Introduction

Cynthia Cohen

"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
expanding his knowledge and understanding of Eastern Central Europe and in Poland about the culture and the Jewish life in childhood, he developed a strong curiosity about the Jewish culture and the history of the Jewish community. This curiosity led him to pursue a career in diplomacy. Coming from a Polish Jewish family, he spent many years of his life in Poland, Turkey, and HaOranim, Israel, but has also spent many years of his life in the Polish/Jewish league, newly reinvigorated Polish/Jewish league, 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.

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 school 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.