried to be careful not to pry, very conscious of not pushing my new friend, but Teneisha was forthcoming with information about her background. She had grown so much from her experiences, and welcomed us into glimpses of her history throughout the summer.

In “The Cave” – Teneisha

Every morning in the office I took my seat amongst a group of four other interns and turned on my computer to begin my work day. The two interns to my right and the one furthest left in our L-shaped closet-turned-office worked for different supervisors at the Department. I interned under the same supervisor as Teneisha, the intern directly to my left. We all started each day with whip-around in our office, which we called “The Cave.” Through questions that all of us answered, we learned about each other’s backgrounds, opinions, and dreams. Many of us, myself included, came from backgrounds of educational privilege, with institutional and familial support that allowed us to pursue our higher education and now pursue this internship. My fellow college access intern, Teneisha, was clued into higher education for a more personal reason.

Meeting Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at an AppreciateED picnic.

However, leaving the Department and reflecting on the experience has made me question the usefulness of those conflicts, and whether they actually helped create more justice in this world.

Teneisha and her family emigrated from Trinidad and Tobago when she was a child. She had learned to value education from her grandmother, father and two aunts who raised her. The adults in her life had always encouraged her to prioritize her education and affirmed that failure was not an option for her. She attended a parochial school in order to receive the best education possible in her community. She decided in middle school that she wanted to be a teacher, a desire born out of a deep love for reading and learning. This love has carried through her undergraduate career, and has motivated her to study psychology at Howard University in order to learn more about working with children.

Teneisha would frequently miss dinners with fellow interns or events after the 9 to 5 work day because she also worked as a manager at the nearby Starbucks. She often came in the day following an especially long shift with stories about the many colorful characters who came through her store. She seemed to enjoy her job and was certainly a good leader, but it served a larger purpose of providing income for herself and her brother. Teneisha’s balancing act of work, school, guardianship and internship was constant, and her dedication to each facet as we left an event and were walking towards the Metro to return to the office. In one moment, we were interspersed in a group of interns, talking and laughing about the event and looking forward to the afternoon. In the next, she had moved apart from the group and was speaking kindly but professionally into her phone. Her brother had gotten into some disciplinary trouble at school and, rather than working it out with him, his teacher insisted that he leave the classroom and would not allow him to return. Suddenly, her responsibility shifted from our afternoon of intern tasks and activities to advocating for her teenage brother.
of her life was unparalleled by anything I had seen before. Infused in the work that she did was an optimism that she brought to each of her jobs.

When her brother was younger, she volunteered in his class and was deeply affected by how much she loved it. Her brother was enrolled in special education classes for students with behavior problems, which provided a unique teaching and observing experience. She had always held a passion for learning and teaching, but the experience of working with children was transformative for her. In teaching, she saw a hope for students like her brother who had experienced challenges but were persevering in every way they could. She knew, from her experiences with her siblings, that those students needed someone to support them and not give up on them in order to make strides. Her personal experience would provide her the empathy and the lasting dedication to education she would need to make a fantastic educator.

Teneisha’s difficulty working and getting through college keyed her in to the complex world of college access in a deeply personal way. While much of my understanding of college access programs was theoretical, limited to what they intended to do, Teneisha had a broader scope of the impact. She indicated that she had not known the phrase that could shed light on her experience, “first generation college student,” until she began her internship and started seeing herself in readings about students that fit this category. This clarity was useful, and certainly allowed others to see how far she had come. She also spoke about the inspiration she gained from our supervisor, who had worked part-time cleaning federal buildings when he was young and now worked as a staff member within one, affirming her belief that she too will make her dream come true. She derived strength to pursue her education, despite obstacles that forced her to enroll in a community college for a few years before attending Howard. With a work schedule that kept her from being more involved in school, she personally recognizes the need for students like her to receive institutional support to help them access higher education.

When Teneisha’s family needed her support towards the end of the summer, she was forced cut her internship short. She spent time with her father in Miami, we knew, but we were unsure of what she had to do in order to support her family. Eventually she let us know that their world was stabilizing because her siblings, including her brother, had moved in with their grandmother. Teneisha even considered transferring to a school in Florida, even if it meant delaying receiving a degree for another year. She is currently still at Howard, but has moved into a different apartment and has even changed her major to pursue something she enjoys more.

Teneisha is sweet and soft-spoken. She never raised her voice to speak, but eternally raised the most important questions – the questions that related to the ability of different ideas and initiatives to help students in need – in discussions with Department staff. Teneisha always encouraged me to ask questions during events, to speak up about being involved in meetings, and to take on new opportunities as an intern. She is driven to ask these questions certainly from her intellect and critical thinking, but additionally from her personal understanding of the failures of the education system. From her own personal experiences having to delay her education to the effort she puts into sustaining herself and her brother

In the main entrance of the U.S. Department of Education.
while paying for school, Teneisha sees and overcomes barriers to her own college access every day. Her insight into her siblings’ experiences shows that educational setbacks can affect students even at younger levels, in high school and even earlier. Though Teneisha is working with her brother and sister to make sure that all of them can attend college, circumstances are not in their favor due to the lack of support that students face in school and the lack of support she has in the process.

In the Office – Greg

Greg was my supervisor in action for the first third of my internship, and in name for my entire internship experience. I had initially applied to intern in the Office of Innovation and Improvement, to work with arts integration education. However, due to logistical changes I was placed under Greg, Special Assistant for the Program on College Access in the Office of the Secretary, a realm that I knew very little about. In the months preceding my internship, I learned what I could about Greg and about his program. I read speeches he gave across the country, press releases from the Department, and articles about the increasingly difficult problem of helping students access a high-quality education. From my education classes and advisors on campus, I sought to find out what programming was well-known and ongoing in education so that I would be best equipped to jump into whatever work I would be doing. I tried to be thoughtful in my research, but I was nervous. Every article I read and comment I listened to informed me of how complex college access was as an issue, and I struggled to understand how I could fit in to help make the answers a little more clear.

Greg’s office was cluttered and personalized in a way that I did not expect from a federal employee. The large space, close to the grand office of the Secretary of Education and featuring a stunning view of the Capitol, exemplified the position of authority that Greg held. On top of the cabinet by his desk sat pictures of him with Secretary Duncan and President Obama, mementos from governmental successes. I was nervous simply being in his presence. I was heavily aware that I, a student and intern, was seated in the space where Greg did work that could change the nation. Around the room, though, were not depictions of power but rather windows into his private life. The seeming clutter told stories, personal and political, about Greg’s relationship with his work and the individuals in his life that brought him to that place in his career. During that first morning Greg ran through an introduction of himself and why he did the work he did every day.

Nearly 65, Greg had been working in education and youth services for the entirety of his career in one way or another. His work in the Obama
administration constituted his first and only time in a federal position in D.C. The pictures and ornaments around his room were primarily tokens from previous jobs and experiences that functioned to ground him in what he was now doing. Many of the artworks on his walls were done by children at the afterschool enrichment program he ran in Chicago. The scribbles of writing and crayon art that shone from the generic white walls infused the office with the stories of those children, who overcame obstacles not because they could but because they had to. The picture revealed a younger Greg, already so invested in the pursuit of aiding youth, with children who have long since left childhood but whose experiences at that time have hugely influenced a now-bureaucrat intent on making a difference.

The artwork that hung on the wall right before him, so that he could see it every time he raised his eyes from his desk, was drawn by a little girl in one of the programs. In the image, the girl wrote about how she loved God and He loved her. Greg revealed to me that the girl was killed shortly after creating that piece of artwork, the victim of a stray bullet from gang violence that had surrounded her while she had been playing outside.

I was struck by Greg’s candor while telling this story, that he as my supervisor would reveal to me vulnerability in his past community and a story that still brought him sadness. It was only later, after interacting with other staff at the Department and learning more about the issues they grappled with, that I realized how instrumental the reminders of that vulnerability were. To Greg, remembering the specific students he was working to affect helped him stay focused in his work and passionate about his cause. The photos in his office told stories of students he interacted with who had faced barriers to their education from factors in their lives and communities. While he served an administration, he truly worked for those students in everything that he did.

During our first discussion Greg introduced key concepts in higher education work that would be relevant for the duration of my internship. Though imperfect, these terms were an attempt to make it easier to manage change in education, and to make it easier for those working at the federal level to grasp the realities on the ground. The first topic we addressed was the idea of “collective impact,” a concept pulled from sociology that to me sounded like a clinical way of saying “working from the ground up.” Collective impact required a coordinated effort for education that started from early childhood and moved through the end of high school to facilitate the acquisition of all skills and information that students needed to be successful in college. Ideally, collective impact could be supported and sustained by communities that worked with members of their state and local education systems to create a systematic process. In practice however, systemic hold ups made this challenging. A lack of organized entry into early childhood education has caused problems throughout the United States, the least being that it prevented collective impact measures from being taken right from the start. The push for comprehensive early childhood education has preceded the discussion of collective impact and is important outside the world of college access, and appears to have a long way to go before any major structural change can be made. From there, the impact of secondary schools and states has been complicated by a constant inequality in resources, and federal programs, such as No Child Left Behind, that conflict with state goals. Greg’s experience reinforced his commitment to collective impact, because he has looked at education from multiple sides and has seen the strength of coordination amongst multiple players.

Greg first got involved in youth issues through the civil rights movement, when he, a high school student from a rural town in Wisconsin, went on a trip across the country to promote activism. From there he worked in Chicago in a classroom, in afterschool programs in experimental schools, and even for a foundation that provided funding and support to youth education initiatives in the city. It was there that he met now-Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and even President Obama. Despite the high profile individuals he met there whom he is still in touch with, Greg let me know that many of his close friends who keep him connected to communities while he works in government were actually students and staff in the schools that he worked with. Now grown, those students he helped teach as a young adult have their own paths in different fields.

When Greg spent a month away from the office for a knee surgery, I was able to interview him on the phone about his experiences. While I sat in his office, he referenced the pictures in his office from memory and directed my attention to them. The faces and images he saw every day, the very same ones he pointed out to me during our first discussion, had more meaning even though he was away.
In connecting with those people from his previous work, Greg is able to remain connected to his community and to his passion. He brought up the relationship between his work in education and social justice, and seemed to rely heavily on those relationships to sustain his view of social justice and ensure that everything he does helps him keep to that.

Many of the pictures, bookends and knickknacks that Greg surrounded himself with at work flashed the bold word “believe,” like the poster that my mother put up in my childhood room. Greg’s belief in student potential and achievement splashes the walls of his office, the paperwork on his desk, and the world that he puts into his work. College access uses that spirit to encourage foundations to donate, coalitions to form, schools to support students, and students to believe in themselves. It is a beautiful model. But, as I saw around me, federal offices and institutions of higher education run much like businesses focused on money more than morals. As the landscape of schools, colleges and government shift around me, though, I sometimes find my belief in that dream slipping. I found myself wondering if “believe” was enough to make college access initiatives effective in transforming the lives of students who needed something more substantial than hope.

If anyone would make a positive difference, however, it certainly would be Greg. His commitment to his past keeps him grounded in his dreams for the future. His humble background and deep work experience with social challenges that broadly affect and often encompass the system of education, in some of the most difficult areas of the United States such as Chicago at the end of the 20th century, humanize him. It does not take more than a few minutes with Greg, seated in his office, his professional home base, to recognize the joy that comes to his eyes and the laugh that brightens his trained, academic expression when he reflects on why he continues doing what he does.

His conscientious practice of keeping in touch with the individuals he had worked with throughout his life make it easier for students and officials alike to trust his judgment and expertise.

Being placed with a supervisor as thoughtful as Greg helped me tamp down my unease about the challenges faced by the Department and my own uncertainty about my ability to make a difference and effect social justice. Greg understood the cycles of institutional violence that kept the students he worked for, the students he knew, from reaching their higher education dreams. He knew it was an uphill battle that he had been facing for his entire career. At the very least, my efforts were going to free up time for Greg to make serious changes in the world of college access.

From the Classroom – Emily

Emily was different from the people I met at the Department because she was not a politician or government official. Emily was a Teaching Ambassador Fellow: a teacher who applied and was accepted to a program through the Department to provide a voice for teachers. It was a nod to the importance of teachers as the most significant on-the-ground actors in enacting positive change in education. Conversely, it recognized that teachers were often the players most affected by political decision-making at the federal level, and that not all of those decisions were helpful to them. For her first year as an Ambassador she chose to sit in the Office of Education Technology because she believed in the monumental impact that technology has on education in the classroom. This year, her second in the role, she will be working in the Office of the Secretary in a more policy-based role.
Emily applied for this position not knowing what it was, only knowing that she wanted to do anything possible to provide a voice for teachers. A Spanish teacher from Florida who was inspired by her father, who had been a teacher, Emily had always worked to be involved in her school and to be a resource to teachers. When changes in the district made teachers fear for their autonomy in their classrooms and their ability to do their work effectively, they turned to Emily. She was upset that teachers were coming to her in tears because of their concerns for their classrooms, their schools and their profession. Emily, in turn, made it her mission to seek answers. In applying for this program, Emily made it clear that she was working to represent the teachers from the community that she came from to ensure that they and other teachers always felt supported in their classrooms and able to do their work—which, at the end of the day, was always to help kids.

Emily was very open with me about her dissatisfaction with the way that teachers are seen in the public eye. She believed that choosing teaching as a profession should not been seen as a sacrifice, and she was displeased with the idea that teachers were professional martyrs who gave up parts of their future for others. Rather, she believed that teaching should be treated as a reputable profession in the eyes of the public, which can raise morale for those who commit their lives to it. On the side of the government, Emily also expressed displeasure with the idea that teachers felt that they had to ask for a seat at the policymaking table. As the most direct point of contact with students, they are entitled to a seat at the table. They are entitled to the majority of the seats at the table. Emily truly believed in the social justice implication that her work has for education overall. By providing a voice for teachers and acting as that seat at the table, Emily was committed to empowering other teachers to have their ideas be heard and to maintain the autonomy of their classroom experiences.

My conversations with Emily about the role that teachers play and the respect they deserve resonated with me strongly. They brought to mind my mother’s reservations about me teaching, but her overall positivity about the choice because of the benefits that teachers afforded to students. Emily’s view on bringing teachers to the table was a perspective that I am confident all teachers and their families could support. Emily transferred the boundless energy that she had in her classroom to her work in the Department, but still had a ways to go to affect cultural change that would bring forth the importance of teachers. She let me know that she was never “teacher tired” after work at the Department, indicating there is something much more deep and personally pulling in a classroom that cannot be felt elsewhere, even in a position that is supposed to be far more illustrious. Her love for teaching and for supporting teachers made me more confident than ever in my goal of working in various aspects of education, to continue the work that individuals like Emily lay out.

Emily’s openness with me about the profound difficulties that teachers face in the classroom, far removed from the district-wide or federal governing bodies making decisions for them, was some of the most honest feedback I heard at the Department. Her job required her to report from her experiences on the front lines facing students, parents and administrators as the gatekeeper separating ignorance from knowledge. Despite the joy she finds in her students, it was troubling that she was so overwhelmed with the conflict other teachers were bringing to her that she felt that she had to act. While it is wonderful that she is involved, it is horrifying that she felt that she had to leave her life and her job in order to make the school environment more positive.

Emily’s story continues to complicate my perspective on who can and should have the power to make change in education at the federal level. While the bureaucrats around her had the political know-how, she had the understanding of how schools work. However, people like Emily will never be the lead decision makers in Washington because they lack the political capital to effect change, even if they know it is right. Caught up in the balance of power, Emily may just have been the most powerful change-maker at the Department, made powerless by a system that sought to empower teachers in title rather than in practice.

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The barriers to making changes to the education system and, in the area of that which I was most involved in, increasing college access, are far-reaching. Like monuments that stand as physical testaments to greatness just a few city blocks from the Department, these systemic barriers rise, sturdy and resilient to external forces.

Human Potential – Going and Returning Home

Washington, D.C. is a complicated political and social environment, built with the projection of languid ease and grandeur. The towering monuments that celebrate larger-than-life feats, buildings cast in white and gilded in gold, seamlessly efficient system of public transportation, and grid-like street structure that carves the city in fourths adds to the illusion. As a transplant from a small liberal arts college to the center of political thought and action, I was lulled to believe that this celebration and concentration of talent in one city meant that solutions were pumped out of the city with gusto. The reality was often much harsher, better represented by D.C. on late summer days when the sun would be suddenly obscured by clouds, and rain would pour suddenly and ruthlessly. The realization that the seat of educational decision making, the U.S. Department of Education, did not even have solutions to the issues plaguing the education system, came as suddenly and as dramatically as those periods of seemingly endless rainfall.

On a theoretical level, I came to D.C. with knowledge of many of the social challenges that students face. I left at Brandeis notebooks full of words like “systems of oppression,” “cycles of poverty,” “social capital,” and “value added learning.” Pulled from the pages of books, I departed for my Sorensen Fellowship with the naive student assumption that the individuals whose achievements had been written of in my textbook knew what they needed to accomplish and how to do so. With an appreciation for education instilled in me by my parents from an early age, I hoped to help the Department make strides in college access that I was sure they were already easily making. Just as I saw in my student programming at Brandeis, work at the Department encompassed a great deal of significant ideas that were difficult to fund and difficult to garner support for. Blocks imposed by Congressional bills, partisanship and funding allocations built walls, despite the fact that education seems like an issue that anyone can support. Department of Education staff certainly knew, just as the writers of my textbooks and my professors in class knew, what the issues were. However, they were grappling with how to create actionable solutions. The impact was overwhelming to professionals and college-aged interns alike, and the result was a department that tried to succeed but struggled.

Fortunately, the Department put in place some truly brilliant minds in education, along with some of the most dedicated civil servants in the field. By meeting Teneisha, Greg and Emily, I was able to find some hope for the Department’s ability to effect change. Though the systems that operated at a macro level were staggeringly complex and interconnected, all three of these
Department staff members sought to understand the systems through their deeply personal lenses. Through her experiences and observing her brother’s obstacles in school, Teneisha has the understanding and insight to be able to make major differences for students who are also facing difficulties as a result of the systems of oppression at work in the education system. Greg, with his deep connection to students in need, sits at the forefront of policymaking and advocacy for college access, and very conscientiously keeps those students in mind in his day-to-day work. They are the reason he has spent his entire career working in education and youth services and, at this monumental place in his career, their influence on his service is evident. Finally, Emily, as a teacher who came to government to widen the space for teacher involvement, has the knowledge of the classroom that is desperately needed in the politics of education but is often overlooked in favor of a knowledge of politics.

These three leaders I had the privilege of meeting at the Department clarified my understanding of what a true civil servant in education does and should look like. In bringing their personal stories and connections to their work, they seek to serve others in an honest manner, and each success is as personal to them as it is to the student or group experiencing it. Though the places they are in their lives and specific interests vary, that genuine core is the same.

Working with them eased the conflict of whether or not I was enacting social justice. As something that is not quantifiable by hours worked on the job or test scores that students will receive years later, I can only measure my social justice impact through what I learned and can bring forward. The mentorship of Teneisha, Greg and Emily allowed me to gain knowledge about the problems but, most importantly, an understanding of the barriers to solutions despite the best intentions and best practices of professionals. It allowed me to understand that my passion can be reflected back to me in strong role models, and helped me clarify the role I wanted to play in effecting change in the education system in the future. The barriers to making changes to the education system and, in the area of that which I was most involved in, increasing college access, are far-reaching. Like monuments that stand as physical testaments to greatness just a few city blocks from the Department, these systemic barriers rise, sturdy and resilient to external forces.

During my first week at my internship, Kris Perry, lead prosecutor for the Supreme Court case against Prop 8, which had been preventing marriage equality in the state of California, came to speak at the Department. After a discussion with Secretary Duncan about her background promoting early childhood education, she left our group of assembled interns with some words of advice. She let us know that we were all there because we believed in the power of human potential. She did not ask us that, she knew it about us. I wrote the line down on the cover of my fresh, yellow legal pad, which I would go on to fill with words and work. . . . I knew the statement was strong, though I could not have anticipated how significant a role the idea of belief would be throughout my summer.

Now, back at school, I keep the paperweight that Greg gave me that reads “Believe” on my desk, and the yellow legal pad on my bookshelf. Long wrinkled, the text on the cover remains. The belief in human potential, and the impetus to stay connected to other people while working in education, connects me to my internship and keeps me connected to Teneisha, Greg and Emily. While they, like Secretary Duncan at our brown bag lunch together, would likely be unable to provide complete solutions to the difficulties affecting the American education system, I am certain that they will continue working tirelessly to amend them. While it is not a complete solution, I am confident any conclusions they come to will always be supported by a genuine appreciation for what they do and love for the students that they support. To me, that tie to the community they support is where true social justice work begins, and I am glad that it is represented in my three mentors from the Department.
"Don’t Forget Me, Sir": Reflections on “Development” in Hubli, India

Shane Weitzman ’16

Abstract
For the last several months, I have been holding in tension my beliefs about a fundamentally Eurocentric transnational finance system with the stories of the individual Indian students I met this past summer who want a “better life.” Because most of my time in India unexpectedly was spent teaching English, I’m grappling with the complexities of using English language instruction as a tool to increase opportunities. By participating in English language learning and teaching in India, in some ways, I am perpetuating a system that is not only grossly unfair, but also contributes to huge wealth and accessibility gaps on a global scale. Unfortunately, this problem will take many decades, if not generations, to address.

For now, I would like to share something that, to me, is of critical importance: India is not a state filled with victimhood. It is a thriving, beautiful place – with considerable social and economic challenges, in no small part due to a lengthy and substantial history of colonial invasion. While on a densely crowded public bus, one of my students turned to me and said, “I have one humble request. Do not forget me, sir.” I hope that I, as an individual, never forget the people I have met this summer. I’ve juxtaposed stories about my encounters with several of them into the largely theoretical essay that follows. But more importantly, we – as concerned citizens interested in collective liberation – ought not to forget stories such as these.

Introduction
I met Abhishek during my second day in Hubli. He wore a large grin and a tight purple collared shirt. During my time in Hubli, he quickly became my closest friend, as well as being a student with whom I worked closely. What made our relationship especially remarkable was the intensity of our time together – time that was often spent within the confines of mundane happenings. As our days and weeks together passed, I found that Abhishek exists – or rather, our relationship and interactions exist – at the exact location where polite formality and deeply knowing another person meet.

Very soon after I arrived at the Deshpande Foundation’, I began to receive text messages from Abhishek. For the first few days I didn’t respond because I didn’t want to be perceived as having a “personal” relationship with some students, but not others. As the days passed, however, and as the messages continued to seem genuinely thoughtful and inquisitive, I changed my mind and began to respond with a “thank you” if he wished me well, or a “good morning” if he wished me the same. I promised myself that I would bear in mind the power dynamic in our relationship – that I, in
The night before we met in person, I received a text message from Abhishek that read, “Hi shane my name is Abhishek. You teaching english is very nice really so nice ok I will meet you tomorrow ok good night :- ).” I was pleasantly surprised by the message, but also embarrassed that I would have no way of picking Abhishek out from a crowd of Koutilya Fellowship students to thank him.

My internship site, the Koutilya Fellowship, is a skill-training program within the Deshpande Foundation – out of fairness to the other students. But, on the other hand, when he texted “ok shena can I call you friend :- ),” I couldn’t help but to enthusiastically respond “yes.”

The following evening, while walking outstretched right hands.

Abhishek, amid what felt like a barrage of tourists or study abroad groups. It is out of the way and poor – but not “so” poor as to attract a bombardment of non-Indian tourists or study abroad groups. It is out of the way and poor – but not “so” poor as to attract a bombardment of non-Indian led and funded NGOs. This is all to say that I was certainly an oddity in Hubli, and accordingly attracted a lot of attention wherever I went. I did wind up meeting Abhishek out from a crowd of Koutilya Fellowship students to thank him.

My internship site, the Koutilya Fellowship, a skill-training program within the Deshpande Foundation, is a five-month residential program open to students who have earned a three-year bachelor of commerce degree. My work was based in Karnataka – and, more specifically, Hubli – a place in India that is not popular for tourists or study abroad groups. It is out of the way and poor – but not “so” poor as to attract a bombardment of non-Indian led and funded NGOs. This is all to say that I was certainly an oddity in Hubli, and accordingly attracted a lot of attention wherever I went. I did wind up meeting Abhishek, amid what felt like a barrage of outstretched right hands.

The following evening, while walking among the chaos of auto rickshaws and motorcycles – whose indiscriminate horns and occasional headlights cut through the orange-brown tint of dusk in Hubli – the song “unworry” by Ani DiFranco began playing in my headphones. In “unworry,” DiFranco sings, “And I ain’t gonna waste your time/Wronging and righting.” This lyric immediately made me think of a text message that Abhishek had sent me earlier in the day in which he apologized for his lack of English “fluency.” I remember receiving it and feeling so sad. Not sad at or with him, per se, but sad that the world is in such a state that he expressed shame for not speaking English in the same way that I do. Abhishek wrote, “shena firstapol my english communication is very low piz you can understand my message or not.” I think we should take DiFranco’s warning seriously: What are we trying to accomplish by teaching English abroad?

**English, Power and Globalization**

Since my return to Boston, I have been struggling to articulate why I found teaching English in India to be so unsettling. Maybe it is because my own politics – those claiming that the presence of English in India, and the accompanying enterprise of American college students doing unpaid internships to spread the language, is necessarily a form of neo-colonial invasion – cannot account for Abhishek’s comments. This is not to suggest that language hybridity does not have a place in India, but rather, that the reverence associated with English feels unearned at best, and, at worst, like a dangerous product of a rapidly globalizing world.

For the purpose of clarity, this essay will employ the word “globalization” to signify the “emergence of disjunctive flows of persons, ideas, texts, art forms, languages, and all sorts of ‘stuff’ also mak[ing] possible a condition in which fixity becomes untenable.” Benedicto writes that this “disjunctive flow” “must be understood in the plural (globalizations) and cannot be reduced to a particular (macroeconomic) logic.” Instead of reproducing distinctly Euro-American standards associated with English in non-Euro-American contexts through what Benedicto calls the “production of a regime of Whiteness,” globalization is fundamentally changing the nature of transnational subjectivities. In essence, then, Abhishek’s comments suggest that a process of globalization collapses any inherent distinction between the so-called “before,” “during” and “after” segments of transnational exchange.

**Instead of thinking of English Language Learning in India as “postcolonial,” I would advocate instead for understanding it as an**
Shane with students in “Cohort 7” of the Deshpande Foundation’s Koutilya Fellowship, a five-month intensive program for aspiring accountants.

The link between English literacy and upward mobility is certainly well founded. I wondered, however, if by learning English the Fellows actually saw the significant shift in access to stable employment, disposable income and the social capital that many have come to associate with English speaking in India.

In another question-and-answer session with the same executive employee, one Koutilya Fellow remarked, “Why do you only teach in English? Hindi is also [a] very important language.” In response, the executive employee said, “Okay. Let’s do a poll. Who wants to learn English?” Nearly every student raised his or her hand, and I wondered why. It may be that, since English is associated with significant access to social capital as a “global language,” even if learning English did not concretely improve the students’ day-to-day lives, it does reinforce the idea that rational modernity is of chief importance in India’s future. To account for a discrepancy between the promises of a better life and the many Koutilya Fellows’ relatively stagnant access to stable employment, disposable income and the social capital associated with English literacy, the individual student’s lack of ambition in learning is found responsible. For example, the executive employee reflected, “If you work hard, all jobs are secure. If you don’t work hard, all jobs are insecure.” He also asserted, “If you are different, [a] job will follow you. If you are not different, you will follow [a] job.”

Rather than holding the system responsible for inequities in access to jobs, I observed that an emphasis on English Language Learning endorsed modernism’s tendency to attribute success or failure to individual “will power,” without much consideration for structural forces that help some “succeed” much more than others. In this logic, only the individual can do right or wrong by either “improving” his or her “mindset,” or unwittingly trapping him or herself in India’s anti-modernism through a lack of “progress.” Since this logic is based in the individual, modernism as a system and the English Language Learning’s service to the “rational” are never subjected to the same scrutiny.

She looked at me with eyes of desperation and said, “Sir, please correct my mistake.” She was gripping my left wrist with her soft palm, interrupting my attempt to sneak out the door after our class session. During the session, for which I prepared a lesson plan on interview skills, I invited each student to be seated at the front of the class. I individually interviewed each of the 34 students. The exercise had left my body and mind heavy. Saying, “so, tell me a little bit about yourself?” to each of the students made me realize that a legacy of intolerance had become so loud that it drowned out the sound of the students’ voices. The irony of asking the students to talk about themselves in English – the language of the colonizer – was not lost on me.

I smiled weakly and glanced at the clock and again at her, hoping that, maybe, if I said nothing, she would realize that I wasn’t going to be helpful to her – that I couldn’t give her what she wanted. She stood patiently, kindly, as my heart sank. I said, “It was very good. Perhaps a little more eye contact – and you could talk about the program more, if you want.” She replied, “No, sir. Really, I want you to find my mistake.”

adoption of a particular rationality – one that values quantifying “progress” as a linear trajectory. English is used to serve a belief in a rational, more capable, more complete, and more “modern” state of being. In this way, English Language Learning is not so much “postcolonial” as it is an endorsement of modernity. I came to this conclusion as I reflected on a question-and-answer session between the Koutilya Fellows and an executive employee of the Deshpande Foundation, during which the topic of rational modernity was continually endorsed as a “path forward” for both the Koutilya Fellows and India as a whole. The executive employee rhetorically asked, “How can India grow?” He then responded, “If you all improve [the] way of thinking about [a] problem. If you will improve India, you must change your mindset.”

In order to “improve” the Fellows’ “mindset,” the same executive employee heavily endorsed English Language Learning as a critical component in accessing employment opportunities. He commented, “There are lots of jobs – it’s not that there are no jobs. But, you [Koutilya Fellows] are not ready for the jobs. This program [the Koutilya Fellowship] helps you be ready for jobs.”
Then I realized that I was not teaching English. I was complicit in a system that uses English as a tool to enforce a rationality that leaves no room for all of the language that exists outside of resumes, interviews, and job promotions. I began to question my exclusion of the spaces outside modernity. What could happen if we taught ourselves that valuing our commitment and connection to one another is a skill worth learning, even if it will never have a place on our resumes? What if we taught love, instead of conformity?

Perhaps “love” was not taught because it lacks “practical” use in the world of international finance. It would likely never come up in an interview. There was no place for “love” on her resume. Maybe I was not teaching English, but instructing a very specific kind of rationality.

I let go of her hand, sighed, and said, “Let’s meet tomorrow. I will talk to the whole class about ways to improve.”

It may be useful to think of transnational English Language Learning as a very tall ladder leading to a rooftop — supported by a house structure — with people situated at every rung. While the ladder is used to reach the peak of the rooftop, the people on the rungs closest to the ground are unable to see the destination of their climbing because of obstruction from clouds, although the ladder’s contact with the house is visible to them. In this analogy, globalization acts as the house that the ladder is leaning against. While, at first glance, it may appear that the house is solely responsible for holding up the ladder, upon further examination, we find that both the ladder and the house are actually each exerting force on each other — which allows the ladder to balance against the house. Similarly, while it may appear that a unilateral flow of power from high income, post-industrial countries is entirely supporting English Language Learning in India, in reality, this transnational flow is hybridizing English, India, and our concepts of transnational exchange. Conceptions of the English language, the state of India, and the processes of teaching and learning are all made more complex as both the ladder and the house exert pressure on each other.

My objective is not to outright reject the ladder-climbing process — the process of English Language Learning — but, rather, to ask questions about how and why people became motivated to climb the ladder — to learn English. Utilizing this analogy, I wish to suggest that language is influenced by the circumstances in which it is taught and used. In other words, like the relationship between the ladder and the house, a process of globalization exists in the space where various, often contradictory, forces exert influence on one another. In addition, like the climbing process, I propose that we examine the kinds of power that the industry of English Language Learning promises to the people whose view is obstructed by the clouds — those who are not upwardly mobile, transnational citizens. When we move away from an assumption of English’s inherent goodness, we can adopt a self-reflective practice in order to confront the social, political and economic power that English holds. English does not pose inherent goodness, but rather, promises goodness. We must confront that stark reality that English, taught transnationally, has become heavy with racist, classist and xenophobic underpinning. For example, in the same question-and-answer session between the Kouitiyla Fellows and an executive employee of the Desphande Foundation, one student remarked, “My village is very poor.” The executive employee responded, “You need to be the champion of your village. You are saying very negative [comments] and I [may] think your village is the most backward place. You need to say positive [comments], so [your village will] have good branding.” He continued, “There are no villages that are very good or very bad. All villages need improvement.” These comments may reveal a new attitude towards modernity, one that is obsessed with constant “improvement.” If English Language Learning is thought of as an avenue of “improvement,” I fear that its implementation has the potential to exacerbate existing claims to knowledge and legitimacy.

Raise your hand if you speak one language,” I said. Mine was the only hand raised. I put a single line next to the number “one” on the board. I continued, “Raise your hand if you speak two languages.” A handful of students raised their hands. I noted this on the board with five lines next to the number “two.” “Three language?” “Four languages?” “Five or more languages?” Hands rose and fell.

I began almost every class session in this way. I said, “I’m standing at the front of the class, but, I’m actually the person with the least knowledge of languages in the room.”

In her story “Targeted,” featured on The Moth, Jen Lee says, “Whenever you have something — whether it’s a religion or a business, or anything else that you think is the right solution for everybody — through that lens you can’t help but look at everyone in the world as if they are broken, and need to be fixed.” To me, teaching English felt like I was doing just that — that I was trying to “fix” something.

I don’t think that teaching English is always appropriate, but, after my summer in Hubli, I also can’t say that teaching English is always inappropriate. Jen Lee says, “I lost
the ability to ever be that certain and righteous about anything ever again.” In Hubli, I lost my ability to condemn outright. And I lost my ability to endorse enthusiastically. Both positions are equally dangerous, because they are both predicated on sameness. To me, both positions say, “What’s good for me is always also good for you.” I am continuing to challenge myself to embrace the “in between.” For me, the “in between” is where human connection rests.

An Ethical “Witnessing”

In “When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White,” Alok Vaid-Menon comments, speaking of the protagonist in his poem, “He clung on to a word like a mirror until he could no longer tell the difference between himself and his own representation.” How can we resist reducing our relationships to what we stand for – when what we stand for, in many ways, creates who we are? In many ways, we are what we look like. In many ways, we look like what we are. In the same poem, Alok Vaid-Menon comments, “We do not yet have a word to account for all the harm that hurt people do to each other. Because this, this is not what English is for. You see? English is for hurting people. English has no words to discuss itself because then English would have to stop speaking.”

If the nature and meaning of words can (and does) change in transnational contexts, it is reasonable to conclude that all language may encompass the same flexibility, under the right circumstances. This is why, in part, it may not be useful to think of English speakers in India as a postcolonial phenomenon. Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate our participation in documenting and witnessing experiences that are “outside” our own. In his TEDx Middlebury talk, he wrote, “we are nothing (and that is beautiful)” Alok Vaid-Menon remarks, “What is the point of a thesis written in a language inaccessible by the very people that it is about? What is the point of a thesis – and a researcher – who is familiar with the names of theories, but not the actual names of her own neighbors?” We need to re-consider what it means to “look.”

This summer, I did a lot of “looking” – which through this essay I’m trying to transform into witnessing. This is not an apolitical act. It is not enough to record events. One must fully consider the implications of who gets to control knowledge. In her essay “The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology” Scheper-Hughes radically reimagines an overtly morally engaged anthropology. She writes, “I suggest that cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live and that anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded.” Through an acknowledgement of the overtly political nature of “naming,” a philosophically grounded anthropology would ask the ethnographer to consider: “As writers and producers of demanding images and texts, what do we want from our readers? To shock? To evoke pity? To create new forms of narrative, an ‘aesthetic’ of misery, an anthropology of suffering, an anthropological theology? And what of the people whose suffering and fearful accommodations to it are transformed into a public spectacle? What is our obligation to them?”

Since my return to Boston, I have been considering: what was the purpose of my “witnessing” in Hubli? What is the use of my documentation? What is my ethical obligation after I have documented? Scheper-Hughes makes an important distinction between “looking” and “witnessing.” She writes, “In the act of writing culture what emerges is always a highly subjective, partial, and fragmentary but also deeply personal record of human lives based in eye-witness accounts and testimony. If ‘observation’ links anthropology to the natural sciences, ‘witnessing’ links anthropology to moral philosophy.” We must transform our documentation into social accountability. Scheper-Hughes writes, “Anthropologists as witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations.”

Perhaps social accountability can come through “witnessing” as an act of rebellion. It is powerful to observe pain and name it – to sanctify an experience by assigning it a word. In a world so filled with pain, we must begin the work of naming to demonstrate that temporalities, ontologies, lives and day-to-day experiences outside of our own are worth sharing. It is not enough to “look.” We must demonstrate a commitment to the ethnographic subject, the storyteller, through “witnessing.” What happens to the storyteller once the ethnographer’s thesis has been published? Her life and her story must be recognized as more than a testament to a visitor’s aloof theory. How will her story become sacred through naming? These are the questions that we must ask ourselves.

“Is your mommy the rice and sambar Madam?” she asked. “Yes, boss,” I replied. I called her “boss” because she held my hand when we dodged cars, motorcycles and cattle to cross the highway. She led, I followed. “Come, sir,” she would say, as she tightened her grip along my pointer finger.

Wetness began to form at the corners of her eyes. In a strained voice she asked, “Do you have the photo?” I took a wallet-sized picture of my mom out my front pocket and stretched out my palm towards her. She didn’t take the photo, but cupped my hand in hers.
“The Lord Shiva will keep mommy, Madam in good health,” she said. We sat on the floor. “Sir,” she protested, uncomfortable that I was seated on the same plane as her. “It’s okay,” I said. She said, “Your mommy Madam saved my life.” I smiled, as the wetness of her eyes transferred to mine.

She asked, “Sir, do you have lunch in your school?” I nodded, with shame suturing the ends of my mouth shut. We both cried. Maybe for different reasons, but maybe for the same.

“You saved me,” I said. “Remember when we cross the road together? I can’t get across the road without you at night,” I remarked. “No, sir. I do not save you,” she protested.

“Why don’t we just try to save each other?” I suggested. I said, “I need you. What would I do without my boss? I would be a mess.” I’m not sure if she understood my words, but we both smiled.14

Developing Towards What? Or: The Danger of Sameness

This summer, I came to understand that “development” is not just an abstract concept, but also a concrete manifestation within an industry. Like in other industries, the concept of development involves selling an idea to the consumer, reader or development practitioner. Within this industry’s ideology, the two states of being – either “developed” or “not-developed” – are often read in motion and in juxtaposition to one another. Sachs writes, “In order for someone to conceive the possibility of escaping from a particular condition, it is necessary first to fear that one has fallen into that condition. For those who make up two-thirds of the world’s population today, to think of development – of any kind of development – requires first the perception of themselves as underdeveloped, with the whole burden of connotations that this carries.15 The concept of “developed” – and, consequently “not developed” – takes on a “suspicious colonizing view”16 because, in order to achieve a “developed” status, one must start in the realm of “not developed.” We must more deeply consider the question, “What are we ‘developing’ towards and why?”

Sachs comments, speaking of the Truman administration’s characterization of development, “Since then, development has connotated at least one thing: to escape from the undignified condition called underdevelopment.”17 In order to “escape,” the development industry has created a set of ideals around minimizing differences and emphasizing “unity” to reinforce the concept that high income, post-industrial countries and communities are the pinnacle all other communities should strive to emulate. Sachs writes, “From then on, ‘humanity’ became the common denominator uniting all peoples, causing differences in skin colour, beliefs and social customs to decline in significance.”18 “Humanity” may be thought of as a way of justifying a false dichotomy between “developed” and “not developed” – one that is predicated on a single path and trajectory for every society.

I fear that English Language Learning has become a site of “humanity,” understood in this homogenizing sense of the word. Instead of invoking “humanity” to mean “unity” or “cohesion,” it may be helpful to consider humanity as a reverence for dignity. In “When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White,” Alok Vaid-Menon calls English “a language of loneliness.” He notes that English is used as a mechanism through which “we are just walking around – trying to find ourselves in one another – I mean, colonizing the entire world and calling it ‘building community.’”

Instead of using “humanity” as an ambiguous post-racial, post-class, post-
In "unworry" DiFranco sings:

And I gotta say I’m amazed – not in a good way – at how much I don’t remember. I just gotta hope – though I’m slow – it’s all part of what I know. And the facts are just pretend, anyway. Yeah, the facts are pretend.

These lyrics have a renewed meaning to me in light of Abhishek’s concern: “You going to USA then who are help me in learning English [?]” For now, I cannot claim to understand the complexities of learning English in order to achieve “success” – both defined by the students themselves and a global banking industry.

This essay is not meant to provide answers, but rather to ask questions about whose agenda we are enforcing by teaching English. English, as a language, is not the problem. Rather, I wish to question English as an arbiter of knowledge, as an arbiter of a “good” life, as an arbiter of extreme power imbalances on a global scale. I am grappling with a sense of profound unfairness that directly underlies an inter-state and transnational promotion of English Language Learning. This is – to my mind – a direct implication of centuries of colonial conquest, structural racism, cyclical poverty and unbalanced access to various forms of social, political and economic legitimacy and power. I’m struggling to understand how to negotiate interpersonal relationships that are politically conscious without being reductionist, tokenizing, or objectifying.

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Scheper-Hughes reminds us that it is possible, and possibly more productive, to advocate on the behalf of informants if we refrain from invoking a “sameness” of the human condition. Such a perspective has the danger of reserving ethical intervention only in situations in which we can see ourselves reflected in the conflict.

During my summer in Hubli and since my return to Boston, I have been seriously considering the implications of teaching English abroad. I have been reflecting – often with deep sadness, considerable anger and unwavering disdain – on the complexities of unpacking a global and transnational banking and finance industry that demands English literacy. It is not my intention to minimize the importance of learning English for the Koutilya Fellowship students. Rather, I feel deeply ambivalent about English being a “gatekeeper.”

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“Who would like to put their sentence on the board?” I asked, as three dozen hands shot up from nearly as many wooden desks. I arched my bare heels and stood on my tip-toes, taking care not to allow the slippery tile floor to uproot me. I pretended that I had been standing here for a long time, although I have only just arrived. Maybe, if my feet stayed grounded, my presence at the front of the classroom – as the “knower” in the classroom – was warranted, even fair. I had prepared a lesson on sentence structure. “Subject. Verb. Object.” I instructed. “Subject. Verb. Object.” They repeated.

Perhaps the only path forward is to hear in Abhishek’s voice – and in the countless other systematically devalued voices – the legitimacy, deep consideration, and appropriate political power that have been stripped from them. In his talk “we are nothing (and that is beautiful),” Alok Vaid-Menon asks, “Who is invited to speak about a movement, and who must die for it?” Our job is to use these dilemmas productively. Our job is to hold space for each other – to recognize difference and be accountable to each other. I went to India for a summer – spent precious time with people who so generously shared their space, food, work environment, and stories with me – and now, like a mismatched children’s toy set, I’m trying to fit the stories of Abhishek’s round pegs into my square-hole life. How can we hold space for each other, when some of us get to take up so much more space than others?
Towards an Ethical English

In “we are nothing (and that is beautiful)” Alok Vaid-Menon notes, “Because we have allowed the crisis of success to go unregulated, we find ourselves in a peculiarly awkward position – celebrating every new success story – while, by and large, the world continues to get more unequal, more unhealthy, and more unbearable for the majority of people.” The concept of development is an especially dangerous one because it asks people to think of themselves as “pre-successful” and “post-successful,” with the former corresponding to “not-developed” and the latter to “developed.” Later in his talk, Vaid-Menon argues that if we refuse to think of our lives as a competition toward the goal of “development,” “we are failing to accept a world of injustice. We are failing to buy into the myth of progress. We are failing to live up to the goal of success.”

If we throw out the word “help,” and un-learn the principles that transnational aid is predicated upon, we may allow growth in directions that don’t lead back to ourselves. If there will ever be truly just living, we must reevaluate who has power and why. I didn’t volunteer in India because I was smarter, more capable, or wanted something more than anybody else. These things are far from random, but rather the result of a historical legacy of power concentrated in a way that benefits me, and harms others.

It now becomes our responsibility to address systems whose power imbalances are so cruel to so many. Our challenge is to make the profound unfairness of life motivate us to witness each other’s experiences. Our challenge is to do this not because, on some fundamental level, we are the same – but because, by embracing difference, we make room for so much that we don’t already know.

By not being special, we can build justice.

Fluent in the Language of Truth

We must reconsider the pedagogy of how English language knowledge is created, validated and transferred. English Language Learning is a symptom of a development industry that “both promises progress in improving the lives of the marginalized masses and threatens this progress with advanced capitalist forces antithetical to these changes.” To reimagine interventions such as English Language Learning in an egalitarian style that is conscious of power-laden claims to knowledge is to disrupt the silence of compliance in a system that validates massive human suffering. We must resist “all of the white men who designed your curriculum – I mean, empire – and disguised it as an education.” As those who are empowered to teach English, it becomes our challenge and responsibility to teach in an ethical way. In our learning, we must not “forget how to speak, forget how to act, forget how to resist.”

In our teaching, we must not become indifferent to the thousands of languages that do not have the “better life” sales pitch that English holds. In other words, we must not “forget how to brown, forget how to human.” In order to realize this transformation – to teach and learn in a way that celebrates difference and recognizes power – we must reframe our lessons. In “When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White,” Vaid-Menon says, “We do not have a word in the English language to apologize, and actually mean it.” It is time for us, those who are in a teaching role, to talk openly about how and why English has gained power. Let us teach self-reflexivity, empathy, tolerance and listening. Let us, the American intern-teachers, name historical traumas and teach ourselves and each other to say “I’m sorry” – and really mean it.

To create a just English Language Learning we must reject the premise that it is predicated upon, namely, that students must enter the English-speaking world in order to “improve” their day-to-day lives. Instead, we, the English teachers, must reexamine our own complicity in global knowledge and commerce that demands
English fluency. Of our formal educations and informal social relations, Vaid-Menon says, “They have not taught you to become fluent in the language of truth.”

Now is the time to teach each other and ourselves to become fluent in the language of tolerance; in the language of justice; in the language of truth.

Notes


3. Ibid., 303.


5. Herbst, 641.


11. Ibid., 416.

12. Ibid., 419.

13. Ibid., 419.

14. The name of the organization the student is referring to is the the Akshaya Patra Foundation. The student I wrote about in the vignette was able to stay in school because she received a midday meal each school day supplied by the Akshaya Patra Foundation. The Akshaya Patra Foundation operates a centralized kitchen in Hubli that serves 126,693 children in 789 government schools. Across India, as of this essay’s publication, Akshaya Patra serves midday meals each school day to 1.4 million students in 10,661 Indian government schools. Because each meal costs Akshaya Patra 5 cents to produce, it costs only 15 dollars to feed a child for an entire year. My mother works for the Akshaya Patra Foundation at their Stoneham, Massachusetts office. https://www.foodforeducation.org/about-us/contact-us


16. Ibid., 7.

17. Ibid., 7.

18. Ibid., 103.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

Additional Reference
