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Introduction

Leigh Swigart

This fall I had the pleasure of working with the 2016 cohort of Sorensen Fellows as their instructor for PAX 89, the course that serves as a follow-up exercise to their summer internships. The course has a dual goal: it provides an opportunity for the Fellows to reflect on the work they performed during their internships and the learning it engendered, and it offers guidance to these students as they write about their experiences in whatever way they consider most meaningful.

This group of six Brandeis students was selected through a rigorous competitive process in fall 2015. Those who emerged successful from the process had impressed the selection committee with their maturity, thoughtfulness and intellectual curiosity, as well with their sincere interest in the proposed fellowship site and activities.

Three Fellows travelled to places wholly new to them: Marcelo Brociner (of Somerville, Mass.) to Hanoi; Brandon Tran (of Houston, Texas) to a monastery outside the Indian capital of New Delhi; and Sophia Warren (of Scarborough, Maine) to Jerusalem.

Two Fellows worked closer to home, but in unfamiliar contexts: Jennifer Almodovar Jimenez (of New York City) in Boston; and Jake Greenberg (of Old Tappan, N.J.) across the state line in New York’s Rockland County.

And Yael Jaffe (of Hollywood, Fla.) was in Jerusalem – far from home, but rediscovering a city that she had previously lived in, as she experienced it in a new way.

Their essays collected here, carefully crafted over many weeks, pull us into particular times and places, allowing us to share in what the Fellows saw, what they did and how it all affected them.

The initial promise we saw in this group of students was not mistaken. I was impressed with the spirit of exploration, self-interrogation and collaboration that the six Fellows demonstrated throughout the semester. Our course activities – whether focused on reading, writing or discussion – brought to light the many ways in which the Fellows had comparable yet distinct encounters with their summer internship sites.

Collaboration is not a given when six young people come from diverse backgrounds, grew up in different cities, and carried out their internships in disparate sites across the globe. Yet this geographic dispersion notwithstanding, these Fellows found that their Brandeisian outlook – and especially the passion they share for social justice issues – served as a common denominator as they described their respective experiences, asked probing questions of one another and critiqued one another’s writing.

Other common threads pulled the group together as well.

Each of the Fellows who travelled to a new place, for example, had a prior connection that made the internship experience particularly significant. Sophie had been involved with Seeds of Peace, an organization that seeks to bridge differences across Israeli and Palestinian societies, for many years in Maine. Her time in Jerusalem was the first opportunity for her to see firsthand how such efforts do and do not work.

Brandon has been a practicing Buddhist for much of his life, and his internship in an Indian Buddhist monastery was an eye-opening way to see how the religion is practiced in its birthplace. And Marcelo was following the trail of his grandfather, a Cuban artist who had been to Vietnam decades earlier to document the horrors of its war with the United States.

Confronting diverse questions around identity was another experience shared by Fellows. Yael grappled with her identity as the most observant Jew,
and a cisgender person, in an Israeli organization that promotes dialogue on LGBTQ+ issues and across divergent Jewish communities. Jake learned how much his family’s socioeconomic status had shaped his appreciation of the environment and his easy access to nature. Jennifer was the sole person of Dominican background working in an NGO devoted to justice for and human rights in Haiti. She quickly threw herself into an important project focused on bringing about accountability by the United Nations for the cholera epidemic in Haiti that followed the 2010 earthquake. Marcelo realized how isolating it can be to live alone in a foreign country without the requisite linguistic or cultural knowledge to achieve any real integration.

Each Fellow was transformed by their summer experience in some way. Yael’s greatest discovery was about how to engage most constructively with the “other,” and ultimately break down the barriers in our society that create fundamental “other-ness.” Brandon’s passion for dentistry, and bringing it to underserved communities, was reinforced at the same time as he discovered the reasons for his strong faith in Buddhism. Marcelo’s relative social isolation in Vietnam allowed him the time and space to reflect on his future career trajectory. Sophie was reminded that human rights work must be guided by the communities of people it is designed for. Jake learned an important lesson about environmentalism when he discovered how invasive species have been spread inadvertently in the terrestrial and aquatic landscape: it is important to be conscious of one’s choices when interacting with nature because even well-intentioned actions can have unintended consequences. And Jennifer encountered her own inconvenient truth – that an organization established for the wellbeing of humankind, the United Nations, can also do harm and should be held accountable for it.

As their instructor, I underwent my own transformation. Each week I looked forward to the insightful comments of these students. They led me to think in new ways about travel to new places, engagement with local communities and how best to engage in social justice work, whether at home or abroad. I enjoyed seeing how their essays evolved, and the enthusiasm with which they offered suggestions to their peers and approached their own revisions. As the semester came to a close, I felt lucky to have worked so closely with this hardworking and hard-thinking group of students.

I would like to thank my colleagues at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life for the critical roles they play in the Sorensen Fellowship program. Without them, my own job as instructor would have been impossible to perform. Marci McPhee oversees all stages of the program and is its backbone. Barbara Strauss manages the communications side of the program, including the expert editing of and photography for this very publication. Cynthia Cohen and David Weinstein carry out the myriad tasks associated with the Fellowship with great skill and even greater humor. David Weinstein manages the communications side of the program, including the expert editing of and photography for this very publication. Cynthia Cohen and David Weinstein carry out the myriad tasks associated with the Fellowship with great skill and even greater humor. David Weinstein manages the communications side of the program, including the expert editing of and photography for this very publication. 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**The 2016 Sorensen Fellows:**

**Jennifer Almodovar Jimenez** ’18 is from New York City. She is majoring in international and global studies, with a minor in legal studies. Jennifer entered Brandeis through the Myra Kraft Transitional Year Program (MKTYP), and served as the MKTYP Senator in the Student Union. She is a ‘DEIS Impacter and serves on the E-Board of the Caribbean Culture Club. Jennifer is a research assistant at the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, investigating wrongful conviction cases. Jennifer also studied international criminal law in an intensive summer program at The Hague in the Netherlands. She attended hearings and demonstrations at the International Criminal Court, International Court of Justice and various war crime tribunals. As a daughter of immigrants from Hispaniola, Jennifer is very interested in immigration law and in human rights issues. For her Sorensen Fellowship, she interned at the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH) in Boston. Some of the issues that Jennifer worked on at IJDH included women’s rights, immigration, and the citizenship crisis for Haitian descendants in the Dominican Republic.

**Marcelo Brociner** ’18, from Somerville, Massachusetts, is majoring in cultural anthropology and minoring in creativity, the arts and social transformation. On campus, Marcelo works as an adviser at the Hiatt Career Center, and as a Brandeis Beacon, collaborating with fellow Beacons to initiate projects aimed towards creating a strong bond between the student body and the University. He is a multi-faceted artist, mainly focusing his creative energy...
on writing and recording rap music, photography, and illustrations. Marcelo is Cuban-American, the grandson of Rene Mederos, a famous Cuban political artist who was sent to Vietnam in 1969 to paint scenes of the war against the United States. Marcelo interned at the Work Room Four art studio in Hanoi, Vietnam. His responsibilities included researching potential projects to undertake, transcribing meetings, maintaining the studio space, and liaising with local artists.

**Jake Greenberg** '18, from Old Tappan, New Jersey, is majoring in environmental studies and business. He is a Co-President of Net Impact: Brandeis Undergraduate Chapter, a Community Advisor and a Co-Chair of Brandeis’ Senate Sustainability Committee. He is especially interested in environmental policy and sustainability practices and believes that there is an inherent interest for companies, nonprofits and government agencies to protect the planet and its people. Jake has created a sustainability blog called “Business Meets Environment,” in which he writes and edits articles related to environmental issues, solutions and experiences. He worked this summer as a Rockland Conservation & Service Corps intern in Rockland County, New York for the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rockland County, building environmental awareness in the local community while discovering many of the natural marvels and challenges of New York’s Lower Hudson Valley. Jake worked to build hiking trails and clean out polluted outdoor sites. He also employed his public speaking skills to educate the Rockland community about hazardous chemical pollutants carried by fish in local waterways, the best practices for organic waste reduction, and various tips for local horticulture. Jake was most deeply involved in a citizen research science program with the Lower Hudson Valley Partnerships for Regional Invasive Species Management and an educational outreach initiative by the New York State Department of Health’s Hudson River Fish Advisory.

**Yael Jaffe** '18, from Hollywood, Florida, is double majoring in sociology and women’s, gender and sexuality studies and minoring in legal studies and near eastern and Judaic studies. She is currently an intern for the Drisha Institute and is involved on campus as the education coordinator for Hillel and the undergraduate department representative for Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. For her Sorensen Fellowship, Yael interned with the Yerushalmit Movement, a grass-roots organization that works to build a more vibrant, pluralistic, and inclusive Jerusalem. Yael was involved in the group’s various community organizing initiatives, including a group entitled “Women Changing Jerusalem,” as well as the “Meeting Point” project - a weekly public gathering for music and peaceful dialogue surrounding controversial issues affecting Israeli society, which specifically serves as a locus of support for Jerusalem’s LGBTQ+ community.

**Brandon F. Tran** '18, from Houston, Texas, is pursuing a double major in biochemistry and biology. As a child, Tran followed one of his aunts to Buddhist temples weekly, where he became inspired by the teachings and chantings. Tran co-founded the Dharmic Prayer Space in the Shapiro Campus Center during his first year at Brandeis, not only to continue his own practice and cultivation on campus, but for the well-being and education of the Brandeis community. He is interested in gaining a better understanding of how Buddhism, built upon values of social justice, has shaped and helped others. For his Sorensen Fellowship internship, Tran spent the months of July and August in New Delhi, India where he resided in the Fo Guang Shan Sramanera School, a Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temple and school that trains novice monks while providing the students with academic courses. Tran spent most of his time teaching the novice monks basic English grammar and conversational English. Through his instruction, he was able to assess the motives and reasons why these children have led the monastic life as well as how their cultivation and practices have shaped and changed their lives.

**Sophia Warren** '18, from Scarborough, Maine, is studying international relations and the arts through an independent interdisciplinary major. She is a student liaison for the Brandeis Pluralism Alliance of the Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences, an English tutor of the English Language Learners Initiative, community advisor for first and second year students, and is student director of the Brandeis/Al-Quds Educational Partnership Initiative. Sophia participated as a U.S. delegate for three years with the international youth peace building program Seeds of Peace, in dialogue with young people from the U.S and conflict regions around the world. In bringing the value of dialogue to her own community, she organized around policy initiatives and artistic praxis, facilitating conversation on immigration, race, gender, and education reform, documenting recommendations for the Maine State Legislature, and state representatives.
She also worked to develop art and film projects with community partners: the NAACP and Maine College of Art. Sophia interned with The Jerusalem Youth Chorus of the Jerusalem International YMCA. She contributed to the Choir’s work empowering high school singers engaging one another in musical and verbal dialogue, using skills in community building, communications strategy, and technological programming. Sophia also conducted research on integrating mediums of art in higher education.

**Leigh Swigart, PhD** is Director of Programs in International Justice and Society at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis.

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**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 pay fitting tribute to the public servant for whom the Sorensen Fellowship is named.
The night before my first day as an intern at the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), I was so excited I could hardly sleep. Against the wishes of my family members, who cleverly reminded me that those who are sleep-deprived cannot think properly, I went to sleep at three in the morning.

Three hours later, I woke up ready to go, and more energized than I had ever been at six in the morning. It was a sunny Wednesday morning, and the crisp morning air greeted me as soon as I walked out the door. I smiled at the sun and thought to myself, “I thought this day would never come.”

The euphoric feeling I had that morning made me look forward to a two-hour journey that would soon become exhausting.

Various times during the spring semester leading up to my internship, I genuinely doubted whether or not the first day of my internship would ever come. I had been interested in various issues, including human trafficking, immigration in the United States, and the human rights violations that Haitian citizens and Dominican citizens of Haitian descent were enduring in the country of my family’s origin, the Dominican Republic.

It took many internship applications and much research on social justice organizations for me to finally end up on the front steps of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti. This process began in October of 2015, and ended the following May, when I received my acceptance letter from IJDH.

The eight-month search for the perfect internship not only led me to doubt whether or not I would be able to obtain an internship, but also to doubt myself. I questioned my qualifications and intelligence. I wondered whether I was qualified to work in the fields I was interested in. I even questioned whether I deserved to be called a Sorensen Fellow. Every time these thoughts would swim through my head, they would manifest physically in my body; my palms got sweaty, my heart would beat faster, and my eyes would gaze into space, as my mind projected images of failure and of what would occur if I did not find an internship.

These doubts were put to rest soon after I walked through the doors of IJDH and was given my first assignment.

Upon completion of my internship at IJDH, I realized that the eight-month journey that led me to IJDH was more valuable than I could have ever imagined. There were many moments of desperation that almost made me lose hope; however, that journey tested my ability to remain patient and persistent when working towards my goals. The patience and persistence I developed in the long months leading up to my internship ended up being extremely useful that summer, when I spent weeks working tirelessly on projects for which I had no prior experience.
My arduous journey also led me to believe in destiny. Towards the end of my internship I understood why it had not worked out with any other organization: I was meant to spend my summer at IJDH all along.

Why IJDH? Why the need to work for Haiti?
My relationship with the issues that the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti addresses began long before I started interning there. Both of my parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic to New York City during their youth. As a result of this background, I have spent various years of my life living in my parents’ home country. I first visited La Hispaniola at the tender age of two. That trip was merely a vacation. However, later my visits turned into yearlong stays that eventually added up to almost half of my life.

The Dominican Republic was the birthplace of some of my childhood’s fondest memories. For various reasons, I moved to the beautiful Quisqueya, another name for the Dominican Republic, when I was four years old for a period of one year. I celebrated my fifth birthday in my grandmother’s humble home in the fluffiest pink dress I had ever seen. During this stay, my attachment to the island began to grow.

Two years later, at which point I was seven years old and living in the Bronx, I remember waking up in the morning and running towards my mother because I missed my grandmother and the food in the Dominican Republic (specifically the rice). I could not say that this is the reason why a few months later my mother moved us to the Dominican Republic for three years; however, in my mind, it surely was.

It was at the age of seven that I began to notice the social inequities faced by Haitians in the Dominican Republic. I would always see them from behind the fence of my grandmother’s front porch selling esquimalitos (frozen popsicles) or palitos de coco (coconut sticks). The one thing I always noticed about the Haitians selling goods near my grandmother’s home was how hardworking they were. I remember feeling bad every time I saw them passing by with buckets on their heads under the scorching Caribbean sun. Beads of sweat would be stringing down their foreheads and faces, but they maintained their smiles as they shouted through the streets the products they had for sale that day.

“Why do they do it?” I naively wondered.

Due to the long history that Haiti and the Dominican Republic share, racism in the Dominican Republic is alive and well. The issues between Haiti and the Dominican Republic stem from wars, slavery, and the difference in cultures, and are so complex that they need a book of their own.

In a video cleverly titled “Why the Dominican Republic Hates Haiti,” the narrator goes in-depth into the history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The narrator states that Haiti occupied the Dominican Republic in 1822 for a period of 22 years. Furthermore, “during that time the Spanish-speaking Dominicans were restricted to speaking French and the Haitians enforced oppressive rules on labor and the redistribution on wealth.”

This is not necessarily the reason why relationships are strained today; however, this is definitely where the problem began.

Dominicans do not necessarily treat Haitians differently because of the color of their skin. Although the “whiter is better” complex exists as a result of colonization from Spain, there are plenty of dark-skinned Dominicans because there were also a substantial number of enslaved Africans brought to that country. There has been animosity between the two countries for decades, and Dominicans simply reject Haitian culture.

As a result of this, I always saw people treat Haitians as if they were second-class citizens who did not belong in the country. Sometimes this consisted of verbal insults, and other times things got physical. Thankfully, my family never engaged in these activities nor encouraged that kind of behavior. I remember my mother telling me, todo el mundo es igual [everyone is equal].

I initially wanted to intern at IJDH because I wanted to work on the immigration issues that Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent were
I always saw people treat Haitians as if they were second-class citizens who did not belong in the country. Sometimes this consisted of verbal insults, and other times things got physical. Thankfully, my family never engaged in these activities nor encouraged that kind of behavior. I remember my mother telling me, *todo el mundo es igual* (everyone is equal).

What is IJDH?
The director of IJDH, Brian Concannon, founded the organization in 2004 from his home on the west coast of the United States. Brian Concannon is a Georgetown Law graduate who courageously set out to create positive change in the world, something many of his colleagues in law school had likely written on their applications but have not gotten around to actually attempting.

If I had happened to cross paths with Brian in an airport, where he almost constantly was during my internship at IJDH due to his busy travel schedule, I would have assumed from his formal clothing and briefcase that he was just another executive. He is of average height, with salt and pepper hair and a reassuring smile that could make a stranger feel like he or she could trust him – a good trait to have as a lawyer. A characteristic that would have been impossible to deduce from his body language was his kindness. Although he traveled often during my internship, one thing that was clear to me was how important his work was to him, and how deeply he cared about the people of Haiti and those working alongside him.

Upon meeting Brian and interacting with him, it dawned on me how vital truly good leadership is for non-profit organizations. I viewed IJDH as a tree: Brian was the seed, his co-workers were the trunk and the branches, and the fruits of his labor were the positive things he helped bring about for the people in Haiti. An organization can only be as good as the people working for it.

Discussing an article with one of my supervisors.
I viewed IJDH as a tree:
Brian was the seed, his co-workers were the trunk and the branches, and the fruits of his labor were the positive things he helped bring about for the people in Haiti. An organization can only be as good as the people working for it.

In the early years IJDH was being run from Brian's home in rural Oregon. He eventually realized that the growth of the organization was hindered by its location, so he packed up his family and moved everything and everyone to Boston, where there happens to be a large Haitian population.

IJDH has a strong partnership with an on-the-ground organization in Haiti called the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI), the Office of International Lawyers. This partnership is the reason for IJDH's existence. In 2004, when IJDH was created, Brian was living in Haiti at the time of the coup. He created IJDH to support and further strengthen the work of BAI. Before IJDH existed, BAI had received its funding from the Haitian government, but in 2004, the funding from the Haitian government stopped, and BAI transitioned into being fully funded by IJDH. Many organizations went in to help Haiti after the devastating earthquake in 2010; however, by then Brian's organization had been established for nearly six years. Brian himself had started working in Haiti during the '90s with BAI, which demonstrated to me the long-term commitment and dedication he felt towards making Haiti a better place.

The issue areas that IJDH and BAI focus on in Haiti include, but are not limited to: fair elections, the immigration crisis in the Dominican Republic, and accountability for the ongoing cholera epidemic in Haiti. The BAI is made up of human rights lawyers in Haiti. The work they have done in Haiti is so high profile that the BAI director, Mario Joseph, has received many death threats due to his involvement in fair elections and his advocacy on other issues. From my perspective the most shocking threat of all occurred in 2004, when Joseph received a bullet in an envelope. He then relocated his family to Miami for safety. He lives alone in Haiti for fear that those looking to harm him would harm or kill his loved ones instead.

The relationship between IJDH and BAI is extremely important, not only because the BAI depends on IJDH for funding, but also because both organizations need each other to fulfill their purpose. IJDH not only funds BAI, but also represents the BAI in the United States and helps bring the attention of U.S. officials to Haitian issues. BAI serves as the eyes and ears of IJDH in Haiti by doing the on-the-ground work, thus allowing IJDH to do the necessary advocacy for Haiti in an efficient manner.

This is extremely important, because in some cases non-profits have done work for Haiti, with the intention of helping by building a school, for example, but without any idea how the infrastructure of Haiti's education system works, and thus they were not able to carry out projects that were truly impactful or even sustainable.

Getting to IJDH
Reaching IJDH was a daily expedition. Every morning I had to be prepared to leave my home by 6:55 a.m. For the majority of the summer, my odyssey to IJDH consisted of taking two buses, one commuter rail train from Lawrence into Boston, and then two subway trains once I got to Boston. It took me approximately two hours to reach IJDH in the mornings. On the return trip, this time was extended to two hours and a half due to the rush hour traffic. I will not deny that my commute was rough; however, I learned much more than I could have ever imagined from taking public transportation on a regular basis. Having come from New York City, I am no stranger to methods of public transportation, though I had never before taken it for such extended periods of time or long distances.

A constant smell of body odor surrounded me in the subway as we were packed like sardines during rush hour. Every single time, it made me regret not having made getting a driver's license a serious goal. That smell would have me feeling especially delirious on the afternoons I would get out of work feeling famished. Every time I stepped into the steaming hot subway stations of Boston, I would picture all the hundreds of people surrounded by their own little worlds. In my head there were actual bubbles around them. This thought originally stemmed from my being squished between two strangers, and realizing how that was the only acceptable setting for us to be touching in such an intimate manner. Initially, they were just sweaty strangers desperate to get
home. But then I started thinking of their humanity and realized that they were someone else’s mom, dad, child, brother, sister, or loved one. Every time we would be squeezed together, I tried to think not only of the person that was physically against me, but also of the individual world that I was interacting with. I came to see the subway as a “web connection.” The connections we had with our loved ones or our friends made us all connected in one way or another.

One particular day in the subway, I saw a woman crying silently. She was middle-aged and looked to be Hispanic. She seemed very sad, and I wanted to say something. I wondered what kind of pain was hurting her world, her bubble. But alas, though the web of the subway did allow us to come into contact with one another’s worlds, the social rules in place did not allow us to go beyond what we could see or feel from another person. It was almost taboo to speak to each other. All I felt I could do was turn away, and type in my phone: “I see your pain, but yet I must maintain a straight face.”

The Case of Cholera

The issue of cholera accountability was probably the one causing the most buzz in the office and on Twitter during my internship. IJDH was working alongside BAI to hold the United Nations accountable for the cholera contamination in Haiti. This was a very interesting issue for me to learn about personally, because there were many individuals, including myself, who had been under the impression that the United Nations was an amazing organization that did nothing but “good” work for the international community. Additionally, the cholera outbreak was something I had not heard about prior to interning with IJDH, despite the various trips I have taken to the island since the outbreak began.

It all began in 2010 after the earthquake in Haiti. The U.N. sent a peacekeeping mission to Haiti – the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti [MINUSTAH] – to relieve the chaos that had erupted in the country. The decision was made with very good intentions, but the plan did not go as the U.N. intended. Among the peacekeepers sent to Haiti were individuals infected with cholera. Unfortunately for the Haitians, waste containing the fecal matter of these cholera carriers was not disposed of or treated properly. The wastewater was carelessly poured into public canals in Haiti. Moreover, UN reports indicate that the maintenance of water treatment plants in peacekeeping camps was often ignored, and that authorities ignored laboratory warnings claiming that tainted liquids contained fecal contamination. As a result of these multiple instances of negligence, tragedy struck Haiti.

I still remember the day I began to learn the hard facts of the case. During my first day at the office, I kept hearing the word “cholera.” I knew what cholera was, but I was completely unfamiliar with what was happening in Haiti. That very first day, I was handed a copy of How Human Rights Can Build Haiti, written by Fran Quigley. The book focused on the challenges in Haiti, and on the efforts that BAI and IJDH were making to move Haiti toward becoming a better place. I was told to read the book on my own time. Given my long commute, I thought it would be a good idea to read on my way to work, but I should have imagined that the struggles in Haiti would not be a pleasant morning read.
forward to opening the book in front of me. That sense of warmth and light soon disappeared after reading the first few pages of the book.

My stomach churned as I read, word by word, the descriptions of the devastating conditions that many Haitians were living in. After the earthquake, many Haitians lost their homes and resorted to setting up shantytowns with deplorable sanitation systems that ultimately exacerbated the spread of cholera. During the time I was interning, it was reported that an estimated 780,000 Haitians had been infected with cholera, and that 9,300 of them had died as a result.\(^3\)

One of the most memorable projects that I worked on at IJDH involved lobbying members of the U.S. Congress. The skills of patience and persistence that I had honed during my search for the perfect internship ended up being extremely useful for this project. As a group, our end goal was to get as many congressional signatures as possible on a “Dear Colleague letter” addressed to Secretary of State John Kerry. The Dear Colleague letter called on the U.S. State Department to push the U.N. to take responsibility for the cholera epidemic in Haiti.

Congressman John Conyers, Jr. [D-MI] and Congresswoman Mia Love [R-UT] originally wrote the Dear Colleague letter. For weeks we called and emailed hundreds of members of Congress to sign it. Although we were passionate about what we were doing and believed wholeheartedly in the cause, it was not easy to come into the office every day to do the same thing over and over again. Some of my fellow interns were even insulted by the office staff of several congressmen and women as a result of calling and emailing every day.

Thankfully, our work paid off! The letter received a total of 158 signatures from members of Congress, who urged the United States to take a stronger stance against the U.N. for cholera accountability. The number of signatures and the bipartisan support was record-breaking for IJDH. Bringing the issue of cholera accountability to the attention of members of the United States Congress and obtaining their support, was one of my proudest accomplishments during the internship, and in my life.

Updates on the Case

In August 2016, a few weeks after I finished my internship at IJDH, news broke that the moment that IJDH, BAI, and the people of Haiti had been waiting for had finally arrived. The U.N. admitted that it had played a role in the cholera epidemic that had infected hundreds of thousands, and killed thousands, in Haiti. I was in the middle of getting ready to start my semester at Brandeis when I got the news from IJDH. I felt a mixture of gratitude for having had the opportunity to work for such an amazing organization, and pride at having contributed to positive change in the world.

Unfortunately, the moment was bittersweet. The U.N. only admitted its role after a panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit upheld the U.N.’s immunity, and ruled that the U.N. could not be sued in American courts.\(^5\) This was not coincidental. The court case that IJDH and BAI filed against the U.N. in 2011 reached a standstill. Nonetheless, it was a step in the right direction, and soon afterward the U.N. Secretary-General made promises to put together a package to provide material assistance and support to cholera
victims in Haiti. After the decision was made, IJDH and BAI were given 90 days to decide whether or not they would appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States.

The White Savior Complex

The topic of the “white savior” was not one that initially came up during my internship, but rather during my mid-point check-in visit with Marci McPhee, the Sorensen Fellowship Director, and from then on I began to think about it seriously. Due to the fact that a good number of the people working at the IJDH office were Caucasian, I realized that it was of utmost importance to me personally to analyze how the “white savior complex” fit into the organization, if at all.

Historically, people have used the term “white savior complex” to refer to white individuals, typically American or European, going into developing countries or communities to try to “save” them. These individuals have usually had good intentions and intended to bring about “progress” in the communities they have gone into. However, a major issue has been that they have often gone in with cultural blindfolds on. Oftentimes when these “saviors” go into these areas, they fail to connect to the local culture and to understand the values and motivations of the people. This has been extremely problematic, because not understanding the people and the actual issues of a community leads organizations to implement programs that end up hurting the people they intended to help.

An additional issue with the white savior complex is that the white individual will always be the hero saving the person of color from distress. An article written by Celia Edell outlines this issue of racial hierarchy perfectly. She writes, “[I]t racializes morality by making us consistently identify with the good white person saving the non-white people who are given much less of an identity in these plot lines. It also frames people of color as being unable to solve their own problems. It implies that they always need saving, and that white people are the only ones competent enough to save them. This is very obviously untrue, and it’s a harmful message to relay.”

If there was one thing I learned during my introductory anthropology course at Brandeis, it was that across different cultures no one does anything that they consider crazy, no matter how crazy we, as outsiders of that culture, think it may be. Before beginning my work at IJDH, I questioned whether or not the work that IJDH did was efficient, given the fact that it was not in Haiti, and I worried that IJDH had no real connection to Haiti and was one of those organizations with the white savior complex that did more harm than good. Shortly after my arrival, I was pleased to discover that IJDH was anything but.

There were two factors that clearly demonstrated this. The first factor was the individuals who work at IJDH. They are deeply dedicated to the work that they are doing, and are intelligent and respectful of Haiti’s culture. In fact,

With my co-workers at Family Picnic Day at the office.
Victims are often depicted as weak and lacking a sense of self-worth, instead of as strong human beings making the most of difficult, often disastrous situations. How should we appeal to people’s emotions without exploiting the victim? Where is the line?

Brian had been working in Haiti since the ’90s, the BAI has been the organization that has done the majority of the on-the-ground work. This has been very important, because no one else can know their culture and customs the way they do. The BAI communicates to IJDH the exact issues with which they need their help, which makes IJDH’s work extremely efficient.

Furthermore, another thing I really appreciated about working at IJDH is that I felt that the organization gives Haitians a humane voice. Oftentimes, organizations exploit the victims that they are advocating for when it comes time to raising money or building their profile, but at every single point of the fundraiser we had over the summer, the staff members of IJDH took a step back to analyze the way in which they were portraying victims. There were many discussions about what the approach should be to engage donors in a way that would not mirror Sarah McLachlan’s notorious animal cruelty commercial. IJDH sought to inspire, not to gain pity. This taught me a lot about respecting the self-worth of the victims and the worth of the cause I was fighting for.

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The first part of our fundraiser consisted of sending emails, and for this I suggested that we use memes, because they are particularly appealing to the younger generation, which I thought might bring in more donations. The second segment of our fundraiser consisted of sending handwritten cards to potential donors and attaching a carefully curated letter from a cholera victim. We sifted through hundreds of letters and chose one we thought adequately depicted the victims of cholera crisis in Haiti and their humanity. This was our way of appealing to the donors’ emotions, without belittling cholera victims or exploiting them. This was something that IJDH was very careful with, and something I had not previously thought about.

During this fundraiser I learned how hard it truly is to get people to support social justice financially. Charitable organizations seemed to have a much easier time getting funding than organizations such as IJDH, because it is much easier to support change that you can physically see. It can be very rewarding for donors to see that they are giving needy people supplies, like food and water, especially when they are shown sad pictures. However, when you ask them to support lawyers fighting for justice and accountability by a powerful organization like the U.N., it is a different story.

Charitable organizations show pictures of starving children, and everyone wants to help; the money comes flowing in. This practice could arguably be seen as exploitative. Charitable organizations often depict victims without their dignity in order to raise money. By this, I mean that victims are often depicted as weak and lacking a sense of self-worth, instead of as strong human beings making the most of difficult, often disastrous, situations.

Fundraising & Lessons Learned
One of the most important tasks I worked on over the summer, and one for which teamwork was essential, was the July Matching Campaign. One of IJDH’s most faithful donors challenged IJDH to a matching campaign in July, which was specifically challenging because, as I learned at IJDH, July is the hardest month of the year in which to fundraise. Hence, it required the fundraising team to come together and strategize to find the most creative way to meet this challenge.

The second and solidifying factor is the partnership that IJDH has with BAI. This partnership is what, in my eyes, makes IJDH so unique. What makes the work that IJDH does so efficient and impactful is the direct connection to the Haitian people that BAI provides. Although many of them have taken the time to learn Creole and to understand the culture of the Haitian people. The staff members of IJDH make a genuine effort to understand the issues that affect the Haitian community and to solve those issues without overstepping cultural boundaries or being exploitative.

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How should we appeal to people's emotions without exploiting the victim? Where is the line? These questions troubled me because the importance of the work IJDH is doing was extremely clear to me, and I wondered why more people could not see it, and how we could make them see it.

Final Thoughts
I will cherish for the rest of my life the lessons I learned interning at IJDH. I learned as much about myself as I did about the causes that I was working for, which is way more than I expected from a summer internship.

One of the most important lessons I learned was the importance of teamwork. I understood early on in my internship that an organization is only as good as the people working for it, but I also realized that nothing can ever be accomplished without teamwork, especially when it comes to social justice. The staff at IJDH demonstrated to me what it is like to work in a positive environment where everyone's ideas are respected and everyone wants to help each other. It not only gave me higher standards for my future work endeavors, but it also proved to me that achieving positive change in the world is impossible alone.

On the last day of my internship I reflected upon how, as a Dominican-American, I felt proud to have done work to benefit my sister country – Haiti. But at the same time I felt a measure of guilt, because I realized that no matter how much work I did, it would not be enough to make up for the suffering that Haitians have endured in my country, and unfortunately, still continue to endure.

Once again, I remembered that I would never be able to do it alone. I took a moment to pray for Haiti's future, and for better treatment of Haiti from other countries, especially the Dominican Republic. I hoped the people of my country would soon understand that todo el mundo es igual.

Notes
1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKqLBBZqo8Q
3. Ibid.
Many years later, in January 1990, my father was teaching ESL and went to Cuba to help Cuban professors improve their English-speaking skills.

Here is where the story gets really interesting. One of those professors with whom my Dad worked in Havana that year was a woman whose father was a well-known political poster artist. As it turned out, her father had created the very same poster of Ho Chi Minh that had been hanging above my father's desk for the previous twelve years! Before 1990 had ended, my father married this woman, and six years later, they had me.

My mom's father was Rene Mederos (1933-1996), a Cuban artist who worked in multiple mediums and mainly focused on painting political posters. In 1969, the Cuban government sent my grandfather to Vietnam to paint scenes of the war in both north and south Vietnam. Rene traveled with soldiers and villagers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, living through the harsh conditions of war and the relentless bombing by the U.S. Air Force. He returned once more to Vietnam during the war, in 1972, and he continued to document the war through his paintings.

During his two trips to Vietnam, my grandfather created a collection of over three dozen pieces depicting the grassroots revolutionary movement of the Vietnamese people in vibrant, detailed paintings. His work was true to the style of contemporary political paintings being done by native Vietnamese artists at that time. Both during the war and in the years afterwards, my grandfather's posters were displayed in many countries throughout the world – in private homes as well as in art galleries – beginning in Hanoi shortly after his 1972 trip to Vietnam.

I never met my grandfather, but my deepest and strongest artistic roots are connected to him, and I am thankful beyond measure for the inspiration that he has given me. As an artist myself, I incorporate his energy into every form of creative work that I do. I long dreamed of going to Vietnam in order to figure out the best way to honor the legacy he left in the art world on behalf of Vietnam's struggle against foreign domination.

In May 2015, I wrote a letter to myself declaring that I would receive a grant to travel to Vietnam and hold an exhibition of his work. In November of that same year, my dream came true, when I actually received a grant to work at the Work Room Four art studio in Hanoi, Vietnam during the summer of 2016, where I also planned to lay the foundation for my grandfather's exhibition.
Landing in Hanoi

I landed in Hanoi at around 4:00 p.m. local time on Saturday, May 21. Upon exiting the airport, I was greeted by a thick and unwavering humidity that weighed down on my skin. Luckily, I was already well acquainted with this climate, having visited my family in Cuba time and time again over the years. I was also greeted by Claire Driscoll, one of the two co-founders of Work Room Four, where I would be working for the next eight weeks. Claire had pale white skin, dyed grey hair, numerous visible tattoos, and a clear British accent. We found a taxi and headed to the studio to finalize my living situation, as I had still not found a place to live.

As we drove along a newly installed highway, I was struck by the similarities between Havana, the capital of Cuba, and Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. I saw a fusion of urban residences and rural farms, with strips of rundown shacks followed by long stretches of farmland maintained by farmers and their beautiful, brown buffalo. We arrived at our destination and got out of the taxi to the sights and sounds of cheerful children playing outside. Nearly everything, from the humidity and the slight odor of garbage, to the concrete on the street and the marble on the building, reminded me of Cuba. Considering how far away I was from both Cuba and home, these similarities brought me a strong sense of joy and comfort.

The studio is located on the 23rd and 24th floors of the Packexim Tower, a building with hundreds of apartments and a number of office spaces for real estate agencies and construction firms. The studio is one open space, with a spiral staircase connecting the first and second levels. It has a massive window that takes up the entire wall, revealing an incredible view overlooking the Red River and the outskirts of Hanoi that continued into distant and vast mountain ranges. When I arrived, there were a number of large tables covered with art supplies on the first floor, where it was clear that work was constantly being done. Claire and Dorian Gibb, her partner and co-founder of Work Room Four, had a joint office on the first floor, and next to it was an office space shared by Hai Anh and Dieu, the two administrative staff members. On the second floor were additional office spaces, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The atmosphere in the studio, largely due to the natural lighting of the space, made me excited to start working.

Claire and I quickly found a pleasant-looking apartment on Hanoi Massive, a real estate page on Facebook, and in a matter of minutes left the studio to see the apartment. We took a taxi to the house, which was located along Tây Hồ Lake, the largest lake in Hanoi, and met the landlord, who was waiting for us at the apartment. I knew immediately upon walking inside that I would be living here for the next eight weeks.

My Street

I lived on 125 Làng Yên Phư, Apt #1 in the Tây Hồ region of Hà Nội, a busy area in the capital located a 10-15 minute taxi ride away from the studio. From a bird’s eye view, my street looked almost like an island, surrounded by Tây Hồ Lake, but it was a loop road with a small road connecting my street to the next one. It was a secluded and peaceful place to live, especially in comparison to Yên Phư, a vibrant and constantly busy street located only a couple of blocks away from mine.

On a typical workday, I would leave my air-conditioned apartment shortly after 9:00 am and walk into the humid heat of Hanoi. The first thing I saw upon leaving my apartment was the only waterside living space on the entire street, in the form of an open-air shack; all of the other homes were located on the side furthest from the water. On most days I would see a man, whom I assumed to be living in the shack, sleeping in the hammock that had been set up outside. Claire had pale white skin, dyed grey hair, numerous visible tattoos, and a clear British accent. We found a taxi and headed to the studio to finalize my living situation, as I had still not found a place to live.

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of friends, who would drink at a table next to the hammock through the night. Directly next to the café, there was vibrantly colorful graffiti displayed on a wall that quickly became invisible to me as I settled into my morning routine.

I would then turn the corner onto a long stretch of my street where I could look far ahead of me. It was shaded by tall trees covered in colorful flowers, inviting locals to convene on benches and tables placed along the sidewalk. The brick sidewalk was beautifully decorated with colorful flowers and shrubbery, which contrasted with the invasive aroma of sunkissed waste. The sidewalk went along a popular playground, a home-based temple, and dozens of homes on my way to Colonel Quy’s, the lakefront Western-style restaurant where I ate breakfast every morning.

After eating there, I would pass a hip café that played tasteful music at night on outside speakers, then walk by a seafood restaurant that seemed to serve no more than one customer per month. I’d then pass by more residential apartments, most of which had open doors, which created a sense of community that put me at ease. As I finally approached the end of the loop where my street was, I would pass three separate cafés that all existed under the same roof, and offered the same menus, the same prices, and the same space across the street for customers to sit. I only went to the first of the three cafés, as it was called “Ken’s”, which is my father’s name. Finally, I would reach the end of the street and see as many as three ABC taxicabs, then hop in a cab and begin my 10-15 minute ride to the studio.

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**Language Barrier Number One: Barbershop**

**My Viewpoint**

Luckily, Claire has been kind enough to give me four days before I began working at the studio to situate myself in my apartment and in Hanoi. I left my apartment around 9:00 am to begin my first full day in Hanoi, and I was surprised upon opening my apartment door to see rainfall, albeit a light drizzle. I put on my windbreaker and ventured out in search of an ATM, for I was supposed to pay my landlord for my first month of rent at noon. There was a narrow street a couple of blocks away from my street called Yên Phụ, full of street food and clothing shops, where I found an ATM, as well as the restaurant where I would eat dinner on a nightly basis. Also located on Yên Ph was a barbershop.

I had considered cutting my hair for months before I ever set foot in Hanoi, assuming how humid it would be there, an assumption that turned out to be more than accurate. I was sweating so much in the ATM booth that I could see beads of sweat growing upon my forehead from the quarter-sized mirror located on the machine. I withdrew my first month’s rent, returned home to hand it to my landlord, and went back to the barbershop, having made a mental note of it earlier. I slowly approached it and had a smile on my face as I opened the transparent sliding door, for I figured that these barbers had never worked with an Afro before. There was only one other person getting his hair cut, so three of the five barbers looked on with considerable interest as the fifth barber motioned me over to a seat.

My barber wore an Adidas hat, a Nike shirt, and blue Adidas shoes, and his apparent attachment to name-brand
athletic clothing stuck with me for some reason. He spoke not a word of English, and more importantly, I spoke not a word of Vietnamese, so I was fascinated to see how my haircut would come out without being able to direct the process. I pulled out my iPod and showed him a picture of me from the previous summer where my hair was extremely short, and that was the only instruction that I gave him. The barber took his time in cutting my hair, and I entertained myself by using the multiple mirrors on the walls of the barbershop to see different viewpoints of the busy street through their door.

I felt extremely self-conscious while sitting in the chair because I could see and feel the three others watching me as my barber cut my hair. I was curious to know what they thought of me, and moreso, my hair. Since I didn’t know anyone in Hanoi, I was not all that worried about how the haircut looked in the end, as long as my head felt cooler.

Unable to express exactly how I wanted my barber to cut my hair, I let him do whatever he saw as most fitting. After somewhere between 20 and 30 minutes, we reached a point where we were both satisfied with the haircut, and so I got up out of my seat. I had not yet learned how to say “Thank you” in Vietnamese, so I put my hands above my head and bowed down to him a couple of times in hopes that I would get a laugh out of him. His facial expression remained unmoved, and I worried that I had offended him in some way. He told me the price of the haircut in Vietnamese, but when he realized that I was lost, he pointed to the part of the sign on the back wall that said “120,000 Dong”. Slightly embarrassed, I paid him the 120,000 Dong and walked back outside into the humidity, with a cool head.

Language Barrier Number One: Barbershop

Barber’s Viewpoint

The weather was typical of summertime in Hanoi: rainy and humid. Luckily, I was spending my afternoon in the air-conditioned barbershop where I worked, so I was quite cool myself. There were almost always more barbers than there were customers, like at this particular moment where there was only one customer and five of us, so I often found myself bored. I was thankful that our door was see-through, because although the other barbers and I are friends, it can get boring waiting around for business all day long. I would entertain myself by looking at the hundreds of people passing by on Yên Phu, the familiar faces of street vendors and the unfamiliar faces of backpacking Westerners.

I saw one Westerner who walked by wearing nothing but a striped tank-top shirt, shorts, and sandals. He seemed as out of place as the backpackers, for he was clearly not from any part of Southeast Asia, but he did not look like he was in any rush to travel through the region. What stood out the most was the long, curly blonde hairstyle, known by Americans as an Afro that covered his head. Based on the way he looked at the barbershop as he passed by, I could tell that he wanted a haircut, but Mr. Afro continued walking until he was out of plain sight, so I figured that I was wrong. Then, to my pleasant surprise, Mr. Afro reappeared outside of the barbershop about two hours after I first saw him. After a brief moment of hesitation, he opened our sliding door and stepped inside.

None of us working in the barbershop had ever cut this kind of hair before, so no one was too eager to do so. I’m not sure exactly how it happened, but it was decided that I was going to be cutting his hair. Mr. Afro spoke not a single word of Vietnamese, and I spoke not a word of his language, so I was quite confused as to how such a dialogue-dependent interaction would go without any verbal communication.
communication. Mr. Afro quickly pulled out an old picture of himself with very little hair on his head and indicated that he wanted the same haircut as the one he was pointing to in the picture. In all honesty, I was quite relieved, because it would have been more difficult to trim his hair than to just get rid of most of it.

Even so, I was somewhat nervous. I was not sure how his hair would react to being sprayed and combed, so I watched in fascination as I began to cut his hair. Because I was not styling his hair in any manner, it turned out to be a straightforward haircut that took somewhere between 20 and 30 minutes. I thought that I was doing a decent enough job of cutting his hair based on his facial expressions, which was the only way I could assess my work in the absence of verbal communication. At the same time, he seemed indifferent to each cut I made, presumably knowing that he would be unable to tell me if he wished to change something. After the haircut was finished and he got out of his seat, he bowed down to me, which I found to be quite strange. He was unable to comprehend the price for the haircut as I was saying it in Vietnamese, so I then pointed to the number on the sign, which was 120,000 Dong. He smiled in embarrassment, paid me, and went on his way, no longer the Mr. Afro that he once was.

First Commute
After spending Sunday through Tuesday exploring my immediate neighborhood, I began working on Wednesday. Before I realized that taxis in Vietnam were plentiful, inexpensive, and efficient, I took the #58 bus to work. With my body still adjusting to the 11-hour time difference between Boston and Hanoi, I woke up at 6:30 a.m. to give myself time to eat breakfast before catching the 8:16 a.m. bus. For whatever reason, I decided to wear sneakers for my first day of work, after wearing sandals for my first four days in Hanoi.

The Work Room Four art studio is located on the outskirts of Hanoi in a 25-story skyscraper called called Packexim. The massive red letters “PACKEXIM” on the roof of the building made it identifiable both for taxi drivers and myself. The vast majority of the building consists of apartments, most of which are occupied by Vietnamese, in addition to the occasional European or Indian family. The Work Room Four art studio was originally based in Zone 9, an abandoned medical school that was eventually renovated and transformed into a flourishing arts district. Sadly, for reasons that no one I spoke to could put their finger on, Zone 9 was shut down by the government after just six months. Work Room Four was forced to relocate, and purchased the space in the Packexim building.

One day I went to Colonel Quy’s Café, as I did every morning, and approached a woman working there who seemed to be around the same age as me. I took out my phone and showed her a photograph of the menu that I took the day before in order to make ordering food easier, and she got a big laugh out of that. It had rained all through the night, and in the morning it was drizzling, so the woman seated me under the iconic yellow awning that I was always happy to see from a distance. (On cloudy days, the lake’s foul smell seemed even fouler; on sunny days, the lake was illuminated with a beautiful tint of blue that distracted me from the slightly foul smell it emitted.) Colonel Quy’s attracted a large number of Western customers, and on weekends I would eavesdrop on various conversations in part out of relief at hearing people speaking English, but on that day, I was the only person eating, and I did so quickly before heading off to work.

I spent my first four days in Hanoi getting familiar with my neighborhood and those near mine, and while I enjoyed doing so, there had been no
direction to my exploration. On my first day of work, I remember feeling a newfound sense of purpose with each step I took towards Nghi Tâm, a feeling I had been missing during those first four days. It put me in a wonderful mood as I waded through the humid air towards the bus stop, which I was relieved to find after a brief moment of uncertainty. I stood at the bus stop and observed the never-ending flow of traffic that I had heard so much about in preparing to travel, with motorbikes outnumbering automobiles by what seemed to be 15 to one. While the motor bikers wore ponchos, I couldn't decide what to wear because of the humidity. I took off and put back on my windbreaker countless times before deciding to keep it off.

The #58 bus arrived a few minutes late, but I was not worried about being late to work. I got on the bus and was surprised to see that the bus driver did not deal with the fare, as there was a man sitting in a seat across from him with a cash box. I paid this man the 9,000 Dong (roughly $0.40) for my ticket in exact change, and he laughed at me as he handed me my ticket. I then sat down a couple of seats behind him and figured that he found it funny seeing a Westerner using public transportation, for as I looked around the bus, which was a little less than half full, it was occupied by perhaps 15 other commuters, all of whom were Vietnamese. Among those 15 were an old woman with a number of bags on the seat beside her, and in front of her, a man in formal clothes with a briefcase on his lap, clearly on his way to work. The bus driver was playing traditional Vietnamese music at a volume loud enough for all on the bus to hear, which I got a serious kick out of – first, because this was not permissible in the United States, and second, because I wondered what American bus drivers would play if they could. I genuinely enjoyed the music as it gave my morning adventure a more local feel.

There was no “Stop Here” button of any kind on the bus, and I learned by observing other commuters that you had to stand by the door in order for the bus driver to stop. Once the bus did stop, it remained still for only a matter of seconds, making the process of getting off the bus more exciting and dangerous all at once. I realized after some time that I had waited too long to get off the bus and that I might end up far from where the studio was, so I decided to get off at the next stop and walk from there. In doing so, I stood up at the door, the bus driver pulled over, and I jumped out before the bus quickly drove away. Of course, I had no idea where I was, but I did have a vague idea of where the studio was.

I crossed the highway. It looked like a ghost town in comparison to the area where I’d gotten on the bus, and proceeded to make my way through local back roads in the hopes of creating the perfect shortcut to the studio. I was taken aback by the beauty of these quiet and colorful streets, decorated with a variety of flowers and occupied by small homes in a presumably humble neighborhood. Unfortunately, my shortcut plan was cut short, as many of the turns I made turned out to be dead ends. As I continued my exploration, a man drove by on a motorbike and immediately smiled upon seeing me. He stopped soon after passing me and I stopped to talk. At the same time, I had my feet. At the same time, I had my cell phone and laptop with me, so if I were to step on anything and react instinctively, or more likely slip and fall into the water, my two most expensive belongings would be completely ruined.

He asked me, “Are you an English teacher?”

I approached him and said, “No, but I would like to be.”

“Where are you going? Would you like a ride?”

“Packexim. How much would you charge me?”

“Free.”

I happily got on his motorbike and we went on our way. This man went by the name of Rock. Rock was 26 years old, married, and the father of a four-month old boy. He wanted to go into the communications industry, but his English was too poor for that field, so he was eager to improve his language skills. Only minutes into our ride, heavily flooded streets met us with brown rainwater covering the pavement. We proceeded to look for detours to Packexim that avoided the flooding, but it turned out that every street within a five-block radius of the building was flooded. With the upper half of the massive Packexim building in plain sight, we decided to get off Rock’s motorbike and travel by foot via sidewalk in hopes of reaching the building. As we walked, I took down his email address and agreed to meet with him in the near future.

Now a mere block away from Packexim, I realized that there was simply no way to avoid the flooding that surrounded the building. The first day that I decided to wear shoes in Hanoi, I had no choice but to take them off and wade through the muddy rainwater in my bare feet. The water was so dirty that I could not see my feet or the pavement, and so with each step I took I was afraid of stepping on something that could cut my feet. At the same time, I had my cell phone and laptop with me, so if I were to step on anything and react instinctively, or more likely slip and fall into the water, my two most expensive belongings would be completely ruined.
before I even began working. Even though I was worried about my feet and my electronic devices, I also had a lot of fun wading through the water. It was a first-day-of-work commute that could not be scripted, and with this in mind, I had a big smile on my face most of the time.

Luckily, I only had to walk one block. I emerged from the dirty water without a single scratch on my body, and with my cell phone and laptop both intact. Upon reaching “shore,” a local looked at me and jokingly made a swimming motion, which made me laugh. Thanks to my eagerness and the help of my new friend Rock, I arrived at Packexim at 9 a.m., almost on the dot. I decided I would no longer be taking the bus to work.

**Internship**

The overwhelming majority of the work I did at Work Room Four was helping to prepare for “Art For You,” a week-long art fair that displayed the work of over 100 artists, the majority of whom were contemporary Vietnamese artists. My work consisted of wiring, framing, and wrapping paintings, washing and repainting display pillars, and transporting all of these materials to the art fair venue, which was located in the center of the city and far away from the studio. In order to promote the art fair, I spent my first full weekend handing out fliers and opening-night tickets to the front desk staff at dozens of hotels in the heart of Hanoi. Upon arriving at the fair, I helped unload, unpack, and display the artwork, as well as paint and clean the space in preparation for the opening of the exhibition. During the week of the art fair, I was responsible for overseeing the venue and being responsive to the questions and concerns of guests. After the art fair ended, we wrapped, loaded, and transported everything back to the studio.

Sadly, the intensity of my internship peaked with the art fair, and there was no work of significance for me to do in the remaining five weeks of my time in the studio. I mainly cleaned and organized various parts of the studio, completed the occasional task, wrote pages upon pages in my personal journal, and spent dead hours on social media.

Despite the mundane nature of my responsibilities following the end of “Art For You,” I learned the all-important and fundamental skills of how to handle, preserve, and display artworks on a large scale, and more broadly, I learned how to appreciate the seemingly unrewarding hours of dirty work that go into hosting a successful event. It was not until we had successfully completed the art fair that I learned to do the latter, and it is a skill that I will benefit from in the future. I also came to appreciate the importance of networking, particularly at the opening night of “Art For You.” It was there that I met Suzanne Lecht, an American art curator who owned a private art gallery in the heart of Hanoi called Art Vietnam Gallery. Claire had already told Suzanne of my idea to exhibit my grandfather’s artwork before I met her, and when we met she expressed a lot of interest in hosting the exhibition in her gallery.

Another important aspect of my time in the studio that helped me deal with the general isolation I felt was the only place where I was able to consistently speak English. It was a relief being able to escape the language barrier and communicate verbally with other people while in the studio. I was self-conscious about the fact that I did not bring much to the table in terms of labor, so I made sure to bring energy and humor with me to the studio on most days. I grew to be extremely friendly with everyone at the studio, and developed a dear friendship with Na, the only other intern at the studio.

**Ly Thien Nguyen (Na)**

Na was the only true friend that I had during my two-month stay in Vietnam. For this, I will be forever grateful.

She had bangs that slightly obscured her face, in the same way that her insecurities seemed to slightly obscure her physical presence. They stopped just short of her eyes, which were as black as the hair that reached almost halfway down her back. She was much shorter than I, which was an unusual dynamic for me to experience, and one that I happily welcomed. Her pale skin, intentionally maintained that way by keeping out of the sun, contrasted with the red lipstick that she put on every day. Her sense of style put mine to shame, because I only focused on wearing the coolest clothes possible.
in order to cope with the humidity of Hanoi. But Na wore wonderfully coordinated outfits that further reflected her cultured identity. Her laugh was contagious to me, so I would laugh and make fun of her laugh, and she would then laugh and make fun of mine.

A Vietnam native, Na had received her bachelor’s degree in business the previous spring. She lacked a passion for business, but saw it as a practical way to get a good job. She did, however, have a passion for the arts, one that was rooted in her upbringing. Her grandmother, with whom she spent much of her childhood, was an avid collector of artwork, and her father was a painter in addition to being an actor. But because she claimed to lack any creative capacity [an assessment I disagreed with], she chose to pursue the management side of the art industry. Na’s mother happened to know Dorian, one of the two cofounders of the Work Room Four art studio, and was happy to bring Na aboard after she expressed an interest in the art industry.

I was lucky to work with Na that summer. As the only two interns at the studio, we were able to vent to each other the frustrations that came with our inability to contribute to much of the work being done. She was, after me, the second youngest person at the studio, which also helped us find a common thread amidst the stark differences in our backgrounds. Despite our differences, I was surprised to discover that she was even more familiar with Western pop culture than I was! She was highly knowledgeable regarding film, which was evident in her ability to deconstruct various films and critique them in a deeply perceptive manner, and she had aspirations to become a film director. She had perhaps the most eclectic taste in music that I have ever encountered; we shared an admiration of Kendrick Lamar’s masterpiece album, “To Pimp a Butterfly.” I was elated that I was able to engage on a higher level with someone who lived on the other side of Earth, and I was ashamed by my surprise at being able to do so, having doubted my ability to connect with Vietnamese folks on that level.

Na and I spent a considerable amount of time together, not only during our seven-hour workdays but also outside of the studio. However, since I had no other friends in Hanoi, I spent the majority of my free time outside of the studio on my own, and being unable to connect with my surroundings on a more immediate level was a depressingly difficult thing to adapt to. Na really helped me to grapple with these feelings, and to navigate Hanoi, simply by listening to me. She was an incredible listener, and was happy to let me speak in order to help me cope with the culture shock that I was experiencing. We often talked about battling the inner sorrow that was manifest within each of us, albeit for different reasons, and the importance of allowing ourselves to find happiness.

As we explored Hanoi together, she answered my countless questions. She explained our surroundings in great detail, and made me more comfortable as a Westerner living in Vietnam. Without her help, I would have been lost in Hanoi. She was the only true friend that I had during my two-month stay in Vietnam, and for this, I will be forever grateful.

A Night in the Old Quarter

It would be an understatement to say that the weekend vehicle ban in the Old Quarter, the hub of Hanoi nightlife, makes for good entertainment. One night, I met Na not too far from the guarded barricade that blocks vehicles from entering, and we proceeded to pass through it into the sea of...
hundreds of people shuffling to and fro within the tight confines of the streets. There was a huge row of street vendors selling clothes, electronics, and more goods in the middle of the road, which made for serious foot traffic, so we eventually turned onto a street with no vendor stands in order to enjoy the benefits of the pedestrian-only mandate.

As we walked through the Old Quarter, there were two live bands performing; I found the music of each beautiful in its own way. However, I enjoyed the band from the center of Vietnam that was playing traditional Vietnamese instruments much more than the cover band playing popular Western songs that attracted a much larger crowd.

As we continued walking, it was cool to see that the Albania vs. Switzerland game of the European Championship soccer tournament was being shown on countless televisions set up outside for the customers of bars and cafes to enjoy – to my mind, further confirmation that soccer is the most popular sport in the world.

We then came across an intersection that might have had the largest crowd of people that I had ever seen in such close quarters (aside from organized events like baseball games at Fenway Park). I was fascinated by the mix of people there, both Vietnamese and Westerners, all trying to navigate the sheer madness of the situation we were all in. Suddenly, it began to drizzle. Sick of the commotion and our inability to freely walk, Na and I had to push and shove our way through the crowd in order to get out of the busy intersection. The slight drizzle that had felt wonderful on my skin quickly turned into a downpour. Soon everyone split like the Red Sea onto either side of the street, huddling under storefront awnings. I asked Na to hold my phone and wallet, and stood outside in the middle of the street under the pouring rain, something that I had done throughout my adolescence. Many Vietnamese looked on and laughed at me from under the awnings, and one woman took pictures of me with a large smile on her face.

After a minute or so, I rejoined Na under the protection of the awning, now soaked by the rain that I had embraced so joyfully. We managed to get a table at a bar, and ordered drinks as the rain quickly slowed and then stopped. We finished our drinks and continued walking, until we decided to sit at a bar that was across the street from another one we had visited just days before. We decided to call it a night and left the bar shortly before midnight. As I helped Na into her taxi, another taxi appeared and I waved it over for me, since we lived in different parts of the city.

Language Barrier Number Two: Taxi Ride Home

My Viewpoint

I got in the taxi and said, “Lang Yen Phu,” and it seemed as though the driver did not quite understand me. He then said, “Map?” I was extremely confused by this question because Lang Yen Phu is located in a well-known area of Hanoi; I figured that, as a local taxi driver, he had to know where Lang Yen Phu was. Still processing his question, I replied, “Map?” He confirmed: “Map.” I knew that something was strange about him asking for a map, and despite knowing that my maps application did not even work, I slowly handed over my phone.

As we drove along the main highway in Hanoi, I realized that I had little money left in my wallet. I looked at the fare meter in the taxi and I could not tell whether it read “28,000 Dong” or “280,000 Dong”, and so I pointed to it in an attempt to ask what the current price was. It was already clear that the man did not speak much English; I showed him the little money I had left and said “ATM.” He indicated that he understood, and turned off the meter, which I found strange. As we neared my street, I directed him to an ATM located around the corner from my house and he pulled over just past it. He still had my phone, and I considered whether or not to take it with me to the ATM, in case he was planning to drive away with my phone and not me.

After a brief moment of hesitation, I shrugged off my concern as paranoia and got out of the taxi. I walked about a hundred feet over to the ATM, slid my debit card into the slot, and looked back to make sure that the taxi was still there. I then entered my PIN, and quickly looked back again. I then returned my attention to the ATM,
He still had my phone, and I considered whether or not to take it with me to the ATM, in case he was planning to drive away with my phone and not me. After a brief moment of hesitation, I shrugged off my concern as paranoia and got out of the taxi.

feeling more comfortable knowing that he was still there. I looked back yet again no more than 10 seconds later, and the taxi was no longer there!

I sprinted down the street and around the corner in my sandals to see if the taxi was still in sight, and it was as though it had never even been there. With a horrible feeling in my stomach that grew exponentially by the second, I got on my knees in the middle of the empty street. I had known all along that something was not right about the ride, but I had given him the benefit of the doubt and I paid for it. I had gotten hustled by a hustler, and I had to accept defeat. Without his license plate or the name of the taxi company, and with the meter and thus any tracking off, I lacked the information needed to report the crime of which I had just been a victim.

Language Barrier Number Two: Taxi Ride Home

Taxi Driver’s Viewpoint

To say that the weekend vehicle ban in the Old Quarter makes for good business is an understatement. See, very few people drive to the Old Quarter on weekends due to the shortage of parking spaces caused by the weekend mandate. Thousands of people are on foot, and many of those thousands of pedestrians will be in need of a ride home at the end of the night.

Between my fixed wage and the frequent bonuses I take in for longer rides, I am always able to put food on the table for my wife and three children. Still, I want my family to live comfortably, so I try to make some extra money on the job whenever possible. A large percentage of the folks taking taxis home late at night are Westerners, and as evil as it may sound, Westerners are far easier to take advantage of than the locals, who know better. While I can’t exactly control who gets into my taxi, I was in luck tonight.

Around midnight, I returned to the Old Quarter from a previous trip. Upon turning the corner onto a street on the edge of the Old Quarter, I saw a Westerner waving me over as he helped someone, presumably a friend of his, into another taxi. He closed the door to the other taxi and hopped into mine. He told me to go to Lang Yen Phu, an area that I knew like the back of my hand, but I chose to play dumb. I learned only a handful of words in English for the purpose of doing successful business, and one of those words is “map.” Upon hearing him say Lang Yen Phu, I said, “Map?” He he responded with a tone of confusion, “Map?” I repeated myself again: “Map.”

The Westerner handed his phone over to me at a pace so slow that I could tell that he knew he was making a mistake. He had the newest iPhone being sold on the market, and it was valuable enough to buy my entire family a present, including myself. He handed me his phone with the maps application open, yet nothing appeared on the screen. I realized that this man did not have a SIM card for his phone, which meant that his maps application was absolutely useless. I laughed in my head at this white man’s utter stupidity as we drove towards Lang Yen Phu.

When we were about halfway to the destination, he began pointing to the fare meter, and while I couldn’t understand a word he was saying, I could tell by the way he spoke that he was confused. He showed me a handful of Dong, and then said “ATM,” and I understood that he wanted to get more money from an ATM in order to pay for the fare for the ride. I turned off the fare meter so that my company could no longer track the ride, and he directed me to an ATM just around the corner from Lang Yen Phu. I still had the phone in my hand when I pulled over just past the ATM.

I could sense him hesitating again for a moment before getting out of the car. I watched him walk about a hundred feet over to the ATM machine, slide his card into the slot, and quickly look back to see that I was still there. I then watched him enter his pin code into the ATM machine and quickly look back to see that I was still there. As soon as he returned his attention to the ATM machine, I began driving away, driving faster and faster until I was out of sight. I was back on the main highway in no more than 30 seconds.
This additional work I do on the job does not weigh heavily on my conscience for three reasons. First, it is the fault of these Westerners for so foolishly trusting somebody that they do not know anything about. Second, this white man can almost certainly afford to buy another phone in no time, whereas money like that is not as easy for me to come by. Third, I do this so that my family can live a happy life. In the end, it’s just another night on the job.

Conclusion
My naïveté had extended well past putting my full trust in a Vietnamese taxi driver, to thinking that I could conceptualize, promote, and hold an art exhibition in a foreign country in a matter of just eight weeks with so few pre-established connections upon arriving in Hanoi. I had not admitted this to myself until I met with Suzanne Lecht for the first time. When I suggested that we postpone the exhibition until May 2017, she was surprised and pleased to hear this. It became evident to me during our meeting that holding an exhibition for such a significant project with only six weeks of preparation would fail to properly honor the work that my grandfather risked his life to create.

My inability to contribute to the studio in a significant manner was a frustrating experience. I spoke no Vietnamese; I did not know how to use Photoshop, the computer program used by the studio for most of its design work; and I had no means of transportation other than taxis. I had been hoping to contribute my ideas and perhaps even my artistic abilities on a number of projects, but no one asked me to do so, nor was it really needed. After the art fair ended, I spent the majority of my time – both inside and outside of the studio – observing my surroundings.

Although I am still unpacking it all, it is safe to say that the eight weeks I spent living alone in Hanoi and interning at the Work Room Four art studio turned out to be a transformative time in my life. Observing the everyday whirlwind of life in Hanoi for eight weeks, a world that was so foreign yet so close to me because of my grandfather’s connection to the country, I was forced to observe myself in ways that I had never done before. This level of introspection caused me great discomfort, but it also provided me with the invaluable space to achieve some important personal growth.

While I lived in and operated under conditions far safer than my grandfather had lived in during the war, I now feel closer to him than I did before traveling to Vietnam. Gaining an outsider’s perspective on the capital city of Vietnam and how its beautiful people function on a regular basis has given me a small taste of my grandfather’s experience from almost a half-century ago. It is exciting to know that I will be returning to Hanoi in May, to become even closer to my grandfather by bringing his work back to the people of Vietnam for whom he risked his life so many years ago.

A man stretches alongside Hoan Kiem Lake.
A Journey Close to Home: Natural Settings and Local Communities

Kimberly Burgos and I, two Rockland Conservation & Service Corps (RCSC) interns, went to the vacant parking lot in Piermont, New York towards the end of our internship, to conduct a field survey and help map out the geographic distribution of invasive plant species in New York’s Lower Hudson Valley. Despite an intense drought that had plagued the county for much of the summer, Kim and I found an infestation of Tree-Of-Heaven (*ailanthus altissimus*) plants encroaching onto the site, each of which was competing with its native neighbors for air, water, and nutrients. Kim, a self-proclaimed Instagram and Snapchat enthusiast, took pictures of the plants as I scribbled down their GPS coordinates, both important inputs for the blockbuster survey organized by the Lower Hudson Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management (PRISM).

That would have been the ideal day to stay in our comfortably air-conditioned Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rockland County (CCE-RC) office, as it seemed that Kim and I had picked the hottest day of the summer to perform our research. But despite stopping for water from time to time, we had a system down and worked together with enduring efficiency, just as we worked throughout the summer. I panted from the heat and looked at Kim as she rolled her eyes slightly and lifted her expressive eyebrows to indicate there was no turning back on this process.

During the PRISM survey, I could not help but feel guilty for some of the ways I had aided invasive species in their ongoing war against native plants. As an avid gardener at home, I had always loved the beautiful appearance of nonnative grasses and flowers on my family’s property. Thus, over the years I had bought many ornamental plant varieties like Scotch Broom (*cytisus scoparius*) and Chinese Silvergrass (*miscanthus sinensis*) to improve the aesthetic appearance of the lawn. I was unaware that these well-intended actions were disrupting local ecology, as many nonnative species become invasive when introduced to new habitats such as my own yard.

This surveying experience with invasive species captures the essence of the evolution I underwent during my Sorensen Fellowship. I was constantly learning new community-specific information about environmental topics that I had only understood more generally beforehand. What did an invasive plant look like in the New York area? Which forms of pollution were most prevalent in Rockland County itself? Many of the region’s environmental issues were imperceptible until you dug a little deeper below the surface. As my account of the summer will demonstrate, my internship experience was ultimately shaped by what I
My internship experience was ultimately shaped by what I learned from these types of subsurface challenges to the environment, to the community, and to my own perceptions.

A Duo Formed

Nearly two months prior, on a fresh and sunny June morning, I was in pure terror as I drove up the Palisades Interstate Parkway. This would be my first day of work and the commute would be the farthest I had ever driven independently; I would have to leave my self-contained suburban community and drive north up the intimidating Palisades Interstate Parkway all the way to CCE-RC in Stony Point, New York. The Palisades Interstate Parkway and Interstate 287 were the two main arteries of Rockland County, and literal drivers to its economy, with commuters buzzing to and from various corporate, government, and non-profit offices throughout the New York metropolitan area. The irony of my driving anxiety was that the whole trip lasted approximately 20 minutes, and my reverse commute meant that I was surrounded by only a few cars, as most commuters were going south and east towards New York City.

On that first day, after holding on to the steering wheel for dear life, I merged off the parkway at exit 14 and arrived at Stony Point. I pulled up to CCE-RC a half-hour early, and for the first 20 minutes of the day found myself parked alone in an expansive parking lot, which was showing its age with large potholes filled in under parking spaces and thin cracks that wrinkled its surface. Ahead of me were a set of old oak trees, with wide canopies pushing past the artificially clipped grass, and across the street was a beautiful area of milkweed plants, which, I could see upon closer inspection, were each being caressed by bees and monarch butterflies. The vibrant flowers fronted an old and charming building at 10 Patriot Hills Lane. The CCE-RC building, with its granite stone façade, high columns, and a portico, had such distinctly sophisticated architecture that I could only assume it was built with the support of a generous donation from Cornell University funders.

Once the wonder of working in both a literally and figuratively ivy-covered building wore off, I discovered that the building was more akin to the parking lot than to the Ivy League. It was an aging part of the landscape, and was in desperate need of repair. While working at CCE-RC, I became familiar with the leaking parts of its ceilings, torn parts of the walls, and outdated bathroom stalls that had shower curtains in place of doors. The building had been converted into an office in the past 20 years from its original use as a residential institution called Letchworth Village, which housed and treated the mentally and physically disabled. Unfortunately, the Village had been marred by a dark period in its history, when patient abuse and neglect were reported. The blast of negative press about the Village had made it a household name throughout the region, and even before the residential institution closed in the 1990s, it had developed a “haunted” reputation.

At the time that I first arrived to CCE-RC, I did not actually know that I would be working at the uniquely historical space for the rest of the summer. I was excited to be a RCSC intern, but would not know my site placement until the second week of my internship. For the first two weeks, the RCSC Program Coordinator, Kathy Galione, and the RCSC Outreach Coordinator, Eric Fuchs-Stengel, ran the show, and made this Rockland County Youth Bureau program a memorable and unique learning-based experience. There were 27 interns in total, aged 18 to 25, each of whom brought unique experiences and skills, but all coming with an interest in conservation work.

Some of our training work was focused on understanding Rockland County’s natural resources by seeing them in person through guided hikes and clean-ups. Other parts of our training work
involved team bonding through trust-building games and activities. Finally, one of the most important parts of the program was preparing us interns with the necessary skills for the expected work at our different summer internship sites. It was during one of these skills training programs that I first spoke directly to Kim, the observant, and sometimes shy, recent college graduate who would become my partner intern at CCE-RC.

Kim and I shared a skill that was otherwise unique in the program, and that neither of us yet knew the other possessed: we could both speak Spanish. I had developed this language skill in school, starting with basic vocabulary lessons in pre-school and continuing on through honors and AP courses in high school. Kim learned to speak Spanish by being raised in a Puerto Rican household and speaking the language with family members daily. We would both demonstrate our linguistic knowledge during a mock community outreach program. For this program, Kim and I played the roles of two Spanish-speaking community members – a novio y novia, husband and wife – who walked by the other interns’ stations to test their ability to interact and educate us about RCSC. Kim’s and my contribution to this training program was important not only because tabling (speaking publicly to pitch a program or provide educational insight) was a major part of many of our internship roles, but also because the Rockland community had many Spanish-speaking members who would be passersby during community outreach events. Kim and I both had fun with the opportunity to act and demonstrate our mutual skill, and I learned that my language proficiency was an important ability that I could utilize in a work setting.

Ultimately, Kim and I were placed to work together at CCE-RC, a site known for engaging with diverse community groups. We would see language and other skills come into play as we built off each other’s strengths to become an effective team, and we would each be moved by our experiences and our expanded knowledge, but in distinct ways.

Two Fish Out of Water Find Recourse

Two weeks into my internship with CCE-RC, I strode down a wooden dock near Bear Mountain State Park, at the northernmost point of Rockland County. I looked out onto the Hudson River, an estuary with tides produced by its connection to the Atlantic Ocean downstream. As the wind gusted along its gently shifting brackish waters, I breathed in the salty breeze. I looked out with Kim by my side, admiring the vast estuarine ecosystem. The river is home to many fish, crustacean, and bird species, some permanent residents of the watershed and others coming seasonally, from the ocean or lands afar. Running past major cities, suburbs, and rural communities, the Hudson River remains a reminder to all of New York State’s natural beauty. It was also an important model of progress: the Hudson River, like thousands of others around the country, had been saved by a legal amendment, commonly known as the Clean Water Act.

In 1972, Congress amended the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, now generally known as the Clean Water Act, establishing an objective “to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Nation’s water’s.” This groundbreaking law was passed at a time when “river fires, toxic spills and other crises had cast a national spotlight on water pollution” and Americans sought to make the nation’s waters “fishable and swimmable” once again. Kim and I spent much of our summer working along the Hudson River, for a partnership between CCE-RC and the New York State Department of Health’s Hudson River Fish Advisory (HRFA), to ensure that the pollution that had marred the river’s past would not endanger the health of current Rockland County community members. While the Hudson appeared hospitable and was certainly cleaner than it had been in decades, its water and soils still contained traces of harmful and invisible chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). These PCBs had been dumped upstream by industrial polluters decades earlier,
persisting in the ecosystem because they are easily stored in organic matter, such as the bodies of the fish swimming in the Hudson River. Therefore, there are many health risks associated with eating Hudson River fish, and the HRFA has established specific guidelines to minimize the impact on those who choose to consume them.  

Kim and I were stewards of this knowledge, traveling to different sites along the Hudson River to post information and speak to locals about best practices when fishing its waters. Not being native to Rockland County, Kim and I traded off the role of navigating towards our destinations, using our phones’ GPS systems to find each of the county’s public beach and dock sites. During our trips, we each learned to drive CCE-RC’s bulky minivans over narrow wooden bridges, down steep roads, and through heavy traffic. After an array of unique and sometimes challenging drives, we would find ourselves repeatedly mesmerized by the Hudson River. We would constantly take pictures and videos while on site, proud and happy that being “at work” also meant being in one of the most beautiful places on Earth.

Once we got ourselves situated at each station, we posted laminated signs with a list of fish that could be eaten from the estuarine river’s waters. The main mantra I internalized, when first learning about the HRFA program, was that it “depends on who you are, where you are, and what you catch.” To illustrate the complexity of these guidelines, the HRFA advises women of childbearing age to never eat fish from the Hudson River because of the impact it could have on their fertility. Meanwhile, under HFRA guidelines, men over 15 years old are able to eat specific fish, like the striped bass – but only if they catch the fish between the Rip Van Winkle Bridge and New York City Battery, and only eat up to half a pound per month.

Doing this work, I often wondered why the HRFA would advise people to eat fish at all if they had to follow all these specific guidelines? The reality I learned is that fishing is a significant part of many of the residents’ culture, and if eaten appropriately, these fish provide many nutritional benefits, including high quality protein and healthy fish oils.

At Rockland County’s northernmost HRFA posting site, on a wooden dock that faces an iconic suspension bridge, Bear Mountain Bridge, Kim and I saw all our developed skills and knowledge come into play. After posting the HRFA sign at the end of the dock, we saw a group of men walking a short distance from the bridge, along a small gravel-filled beach on the river’s edge. Each of these men carried an array of fishing gear, and judging by their conversation, it seemed they all spoke an Asian language that neither Kim nor I recognized.

I felt compelled to encourage this group of men to read and learn about the Hudson River fish before they cast their fishing rods into the water. I walked up to the men and said, “Hi, we are working with the Hudson River Fish Advisory. We just put up a sign about which fish are good to eat from the river. You should check it out!” The group was initially unresponsive to my recommendation, so I assumed none of them understood what I had said. Kim and I kept pointing towards the graphic poster that would help them determine which fish to eat, but felt disappointed seeing that none of the men walked over to the dock. After a few minutes of attempted conversation, Kim and I turned around and started heading to the car to leave.

Just as we entered the minivan, an older man from the group ran up to the car and knocked on the front-seat window. Kim rolled the window down, and the man cautiously asked, “Are we not allowed to fish here?” We were relieved to hear him speak in English to us, and quickly responded that people are allowed to fish in the Hudson and that we were just trying to advise the group to read the HRFA poster to know which fish were healthy to eat. He responded “Oh... because of the chemicals. Thank you!” We were happy that the man came up to the car and that we were able to communicate the information effectively, but it also reinforced the importance to us of bringing the HRFA fish advisory guides in other languages on future trips. As we started to drive away, we still wondered whether the group would take our advice. Fortunately, we saw all the men wave and smile at us and start walking towards the sign on the dock.

This experience was just one of many efforts that Kim and I made to educate anglers and other community members about guidelines provided by the HRFA. Late in the summer, Kim and I drove down to one of the southernmost public access points of the Hudson River in Rockland County. This was a mile-long
pier in the village mentioned at the beginning of this essay, aptly named Piermont. Growing up, Piermont always felt to me like a lively beach retreat, with art galleries, cafes, and upscale restaurants, and a full view of the widest section of the Hudson, though it was only four miles from my inland New Jersey suburb. In fact, the proximity and beauty of the village made it my most common run and bike ride destination.

Posting HRFA signs along my familiar stomping grounds truly turned my out-of-state internship into a personal reality. I was excited to show Kim one of my favorite places to watch the water, which was a wooden bench near an aging timber pillar covered with fishing-themed paraphernalia; and the marshes across from the pier where I had gone kayaking. While I had never fished in Piermont myself, I knew that this would be an important place to post our signs as I had seen many residents fishing there during my visits. After spending time at the pier, Kim and I walked back to the car, both sad to think that we had finished our last posting for the summer, but happy that we had accomplished so much for the outreach project. This project was an important component of my work experience, and one of the outdoor projects that I could even show my family members by bringing them out to the pier. For the rest of the summer, I would send pictures to Kim each time I rode my bike to any of the posting sites, and was glad to see them being read by fishermen each time I stopped by.

Come On, Come On – Turn the Radio On!6

After many weeks of venturing around Rockland County to directly educate community members about HRFA, on July 14, 2016, I spoke on a local Rockland radio station, WRCR 1700, to educate the broader Rockland community on a large scale. This radio station was housed in Pomona, New York, towards the back of Palisades Credit Union Park, a stadium that also was also home to the Rockland Boulders baseball team. For this feature, I was expected to represent many intersecting parts of my professional role. As an RCSC intern, I was representing both the Rockland County Youth Bureau and CCE-RC; as a community educator, I was representing the HRFA and PRISM programs; and as a student, I was representing my environmental studies program, Brandeis University, and the Sorensen Fellowship. Whether from my own motivations or the expectations of my supervisors, I came into the radio show interview with the task of crediting all of these different actors during my introduction to the show.

For a full week prior to my radio appearance, I spent time practicing all of the topics that I anticipated needing to address during the program. As the event date approached, I spent time with Jennifer Zunino-Smith, the new Environmental Educator for CCE-RC, to review my prepared notes. On the day of the show itself, Jennifer sat next to me as a fellow talk show guest. I had prepared to speak to audience members about the dangers of eating more than a half-pound per month of select fish species from the Hudson. In addition, I was ready to advise women of childbearing age and children to avoid eating Hudson River fish entirely. I was also prepared to discuss what I had learned about the history of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination in the Hudson, “legacy pollutants” of the river’s industrial age that lingered in local fish species’ fat and other tissues.

I would also be expected to answer questions from the interviewer, Michael [Mike] Wilson. Mike was a part-time radio show host, a part-time professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey, and a part-time horticulture lab technician at CCE-RC. Working at CCE-RC, Mike was able to prepare me before the show regarding the order and type of questions he would ask. I had accordingly written down many pages of notes to prepare to speak on each topic in as much depth as time would allow. However, Mike was unable to prepare me fully for the questions that would be asked by radio listeners, who would call in and ask anything that

As the show started, I was aware that my audience would include many different listeners. First, my voice would be broadcast to an audience of 2,500+ listeners throughout the county. Second, Ann Marie Palefsky (CCE-RC’s Interim Executive Director), other supervisors, and even my parents would be tuned into the program. Third, I planned to share the show’s recording with my Sorensen Fellowship advisors, friends, and Facebook followers.
pertained to the topics being discussed. Call-ins would first speak to Steve Possell, the station’s radio broadcaster, who would listen in to confirm their questions’ relevance before directing them to our line to speak.

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Walking up to the grated stairway of Boulder Stadium, I saw the WRCR 1700 radio station at the top of the staircase ahead. I had dressed up in a button-down shirt for the day with the thought that if I looked professional, I would feel professional. Unfortunately, wearing this long-sleeved and [for me] semi-formal outfit, I started to sweat, and my mouth got dry under the mid-summer sun as I made my way up the stairs.

When I arrived inside the sound-padded and (fortunately) air-conditioned space, I was greeted by Mike and Jennifer, two key figures from my CCE-RC family. We kept our preparation discussion to a whisper to be sure that our voices would not get picked up by the microphones before we began the interview. During the half-hour radio program, I would address various conservation topics, from environmental health issues to horticulture and storm drain management. I felt extra-prepared to speak on the environmental topics of my program, but went into the interview concerned about how I would properly credit all of the actors involved in my summer internship role.

In the recording booth, I sat with Jennifer and Mike facing a wide window, which brought in natural light and views of a small section of woods beyond the stadium complex. Across the room stood Steve Possell, an older man who tinkered with the knobs and buttons of his radio station equipment for a few minutes before bringing us on air. Once the show started, I saw how he stared off and seemed to be listening intently to the sounds of the show in his headset. I had learned the day before that Steve was blind, and that radio broadcasting was a unique niche in which Steve could use his senses of touch and hearing to accomplish his job responsibilities.

As the recording started, I felt my nervous tension reach its peak. For my introduction, I had to provide a diversity of details about my internship position while keeping the exposition under 60 seconds. As I started speaking, I felt myself cringe with each “um” and short pause I gave. However, I managed to successfully battle my internal self-doubt, and after getting over that hurdle, managed to mention both the Sorensen Fellowship and my environmental studies program. Transitioning from the technicalities of my title and position to my experience at Brandeis University helped me loosen up. By the time I got to the question section of my interview, I felt genuinely confident, a critical characteristic for someone who is offering advice.

Mike and I spent about 10 minutes in a back and forth conversation about my work and the message I had for community members regarding eating marine species from the Hudson River. After giving both a general overview and specific recommendations from the HRFA, the phone lit up and the radio station received its first call of the day. I held my headphones tight against my ears to listen closely to this first caller.

Speaking on WRCR Rockland Radio to announce updates from The New York State Department of Health’s Hudson River Fish Advisory.
The speaker identified himself as Brian, a 66-year-old Stony Point community member, who had spent his entire life fishing on the Hudson River. Brian expressed a combination of curiosity and concern about the contamination of a particular species he had fished for years, what he called a “Snapper” or “Baby Blue Fish.” Brian had strong pride in his experiences fishing, “being born and raised on the Hudson River” and even swimming in the river in his youth. Brian’s story reminded me of Santiago’s from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, as he was a nostalgic man who spent his entire life fishing among local waters and was confronted with a challenge larger than he could accept.

Unlike an interview, in which I might feel pressure being under the lens of a critical observer, I was relieved that this question came from a community member who was inquiring from both a genuine and personal place. At that moment, I sympathized with his passion for the Hudson, but knew my responsibility to relay the facts. He should eat no more than half a pound of the “Baby Blue,” a colloquial term for Bluefish, per month. He listened and I affirmed his story. While I may never know if Brian heeded my advice, I know I did my due diligence to teach him and, most importantly, educate the audience of the relevance of these recommendations.

As questions from both Mike and the audience continued, I kept up my energy answering them with the confidence I so often felt when speaking about environmental topics. These sets of questions were ones in which I could really prove myself, as I implemented my biology and chemistry knowledge from high school, college, and CCE-RC in order to quickly answer them. After almost a half-hour, we came to the last minute of the show. As Mike gave his outro to the interview, my confident adrenaline declined and was replaced by warm comfort as I took the time to collect my thoughts and look out again at the trees and shrubs below. In that moment, I felt a sense of completion, and knew that I had succeeded in delivering important environmental messages to the Rockland community.

**Putting Academics to Work**

Returning back to the beginning of this essay, one of the other major programs Kim and I were involved with during our CCE-RC internship was helping with training and protocol development for the Lower Hudson Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management (PRISM). This opportunity to help CCE-RC’s Horticultural Educator, Annie Christian-Reuter, and the Partnership with the project was particularly meaningful for me as an environmental studies major. I had just spent my Spring semester participating in a course called “Citizen Science: Bridging Science, Education, and Policy,” and the PRISM’s blockbuster survey that the partnership was developing was a perfect example of citizen science (or the inclusion of everyday citizens in scientific research) in action.

Kim’s and my first task was developing quizzes to assess the effectiveness of the training programs that CCE-RC and other CCE sites would be holding as a first step in initiating participants into the blockbuster survey program. The program volunteers would have to complete this training to brush up on invasive species, and to understand the various protocols involved in the blockbuster survey. In addition to those assessments, Kim and I had to maintain the CCE-RC’s invasive species garden, which had many plants that would be used for demonstration during the training. Kim and I both loved the opportunity to go out each day to water and check up on each of the plants. It helped break up some of our more indoor-oriented days and allowed us to learn the identifications of each of the species.

A few weeks into the PRISM program, Kim and I had the opportunity to do some hands-on fieldwork with the program developers. We followed experts in botany and horticulture as they explained the steps involved in properly assessing the area’s biodiversity. The park where we did our fieldwork was called Schunnemunk Mountain State Park, and it was shocking to me to discover that the seemingly natural setting had been significantly affected by humans by the introduction of invasive species like the multiflora rose and Japanese honeysuckle. Not only had these species entered the area, but in some locations we found them in higher concentrations than native species like common milkweed. All of this
preparation with the experts would eventually help Kim and me do our own field survey in Piermont, New York.

After putting time and energy into the PRISM project, CCE-RC’s goals came to fruition as the extension site hosted two successful workshops to educate community members and initiate their participation in the PRISM survey. During these sessions, I presented information on using GPS devices and, with Kim, ran the pre- and post-assessments. For both presentations, CCE-RC had a higher attendance than expected, and during the second session, there were even a few RCSC interns who came to participate and to support us. Ultimately, it was great to both conduct the blockbuster survey in Rockland County and to inspire and educate large groups of community members to become involved in the citizen science project, which would serve as a basis for mapping out and understanding ecological shifts in the area.

Lessons in Perspectives
Towards the end of my internship, I took the time to sit down with Kim and learn and compare our different experiences over the course of the RCSC program. One important and surprising lesson I learned from Kim was how gender played into our different impressions of our roles. Primarily, Kim described to me her feeling of empowerment as a female in the RCSC role, specifically noting the liberation she felt when taking on hard outdoor tasks during our training hours. While I was at first nervous that my physical strength would be a limiting factor in these tasks, Kim worried about how gender would play into them. Would these tasks be looked upon as male-only roles?

Both Kathy and Eric instilled in us that while our tasks would be challenging, no one would be judged for our gender or strength, and that we would all work hard while respecting each other. Such tasks included towing mulch and cutting branches, and even smashing rocks and pushing logs, and Kim and I both took them on directly, along with our peers, despite some of the concerns we may have originally had. From this conversation with Kim, I began to see and appreciate how Kim herself was someone looking to break barriers, and someone who truly embraced the service opportunities of the RCSC role.

Another important lesson I learned from Kim was the privilege and importance of green spaces. Kim, like me, had come from Bergen County, New Jersey; however, Kim came from a semi-urban community called Lodi that had limited green space. Many Lodi residents, like Kim, lived in apartments, which created a barrier for those looking to make large gardens or compost systems on their own properties. In contrast, I had lived in a more suburban community, called Old Tappan, where the average homeowner had a half-acre or more of land to potentially use for gardens, composting, and other direct outdoor functions.

Given our different upbringings, Kim and I had slightly different sentiments when it came to our horticultural work. I came in familiar with horticulture, excited to continue learning about subjects relevant to my own home garden and landscaping experiences. Meanwhile, Kim’s energy derived from a desire to break new personal ground while working with the earth. She was specifically intrigued by the practice of composting, and would always have extra enthusiasm when speaking about that topic with community members. In addition, I noticed that during many of our outdoor activities, she had an extra eagerness that was motivating to both of us.
The summer of 2016 was one of many times in my life that I had the opportunity to spend significant periods of time outdoors, either for recreation or work. For Kim, this was a new opportunity that she had longed for since realizing her environmental passion. Ultimately, working with Kim made me aware of some of my own privileges and the differences in perspectives that two people can have, even while partnering closely.

**Conclusion on the Interstate**

To celebrate the work that all the RCSC interns had accomplished over the summer, Kathy and Eric put together a closing party out on a beautiful blue lake in the middle of Harriman State Park. With the sun shining, the interns all jumped into the refreshing body of water. We were happy to spend an entire day enjoying nature after devoting a whole summer to protecting it.

After swimming for two hours, the corps members sat together on a wooden dock looking at the lake and discussing their respective plans for the upcoming year. But even while talking about the future with my cohort, I could not stop thinking about the program we had just completed. After an intensive three months of pushing myself beyond my comfort zone, muscling through gritty physical labor, and grappling with my own privileges, I felt truly changed as I left my internship.

As we packed up, it started to drizzle, a welcome event for the region plagued by heat and drought. The sky had gone from a crystal blue to grey, and the lake’s reflective surface became fractured by the drops of rain, and yet the piercing August heat held its final grip. As the rain started to come down harder, I shared a final hug and goodbye with Kim, then both Kathy and Eric, and ran to the car with a sense of accomplishment in completing this major stage of my Sorensen Fellowship journey.

Pulling out of the state park, I wondered if the RCSC program was unique. Were there any other county programs that built county “pride through service” as RCSC had? It is hard to imagine how effective global conservation efforts could work without first getting young adults involved in improving the environmental conditions of their local communities. This is precisely what the RCSC program did for my cohort.

As I drove down the Palisades Interstate Parkway one last time, from the top of Rockland County all the way to Bergen County, I thought about how lucky I was to become a part of this nearby community. Suddenly, a flash of lightning came down and a crash of thunder broke, and as the rain reached its greatest intensity, it drenched the roads and the car with nature’s most fundamental element. For a few seconds, traffic stopped entirely, as all of us commuters were consumed with this sudden reminder of Mother Earth’s presence in our lives.

As the rain settled, the commuters drove forward once again. I too pushed onward, neither nervous nor sad, but motivated to learn more and excited to think how the members of the RCSC group, myself included, would each find ourselves continuing to impact local communities and conserving the global community we all ultimately share.
Notes


When I meet Neta, I meet her neighborhood of Nachlaot. The young woman subletting her apartment to me for the summer is a beautiful university student with excellent English and a thick Israeli accent, with “r”s so dense she sometimes sounds French. She wears jeans and a sleeveless top, and as she leads me to her apartment around the corner from a charedi (ultra-Orthodox) synagogue, I realize I know nothing about this area of Jerusalem.

Neta’s tiny loft is a perfect fit for me and my friend Camille. I confirm that, yes, we will be taking the apartment for the next two months, and Neta calls her landlady, Michal, on the phone. As they talk logistics, I hear Neta’s side of the conversation in fast-paced Hebrew.

“What you’re wearing is fine!” Neta assures me.

“It’s okay,” I reply, “but I should have worn longer sleeves.”

Neta gestures to her own outfit.

“It’s really okay,” she says, “as long as you’re not wearing something like this.”

This is my second day here, and the situation throws me right back into the uncomfortable rhythm of life in Israel. Having spent a gap year in Jerusalem before starting university, this place is full of memories, stories, and habits I once learned and have since forgotten. Over the next two months, I will relearn the habit of planning my dress based on the neighborhoods I’ll be visiting. I will relearn some colloquial Hebrew. I will relearn how to fake an Israeli accent in the market on a Friday afternoon. I will relearn how not to cry on the #418 from Beit Shemesh to Jerusalem, as I make my way past male passengers to the back of the bus, where charedi women sit in silence and invisibility. Over the course of my internship with the Yerushalmi Movement, I will relearn so many intricacies of navigating this place, but I will learn much more for the first time.
A Crash Course in Dialogue

My time in Jerusalem is always framed by the fact that, in more ways than one, it is always a return. It is the city where I spent one of the most formative years of my life, and around which so much of my heritage revolves. I am an insider there in that I am a Jew, an observant Jew, a Hebrew-speaking observant Jew...a Hebrew-speaking observant Ashkenazi Jew. There are certainly other facets of my identity that factor in, but these – religious identity, religious practice, language, and ethnicity – are some of the most significant. I also have the insider knowledge of having lived in Jewish communities for my entire life, and of having lived in Jerusalem, if only for a short while.

In other, often more relevant ways, I am an outsider. My American-ness is primary. I lack the salient insider knowledge of those who grow up and truly, immersively live in this uniquely complicated region and society.

As an intern with the Yerushalmit Movement, I can speak Hebrew well enough to interact with fellow employees, plan and execute events, and participate minimally in staff meetings. Discussions are framed by the mission of this grassroots organization: developing a vibrant, pluralistic, and inclusive Jerusalem. This means breaking down barriers between communities based on religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and more.

I spend most staff meetings listening as closely as possible to staff members: Shira, Ya’ara, Boaz, Nir, and Sarah. Sarah is the only non-native – she moved to Israel from California years ago, and is, mercifully, my supervisor. Regardless, I am visibly, audibly, palpably American in a way that she no longer is.

My level of religious observance is also unique in their context. I am the only employee who fasts on Shiva Asar B’tammuz, a so-called “minor” fast day. I politely decline the spread of food offered at a large meeting occurring that day.

One of the Movement’s hallmark initiatives is the Meeting Place project. Sarah calls this series of Thursday night dialogue circles, held in the bustling town center of Jerusalem, her “baby.”

The Meeting Place project began in 2015. That summer, at the Jerusalem Pride Parade, 16-year-old Shira Banki was murdered. A charedi man went on a rampage at the parade, stabbing Shira and wounding five others in his attack. The man, Yishai Schlissel, had just been released from his ten-year prison sentence for committing the same act at the 2005 Pride Parade, where he stabbed three parade participants.¹

The LGBTQ+ community of Jerusalem needed to mourn. And the charedi community of Jerusalem needed to pay respects. Partnering with the Banki family, the Yerushalmit Movement hosted a public shiva in Zion Square, in the center of Jerusalem. Night after night, Jerusalem residents of all backgrounds showed up in the square to mourn, to talk, and to heal. At a time when the distance between groups might have prevailed, Zion Square became their meeting place.²

The Yerushalmit Movement kept the dialogue going, establishing Zion Square as a weekly meeting place for individuals to discuss some of the most pressing issues in Israeli society: gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other facets of identity; politics, religion, and their inevitable intersections.

With the help of other organizations and initiatives, the square remains a crucial space for LGBTQ+ community organizing and action. The Meeting Place dialogue circles often feature a bright Israeli Pride flag – its rainbow stripes emblazoned with a white Star of David. The combination of the circle, the Yerushalmit Movement’s signs, and the flag attract quite a bit of attention from passersby.

My first week attending a Meeting Place, I arrive in the fabled Zion Square ten minutes before 9:00 p.m., when the dialogue circle is meant to begin. I see nothing. Untrue. I see quite a lot. This is “the heart of Jerusalem,” after all. On a Thursday night, the new glittery market fair takes up the majority of the square, with energetic local craftspeople selling jewelry and art from their brightly lit booths. A band to the side of the square plays a mixture of Israeli music and covers of American pop. Meanwhile, a visibly religious couple performs on the
other side – a bearded man strumming his guitar, a woman emphatically swaying as she plays her violin, her skirt flowing to the ground and her hair covered in a matching scarf. People mill about the market, listening and looking and watching, sometimes purchasing. The Light Rail train runs along Yaffo Street at the bottom of the square: count 10 minutes or so, and the bells ring, pedestrians scatter off the tracks, and the silver train rushes past with deep rumbling and a gust of wind.

But I see no one from the Yerushalmit Movement. I frantically call and text Sarah, worried I may have misunderstood the place or time of our weekly event. After about 20 minutes, she replies, directing me behind the market, right alongside the train tracks. I circle the market and finally find her, with the flag’s broom-handle pole resting on her shoulder.

She stands alongside several people I learn are regulars – friends of the Yerushalmit Movement, friends of Sarah – who are consistently present at these Zion Square dialogue circles. They chat in pairs as a journalist snaps photos of Sarah laying woven mats on the ground. The night is too windy to unfurl the organization’s lengthy sign designating this as the Meeting Place, so we resign to leaving it aside. After another 10 minutes of straightening things out and shifting our camp at the request of some salespeople from the market, we sit down.

Dina is there – a woman with whom I have been corresponding via email to translate some of the organization’s promotional material into English. She, along with her husband Dani, is a friend and committed volunteer for the Yerushalmit Movement. She and Sarah have a quick and quiet conversation: we have not planned the dialogue circle as thoroughly as I’m told we usually do. This past week, after all, we hosted our annual Jerusalem Day Family March, which monopolized our time and attention.

But Dina improvises. We talk about the nature of a Jewish state – what it means to be a religious state, what it means to have a Chief Rabbinate with enforceable power. Dina is engaging and thought-provoking, attentively reading the group, skipping the most obvious questions to ask the more difficult questions ones (i.e. “What do you like about the Rabbinate?”). The people in the square come alive, they open up, they argue, they speak their minds. She pushes them to do so, and they respond.

Meanwhile, Sarah moves in and out of the circle, all the while proudly carrying the Jewish LGBTQ+ pride flag. This, she tells me, determines what happens next. When she does not bring the flag, the group has peaceful, engaged, seated dialogue. When she brings it, we attract more attention – aggressive, homophobic attention. After about half an hour of the dialogue circle, I notice Sarah having a somewhat heated discussion with a small crowd of young men. A few of us rise to listen, and it quickly becomes clear that they have engaged her because she is carrying the flag. They interrogate her about the sinful nature of “her behavior,” using slurs, hurling verses of the Torah at her as incriminating evidence.

I wander through the crowd of conversations. I watch, listen, and try to understand the fast-paced, high-energy debates, covering moral, religious, and philosophical subject matter. Most are heated from both ends: an angry accuser, and an equally angry defendant. The anger I understand: the individuals in the square spar along the lines of some of their most fundamental beliefs. Slurs and insults fly from their mouths along with furious spit.

I sympathize most with the anger of Yerushalmit Movement members and those on “our side.” When faced with violent, overt bigotry, how can anyone help but immediately convey the profound damage those words inflict? Night after night, Jerusalem residents of all backgrounds showed up in the square to mourn, to talk, and to heal. At a time when the distance between groups might have prevailed, Zion Square became their meeting place.
In my experience expressing myself as a woman and feminist within Orthodox Judaism, I know that instinct all too well.

Sarah, Dina, and Dani, meanwhile, conduct their interactions like the skilled non-violent communicators they are. With all the accusations and abuses flung at them, they remain in control – not only of themselves, but of the tone and content of their discussion. They challenge ideas, not by labeling them as they are – homophobic, sexist, racist – but by providing a face to demonstrate what ideas can do. They show pain and understanding and ultimately shed a humanized light on the causes their interlocutors so deeply fear.

Dalia, Sarah’s partner and a professional psychologist, is always there with us in Zion Square as well. The two of us assume the roles of assistants to Sarah and observers of the square. I spend much of our Thursday nights with her, standing back and analyzing interactions together. With her insight and encouragement, I begin to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what really goes on in Zion Square every Thursday night. I find myself tapping into things I have learned experientially – as an Orthodox Jew, a woman, a feminist – and academically – in sociology, gender studies, Judaic studies. Dalia shares not only her analytical, psychological lens, but also her insider knowledge of the dynamics in action and the populations involved. With her, I learn who the people in the square are and why they are here.

Each Thursday night, I study the square. And each Thursday night, the ways Sarah, Dina, and Dani, conduct themselves stick with me the most – their patience and empathy and carefully composed demeanor.

A few weeks later, at a conference for organizations working towards pluralism in Jerusalem, Sarah and I sit across from each other eating our lunch. I broach the subject: “How do you do it? And why?”

Sarah explains her logic with patience but frankness: Start a conversation by labeling someone a bigot, and you lose them immediately. To them, you are an irrational villain; they, a victim of wrongful accusation. All you accomplish is asserting that you are right and the other is wrong. In dialogue, she insists, your goal cannot be to change your interlocutor’s mind. It cannot even be to establish mutual understanding, but only mutual empathy and respect. You must take on that task: to initiate those goals and establish the dynamic necessary to accomplish them. You must approach the person with empathy and respect – reach to meet them where they are, rather than trying to drag them over to you.

“So, you put forth all this effort to empathize with this person shouting abuse at you for who you are and what you believe. Don’t you feel like you’re compromising on your values?”

Sarah responds with an idea I have heard before but struggled to put into practice: You demonstrate true confidence in your values when you are challenged directly and you don’t aggressively defend them – especially when your goal is not to be “right”; but to engage in productive dialogue, to humanize yourself and the people you are expected to represent in a particular interaction. You must empathize with the person across from you, mediate your emotional reactions while mentally holding your ground, knowing you stand firmly in your position.

“But, how is that mutual on both ends of the conversation? Where is the compromise?”

Sarah surprises me with a slow smile. “It’s not! There is none! And isn’t that great?”

I furrow my brow in confusion.

She explains: “Only one person in the conversation needs to be trained in non-violent communication for this to work. Only one person needs to be consciously making an effort. It’s amazing!”

Week after week, I ask more questions. I participate in weekly dialogue circles for the rest of the summer, and I think about these ideas constantly. I discuss them again and again, with Sarah, with Dalia, with Dina, with other Yerushalmit Movement members, and with at least four friends outside of the Movement. Toward the end of the summer, I begin to understand.

Sarah chooses to assume all responsibility for making a conversation productive, peaceful, and empathetic. She is the target of abuse, but still willingly shoulders the burden of trying to create a point of connection between herself and the other person. For
her, it is a privilege to take on all that responsibility, when she can move forward expecting nothing in return from her interlocutor – nothing but for them to bring themselves and their ideas to the table. With this framework, she says to her conversation partner, through her behavior: “Let’s both speak; let’s both listen. I will work to empathize with you and your thoughts, while I simultaneously work to demonstrate my own humanity to you. I will do all the mental and emotional labor to try to make this conversation substantive and constructive, to try to make you respect me as a human being. I will do that by offering you that same gesture in full force. All you need to do is speak and then listen.”

I eventually tell Sarah that I honestly feel incapable of that immersive kind of empathy, that totally unbalanced engagement with someone who has no respect for me. It seems so far out of reach, a lofty plane of pure acceptance and patience. It seems monastic. She replies that, of course, it takes significant training and practice. Over the summer, I continue to learn as I observe and absorb, from Sarah and from others, in Zion Square dialogue sessions and beyond. I try to put these strategies into practice when I have the opportunity – to hone my skills.

A few weeks after that first dialogue circle, I spend the weekend in Tzfat. An old, northern city, Tzfat is known for its population of Jews who cherish the spiritual, mystical aspects of Jewish faith and practice. I find myself, as I so often do, in a conversation about feminism, with an Orthodox man who is sure that feminism is an evil, secular invention compelling women to hate men and shirk religious obligation. A month prior, those words would have made my chest tighten. Now, instead, I

tell him I can understand that, and that it makes sense. It’s true. I can, and it does. Instead of making an argument, I find myself telling stories of my experiences, asking him to imagine himself in my situation, and then asking him about his own experiences and feelings. I muster the patience to humanize myself to another person. It’s a task that, from one standpoint, seems degrading and unreasonable. But the fact is, in Zion Square many young men, for the very first time, speak to a gay woman, and they learn she is human. In Tzfat, at least one young man for the first time meets a woman who calls herself feminist, and he learns she is human. And all I have to do is take on all the responsibility for creating mutual respect, empathizing fully while holding tightly onto my beliefs and identity, expecting nothing in return. And isn’t that great?

**Pharaoh’s Daughters, Underground**

It is 8:30 p.m. on a Wednesday night when I arrive at the Mashu-Mashu studio. That is to say, at 8:30 p.m I find myself standing outside a massive white brick box beside an empty children’s playground. I am here for my second time. My first trip here, two weeks ago, I got lost several times on my way over. This time, with the help of Google Maps, I navigate my way through residential streets of Kiryat Yovel to get to this particular brick box: an old community miklat – bomb shelter – converted into a home for the social change theater Mashu-Mashu. The Yerushalmit Movement partners with the organization for their project, “Women Changing Jerusalem.”

In Hebrew, it is called “Meurevet Yerushalmit’ – ‘Involved Jerusalem,’ in the feminine. I learn later that this is the name of a traditional Israeli dish, translated literally as "Jerusalem Mixture," but in the feminine form. Chagit from the Yerushalmit Movement and Mirit from Mashu-Mashu run this project together, bringing ultra-Orthodox and secular Jewish women together – in a unique “mixture.”

Kiryat Yovel is a uniquely religiously diverse neighborhood, but, like much of Israel, highly segregated. There are not only barriers between the charedi and secular communities, but active tension and disdain in both directions. It is a microcosm of socioreligious tension across the country. Women Changing Jerusalem aims to bring individuals from these communities together for dialogue and community building – to dismantle norms of division and disrespect. And women, as Chagit and

Week after week, I ask more questions. I participate in weekly dialogue circles for the rest of the summer, and I think about these ideas constantly. I discuss them again and again, with Sarah, with Dalia, with Dina, with other Yerushalmit Movement members, and with at least four friends outside of the Movement. Toward the end of the summer, I begin to understand.
And women, as Chagit and Mirit are quick to point out, are ideal bridge builders: they have unique experiences of marginalization in the context of their respective communities, as well as specialized perspectives on the needs of their families and communities.

The project began in its first iteration in the summer of 2015. After just a few weeks, the charedi women discovered that there were Reform women in the group, and quickly abandoned the project. Reform Judaism as a formal religious movement poses a moral and existential threat to charedi society in a way that secular Jewish life does not.

Chagit and Mirit are reviving the project this summer. Their plan is to have three introductory meetings over the summer, open for women to move in and out of the group, then to start in earnest with a stable cohort in the fall. They do worry that the denominational tensions will arise yet again, but they are hopeful.

I have never been to Kiryat Yovel before this summer. Nor do I understand the pun in the project’s name until it is explained to me. I also get both Chagit and Mirit’s names wrong when I first time meet them. The denominational tensions in the group are unique to Israeli society. Add the factor of having to literally go underground for this group’s meetings, and the whole affair is entirely disorienting. I am here for our second meeting, but for the first meeting, two weeks prior, I arrived late, lost, and confused. Chagit and Mirit are unfailingly kind and thrilled to have me, but I still feel out of place.

When I arrive for our 9:00 p.m. meeting Chagit and Mirit are not yet there. [I see a pattern in the Yerushalmi Movement’s approach to punctuality – another Israeli phenomenon I must relearn.] Using the key Mirit gave me, I nervously unlock and open the heavy cellar door. I turn on the lights and head down the bomb shelter stairs to the surprising, out-of-place studio below: bright lights, wooden floors, light green paint, colorful furniture, and kitschy art hanging from the ceiling and walls. I begin to set up chairs and soon Chagit and Mirit arrive. We exchange greetings and quickly review what we have planned for the meeting.

As participants arrive, I hear tense words exchanged, but we move quickly into the survey so we can get to the substance of the meeting as soon as possible. I learn later the topic of the hushed conversation: our group has been condemned in the ultra-Orthodox community’s newspaper. Meetings are canceled indefinitely. The And women, as Chagit and Mirit are quick to point out, are ideal bridge builders: they have unique experiences of marginalization in the context of their respective communities, as well as specialized perspectives on the needs of their families and communities. 

A week ago, we asked each woman to bring in an “identity item” to share with the group. We go around the circle, allowing them to re-introduce themselves and tell us about their items. Women share photos, household items, sentimental objects, their own writing, others’ writing with which they strongly identify, and more.

Rachel, a woman who identifies with the Reform movement, as her identity item reads a passage from a book [by an Israeli author] of historical fiction rooted in biblical narrative. In this passage, the author recounts the story from Exodus in which Pharaoh’s daughter rescues the abandoned baby Moses from the Nile River and takes him into her care. Pharaoh’s daughter, the author concludes, is therefore as much to credit for the Exodus from Egypt as Moses himself. She, a non-Jewish woman, has an extremely significant role in the salvation of the Jewish people. In this way, the author argues, she is a vehicle and partner of God in the Exodus story.

I look around the circle and see ultra-Orthodox women shaking their heads and muttering under their breath. They know very well that this interpretation actually draws on some traditional rabbinic sources, but to emphasize human effort alongside divine intervention, and to assign that interpretation so heavily to the daughter of Pharaoh? To them, this is heretical. The tension is palpable, but the next woman thankfully takes the reins smoothly and moves into talking about her own identity item.

Over the course of the week, after several heated discussions and passive-aggressive emails between ultra-Orthodox women and Chagit and Mirit, meetings are canceled indefinitely. The
third summer meeting does not happen, though regular meetings do in fact begin in earnest in the fall as planned. On my last phone call with Chagit, she is clearly dejected: Who is this group going to help if so many ultra-Orthodox women refuse to even be present in the room? What does this say about the future of our Jewish community? Are some gaps simply unbridgeable?

I try to instill some hope in her: Perhaps this particular gap is too wide to build one giant bridge all at once. Perhaps a series of steps are necessary. Perhaps those steps are baby steps. The group must go on, regardless of how few ultra-Orthodox women are present.

And it does. They continue to meet regularly, with some diminished attendance, but with the same energy and aspirations. Meanwhile, back in America, I continue to receive every email and message, every update on the timing and location of their meetings. With each notification I breathe a sigh of relief, happy to know that the project goes on, grateful for Chagit and Mirit’s efforts. They gather women into the miklat of the Mashu-Mashu studio and into community, hoping against hope to effect change. Like Pharaoh’s daughter doing her small part in a grand narrative of redemption, they draw them in from the Nile with outstretched hands.

Spaces
In initial meetings about the Women Changing Jerusalem project, I am asked how I perceive my role in the initiative.

I answer that with Chagit and Mirit as professional facilitators for the group, I want to help them do their job. Not to contribute too many of my own ideas, but to encourage women to engage and to share with one another.

And, as someone invested in similar work in my own communities, I hope to learn about the origins and creators of substantive pluralistic spaces. And I do.

Chagit and Mirir show me, along with Sarah and the others from the Yerushalmit Movement, what these creators are made of. They are not invested merely in theory; they are invested in practice. They are individuals who actually need the spaces and services they themselves put in place. They rely on these projects for their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their communities.

In Barbara Christian’s “A Race for Theory,” the renowned theorist critiques the academic institutionalization of Black feminist thought. Christian writes: “I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is.”

Christian did not write as intellectual exercise. Chagit and Mirir do not gather women into the Mashu-Mashu studio because pluralism is an appealing idea. Sarah does not stare bigotry in the face in Zion Square because it is interesting. They do it to save their own lives.

Now, in America and at my university, I am in a place where I can challenge myself to connect these ideas in a more concrete way to the work I do now and the work I hope to do in the future. Some days, my time spent with the Yerushalmit Movement feels so potently relevant, and some days I can forget it entirely. But ultimately gratitude for the experience prevails.

When I began my work with the Yerushalmit Movement, I did not realize how relevant the experience would be. I did not make the now-obvious connection between Women Changing Jerusalem and the Jewish feminist group that my peers and I have launched. I had no way of anticipating how essential the skills from Zion Square would be in developing programming to engage our Jewish community in conversations about race and racism. The list goes on. With each

My mind often returns to Wednesday nights in the Mashu-Mashu studio, and to Thursday nights in Zion Square, and I am reminded of how much I did not and still do not know: about this work, about the people involved, and about every person I encounter.
new project I remember the activists I grew to know and admire this summer, the dedication they give to their work, the Barbara Christian-esque investment they represent.

During my two months in Jerusalem, I relearned the skills necessary for navigating the complicated realities that line the city’s streets. And I learned, for the first time, of the people endeavoring to change some of those realities, the revolutionary spaces they are creating, and the personal investment that drives them.

My mind often returns to Wednesday nights in the Mashu-Mashu studio, and to Thursday nights in Zion Square, and I am reminded of how much I did not and still do not know: about this work, about the people involved, and about every person I encounter. The Yerushalmit Movement granted me the awareness of that expansive space for learning and for growth. That space is not just interesting or useful. It is essential. Life-saving.

Notes


Learning the Self and Others with the Dharma

Brandon Tran ’18

“Live For Your Faith” – Venerable Master Hsing Yun

My Buddhist Childhood

Since the naive age of six on Sunday mornings, I always made sure I rose out of bed at 8:00 a.m. and dressed conservatively by 8:30. At the honk of my Aunt Kim’s navy blue Honda, I would rush out the front door carrying with me only my black hai qing robe. After 20 minutes sitting in the car listening to Buddhist chanting, we would finally reach one of many Buddhist temples in Houston’s Chinatown. Even without knowing the language, Mandarin Chinese, I was very excited to attend weekly services. Sitting in on Dharma [Buddhist teachings] talks, and following the chanting led by the melodious voices of the monastics from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., allowed me to be in a state of single-mindedness, tranquility, and awe.

Back at home, offerings of sandalwood incense, candlelight, fruits, flowers, and water would be made to the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and my ancestors every full and new moon of the lunar month. The day before making the offerings, I made sure I cleaned the incense censer, wiped down the statues and plaques, and swept all the dust down. As a family, we made the offerings, not exactly knowing why, but did so in following the tradition that was passed down from our ancestors. In addition to making the offerings, I would stand in front of the over-six-foot-tall altar reciting a variety of Buddhist mantras and sutras. Doing so, I caught the attention of my family members who became very worried.

The combination of the time I devoted to attending weekly services, making sure the altar was cleaned and fresh fruits were purchased, and reciting Buddhist scriptures at home, made family members question my future. “Omitofo shifu,” I was sarcastically greeted by family members, using the greeting used for monks. Different family members, including my parents, raised all sorts of questions and remarks: “Will you become a monk?” “What do you plan on doing in the future?” “Do not go to the temple too much, I am worried.” I could not help but just say “no” to all of it, alleviating their stress for a short term – until they saw me again partaking in such activities.

Now that I am in college, my family members have stopped worrying for the most part. And my relationship to Buddhism has become more than just simply believing, like I did as a child. Today, I question and test out the central ideologies and teachings of Buddhism, and then evaluate how my practice from a young age has shaped me as a person. Given the language barrier that has prevented me from fully understanding the Buddhist texts that I chant, and the Dharma lectures that I have been listening to as a child, I have turned to online resources provided by Buddhist organizations for those who do not speak Chinese.
While surfing through the profiles and pages of Chinese Buddhist monastics and organizations, I came across a certain monastic’s Facebook profile that featured hundreds of pictures of different activities under one roof. I identified many of the different activities, ranging from the Chinese and Indian cultural occasions to the more spiritual and ritualistic events, such as the Bathing the Buddha Ceremony. What seemed unfamiliar were the different faces of people featured in the pictures. Women in the pictures were dressed in Indian sarees, men in kurtas, and bald innocent-looking boys with distinct South Asian facial features in traditional Chinese Mahayana monastic robes. I shrieked in excitement, immediately realizing that these young boys were novice Buddhist monks.

As I continued to scroll through the albums, I noticed pictures portraying the novice monks engaged in all sorts of activities and language classes, including English. I promised myself to one day visit the school to contribute to the students’ learning, as well as to understand how Buddhism has shaped their lives. Without hesitation, my mouse hovered over the “Add Friend” icon and within a second, it transformed into “Friend Request Sent.” Within months of establishing the connection, I applied for the Sorensen Fellowship knowing exactly where I wanted to go.

Upon the confirmation of the fellowship and purchase of plane tickets, family members questioned my ultimate motive. “But why exactly are you going?” “Will you also shave your head?” Many misunderstood the true meaning and purpose of my journey across the world to a Buddhist temple, and fell back to worrying about whether I was once again considering becoming a Buddhist monastic. After following my longstanding custom of replying with a simple and direct “no,” I took off from Houston towards New Delhi, worry-free and excited to begin an adventure and journey that would involve teaching English while researching and learning more about Buddhism and the monastic community.

Buddhism Returning Home
The Fo Guang Shan Cultural and Educational Center was established on the outskirts of New Delhi in the early 2000s to help revitalize Buddhism in India. This way of life attracted millions of practitioners in what is now India dozens of centuries ago, but now only 0.8% of the Indian population recognize themselves as Buddhists. Fo Guang Shan is an international Chinese Mahayana Buddhist religious movement based in Taiwan. In order to promote Humanistic Buddhism, the founder, Venerable (a term for any fully ordained monk or nun) Master Hsing Yun, established the following principles:

1. Spread the Dharma (Buddha’s teachings) through culture;
2. Cultivate human talents through education;
3. Benefit society through philanthropy; and
4. Purify the mind through cultivation.

Until 2010, the Center served solely as a public sanctuary to execute these principles by offering interested devotees a chance to learn about and practice Chinese culture as well as Buddhism, and perform charitable works as a group. In that year, under the order of Venerable Hui Xian, the Center acquired an additional new purpose, allowing young male children to officially join the Buddhist community, or sangha. Venerable Hui Xian, of Malaysian descent and ordained in 1996, is currently the abbot of the Fo Guang Shan Cultural and Educational Center, overseeing all processes at the Center. Five students, originating from remote villages in the state of Uttar Pradesh, received the 10 sramanera precepts in May 2011 (a sramanera is a male novice Buddhist monastic who cannot become fully ordained until the age of 20) and became the first cohort of sramaneras of the Fo Guang Shan Sramanera School. Today, the Center houses 54 sramaneras and continues to disseminate the Buddha’s wisdom and teachings to the people of India.

Located 20 minutes from the nearest train station, and 45 minutes by car from Central New Delhi, the premises of the Center stand clear from the world full of materials and chaos, and uphold simplicity, strict orders, and harmony. Marking this heavenly landmark are the dual swinging red gates with the Chinese characters, 佛光 (Buddha’s Light), boldly painted in bright yellow.

The gatekeeper, a man in his 50s or 60s, greets visitors with a pearly white smile, which starkly contrasts with his dark brown skin. With black, straight hair and always wearing a button-down long sleeve shirt with slacks, he is the first person anyone meets upon arrival. Upon hearing the honk from a vehicle at the gate, he unlatches the lock from the inside, forcefully swings the two doors wide open, and, smiling, bows with palms joined to welcome all guests.

A Second Father
A good father is a male figure who is a pillar of discipline and support. Daily, his work is often endless as he radiates love to his children. In the
context of the Center, Venerable Hui Xian is the fatherly figure. In addition to being the sramaneras’ master and spiritual leader, Venerable Hui Xian acts as their second father. He exemplifies the characteristics of the perfect father, expressing and providing bountiful support, compassion, and wisdom to the sramaneras.

“So when did they get braces on?” I questioned curiously, noticing about five students bear braces.

“A few months back,” replied Venerable Hui Xian. “Some devotees ask why I do not wait for four or five years so that they can get free treatment,” he continued, as I nodded my head in agreement. He explained that he decided to allow those who require orthodontic attention to receive proper care upon recommendation of a general dentist. “As a parent, you do not want to wait in order for children to get treated. I think in the same way here.”

Based on this conversation with Venerable Hui Xian, I learned of the enormous attention and care that Venerable Hui Xian emanates to the sramaneras. He sets himself at the level of a parent, not wanting to wait for the students to receive care. In similar situations, when the novice monastics are ill, Venerable Hui Xian is quick to provide them with Chinese traditional medicine and treatments, such as acupuncture and massage.

Mindful of their childhood development, Venerable Hui Xian allows the sramaneras to engage in leisure activities daily. Following days of heavy monsoon rainfall in August, the usually dry, yellow-green playing field was flooded on a Saturday. Fearing that the sramaneras would get ill from playing in the rain and flood, the venerable masters and staff members would not allow students to play on the field for the hour following classes. On that day, noting the disappointment and questions of the students, Venerable Hui Xian allowed them to play for a period of time. Upon my return from touring the city, students were very excited and eager to share stories of playing a contact sport named Kabaddi in the rain and flood. In the Venerable’s view, he does not want to take away from the sramaneras’ development as children.

Venerable Hui Xian clearly projects unconditional love and care towards the sramaneras, treating them as his own children. Coming to the Center, I had not thought about the level of care the sramaneras received from the abbot and other residing monastics and staff members. By observing the close care that the students receive, I became aware in practice of the Buddhist perspective of interdependence and interconnectedness that the venerable once explained to me. Venerable Hui Xian’s practice of unconditional love towards the sramaneras promotes a learning experience for the sramaneras so that one day they can also care for others in the same way.

Different, Yet Similar
The sramaneras range in complexion from pale to dark. Their complexions are characteristic of the different states of India from which novice monks originate: Uttar Pradesh, the home of the Taj Mahal; Maharashtra, the home of the Buddhist Ajanta Caves; Tripura, the northeastern state of Theravada Buddhism; fish-focused West Bengal; and snowy-mountain Jammu and Kashmir. From east to west India, distinct groups of students look different from others. While some have features of East Asians, others have features of Caucasians, and still others have features of the stereotypical Indian – thick, black eyebrows on a chocolate-brown complexion. While some novice monks are thin and others of average build, none are overweight in body size. The students range from eight to 19 years of age.

Along with great diversity in height, complexion, age, and facial features...
comes a range of personalities. Each novice monk brings to the monastery his own talents, skills, and questions, enlightening and inspiring others about the many easily accessible opportunities life offers to us daily. When evaluated closely, each individual sramanera remains distinct from all others.

Despite the obvious diversity among students at Fo Guang Shang, the similarity of their daily lives can sometimes conceal their differences. The schedule that all residing members follow is identical, one that leaves no room for any changes. An auspicious new day begins by the knocking of a wooden board (da ban) at 5:30 a.m. On Sundays to Fridays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., students are immersed in their academic curricula designed to help them become well-rounded individuals. Subjects include, but are not limited to: English, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, Pali, mathematics, history, environmental and biological sciences, and psychology.

The residing monastics and staff members, as well as hired academic teachers, and volunteering monastics and teachers, instruct the sramaneras. In addition to academic classes, the sramaneras also complete their daily chores, exercise, meditate, consume their three “medicinal meals”, and conduct chanting services.

As evident in the publication “The 3rd Diary of Novice Monk,” the aspirations of the sramaneras at the school provide “…hope for the revival of Buddhism in India” to the venerable masters of the Fo Guang Shan organization. According to Venerable Master Hsin Ting, the sixth abbot of Fo Guang Shan, with strong faith and the right perception, the sramaneras train and learn the Dharma diligently. Even when severe weather pervades, with temperatures as low as 0°C and as high as above 40°C, the students do daily chanting and bowing, attend classroom lectures, and conduct chores outdoors. Venerable Master Hsin Bao, the current abbot of Fo Guang Shan, mentions that the life of the sramaneras is not easy “…as they have to constantly practise and cultivate the Way whilst mindfully keeping to right thoughts in order to carve out a bright Bodhi path.”

With backs and clean, shaved heads turned towards you, it is hard to differentiate the sramaneras from each other. They all wear the same uniform – a smoke gray-colored, long-sleeved, button-up, collarless shirt with complementary extra baggy and long pants. The paper-thin and cottony-soft texture of the monastic outfit appears to be so comfortable that at times – many times – I wanted to ask for my own pair to wear. At the bottom of the pants, an elastic band wraps the excess material along the lower leg, above the ankle. When wind blows, the outfits skip along the beats of the wind, thin enough to allow the breeze to flow through to cool the body. Each sweat gland covered by the material appreciates the breeze of cool air after working nonstop in the above 40°C temperature of New Delhi.

There are exactly 108 outfits of this type, each sramanera having two pairs. Following the hour of roasting under the sun playing sports and activities, novice monks cleanse themselves and put on the pair that has been air-drying for exactly 24 hours. Following their cleansing processes, sramaneras wash the day’s outfit by hand, later
attending dinner with 10 wrinkly fingers. Individually scrubbing their own outfits, students utilize a bucket of water with light soap. By dinner time, 54 soaking and dripping wet outfits hang from clothes hangers on a rack located adjacent to the bathrooms.

A Battle Between Friend and Teacher

My role as a volunteer teacher and researcher was challenged by another role I had—being a friend of the sramaneras. The small age gap that existed between me and the novice monks played a crucial role in the effectiveness of my duties and responsibilities as an instructor and researcher while there. Throughout my stay at the sramanera school, I recalled a text message from Auntie Kim: “The novice monks have many rules they must obey so be friendly, goofy but never impolite...after all though younger than you...they are your si heng...older dharma teachers.”

At the beginning of each class that I taught, the sramaneras bowed with joined palms and greeted me with “Ji Xiang” (Auspicious Blessings), “Good Morning,” or “Good Afternoon.” With my permission, the students sat quietly, while thanking me by saying “Thank You,” or “Omitofo” (the Chinese pronunciation for Amitabha Buddha’s name). This troubled me; I felt as if I were disrespecting them by having them bow to me. At the time, I felt my role as a layperson did not deserve the reverence of these sramaneras, my “older dharma teachers,” as my aunt had called them. In my view, their deep practice and cultivation of Buddhism were ranked much higher than my own, a layperson’s.

Interestingly and shockingly, when listening to the opinions of the novice monks I learned that many of these students felt unchallenged by their hired academic English instructors. The sramaneras complained of the slow pace that the hired academic English teachers followed. The students in the lower level classes were taught one chapter per month.

From my perspective, both of the hired English academic teachers focused too much on reading comprehension. Recognizing this, I, as the volunteer American English instructor, implemented more rigorous teaching lessons for my classes to further sharpen their skills in English. For all 54 students, for one month I assessed their understanding of basic English, from identifying nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. to writing complete sentences. For the next month, essay writing and speech giving were the two most important tasks I gave to students. Many students grumbled, sighed heavily, and required lots of time to think, not knowing what to write or say, but these were important steps through which students could more effectively learn the language.

Outside of the classroom, my role as an instructor, as I have mentioned, was complicated by my role as a friend. We danced to the song “Try Everything,” ate on Saturdays in a large circle on the grass, processed tofu, cooked, chanted and meditated, and played sports all together. It was perhaps through all this time that I spent working with the sramaneras that I saw them as friends as well as students. Unlike the other teachers, both academic and volunteer, I practically stepped into their shoes, doing the same things as they were. During their “weekend holiday” on Saturdays, even when other volunteer teachers came from Taiwan to provide them with a two-day summer camp, students would eagerly wait for me to join their respective circles for the meals. “Lao shi!” (teacher) they yelled, gesturing with their hands for me to sit next to them.

Upon seeing this, many of the other volunteer teachers wondered why so many students wanted me to join them in their meals. What was it about me that made me so popular among the novice monks? I laughed at their reactions. Students themselves could not even answer. I still do not know the answer myself. This personal
connection that I built with the students allowed me to learn more about each one on a personal level. The one-on-one conversations that I had with students regarding their time there at the school were very inspirational and informative. Although my roles as a friend and an instructor/researcher were distinct, the interconnectedness of the two allowed me to have a richer experience than most other instructors. I was able to better relate and connect with the students on a more personal level.

As a participant in many of the different activities, I felt as if I were home. Because of the strict order and uniform temple procedures for all Fo Guang Shan centers worldwide, as well as the comfort of the atmosphere, I did not sense I was 9000+ miles away from the United States. Working closely with the members of the Center allowed me to immerse myself wholeheartedly in everything that I did. The one-on-one conversations that I had, games that I watched, dances that I coordinated, and lessons that I taught have all inspired me to continue to work with people of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and to always focus on the present and neither the past nor the future.

What was it about me that made me so popular among the novice monks? I laughed at their reactions. Students themselves could not even answer. I still do not know the answer myself.

Smiles
Throughout my stay at the school, students, monastics, and staff members knew of my plan to become a dentist. Before my journey to India, I thought having a class session dedicated to learning about oral hygiene would be very important for the students. I spent months contacting different dentists and companies including Colgate, Oral-B, and Crest, asking for donations of toothbrushes, floss, and toothpaste. Though I was denied many times, a number of individuals agreed to donate supplies, often more than what I expected to collect. On the day of my journey, an entire suitcase full of two boxes of toothpaste, 70 toothbrushes, two boxes of floss, and a typodont [a teaching model of the teeth and gums] was at my side.

One morning at 8 a.m., I surprised all of the students with a presentation about oral hygiene. Sitting on the floor of the main shrine, students made jittery noises while keeping their eyes locked on the unfamiliar black luggage. The students watched clips I’d found online on the importance of brushing and flossing, how to brush, and how to floss. When shown how to floss, students glared at me, looking over each others’ heads; none of the sramaneras had ever been exposed to flossing. But when asked to come up to the front to show everyone how to brush using a toothbrush and the typodont, many of the sramaneras were eager to showcase their skills, raising their hands as high as possible.

Each student was presented with a toothbrush and a packet of floss. Students who had questions regarding their oral health stepped aside to speak with me. Many of the younger students had discolored and decayed molars, ranging in color from yellow to orange to black. The deep penetration that the bacteria had eaten through the enamel and dentin was vivid at the time of inspection.

Students were intruiged by floss and excited to have new toothbrushes.
On the third of August, the community of monastics and teachers wished me a happy birthday throughout the morning, all the while continuing the daily routine. In the extremely humid afternoon following classes, all sramaneras gathered in the breezeway at 4 PM to enjoy fruit popsicles and chocolate bars. Meanwhile, Venerable Hui Xian announced that it was my birthday and led the group in singing “Happy Birthday.” I felt embarrassed, as I was told that monastics do not celebrate their own birthdays. Why did I deserve it when they do not? Before singing my name out loud, I looked around for Cheng Liang, attempting to share the spotlight with him.

In the late evening around 10 o’clock, jiao Shih, a staff member of the center, returned and jokingly asked out loud if there was a birthday. In my peripheral vision, I noticed two pairs of eyes on me, one of a sramanera and the other of jiao Shih. I was only able to imagine the two smiling real big, only to see me shying away. Unresponsive, I kept to my task in the office and did not bother to acknowledge the question, because I did not want the occasion to be a big deal.

Soon after, I went into the small kitchen of the main complex to refill my water bottle and spent some time smelling essential oils with Venerable Hui Xian. Midway, the Venerable asked if I was ready for the surprise. Nibbling on my Camelback bottle, I hesitantly laughed and replied yes, knowing that a cake was coming – I had already been warned in the middle of classes by Venerable Hui Xian. Excited to be joined by a group of the senior sramaneras, venerable masters, and residing staff members, I skipped up the stairs and back to the office to grab my DSLR camera.

On my way back, the sramaneras swamped the dining table. Anxious and nervous, I was hoping it was nothing too serious and big. I reached the pack and saw two big white boxes opened to chocolate-brown desserts on the dining table. I gasped. One was oddly shaped and flat; the other was round and looked quite normal. Instead of consuming both, as one seemed large enough, I suggested we only have one and retain the second for the next day. We chose the dessert that was flat, oddly shaped, and contained fractures and cracks on its outermost layer. The once round and tall chocolate cheesecake was all melted and flat due to the heat. Still, I remarked that it was beautiful and looked very good. I felt so honored there was absolutely no room to be unthankful.

As an aspiring dentist, I not only want to serve underserved communities in Texas, but also hope to provide care to the sramaneras at the Fo Guang Shan school in the future.
I went to bed later that night wondering why monastics do not celebrate their birthdays. How did the sramaneras feel seeing the entire group celebrate my birthday when they do not get to celebrate theirs? I was puzzled, yet honored. At least I was able to share the celebrations and its delicacies with all of them.

Findings
What had first appeared to be cruel essay writing and speech giving assignments allowed my students, in the end, to reflect on their own lives as Buddhist novice monks. In turn, I was able to discover much of what I now know about the personal lives of the sramaneras.

A large percentage of the students come from Uttar Pradesh, a state of India neighboring New Delhi. These students and their families became aware of the sramanera school primarily due to an organization called Youth Buddhist Society (YBS). According to the organization’s website, “Youth Buddhist Society is a volunteer, non-governmental, non-sectarian, non-profit, non-political people’s development movement based on engaged Buddhism established in 1986 in Sankisa, Uttar Pradesh – India. YBS has brought about grass root initiative, involvement and development of mind among thousand of villagers and human race in India.”

Venerable Hui Xian wished me all the best and reminded me that the next day would still be a normal day, that the sun rises from the east and sets in the west. From this occasion, I was able to realize the power of humor and giving. From one single cake, the power of happiness was multiplied across all participants.

I went to bed later that night wondering why monastics do not celebrate their birthdays. How did the sramaneras feel seeing the entire group celebrate my birthday when they do not get to celebrate theirs? I was puzzled, yet honored. At least I was able to share the celebrations and its delicacies with all of them.

A heartwarming 20th birthday celebration with venerable masters, teachers, and sramaneras.

As I was taking the honorable seat next to Venerable Hui Xian, the “Happy Birthday” song was again sung by the glorious and divine voices of the venerable masters, sramaneras and staff members. The Venerable Masters Hui Xian and Hui Hu sang “Happy Birthday” to me in Cantonese, which turned out to be a laughing situation – since I did not know the Cantonese lyrics and embarrassingly could not follow along.

Before grabbing the knife to cut the cake, Venerable Hui Xian instructed me to join my palms and make vows to make the world more peaceful and for my academic and professional goals to be met. Nervous, I did not know what to do or say. After much persistence, I took a deep breath, exhaled, closed my eyes, joined my two sweaty palms, and whispered my vows. I turned towards Venerable Hui Xian to thank him and wished him and the community happiness and long lives. He laughed and joked about not wanting a long life as it meant more suffering. Finally, the obviously melted chocolate cake, jokingly referred to by Venerable Hui Xian as the “yat peck yeh” [Cantonese for “pile of feces”], was cut and served, followed by seconds.

Concluding the surprise, Venerable Hui Xian thanked me for giving the monastics and staff members a chance to enjoy such a delicacy, whereupon I laughed and thanked them for providing me such a heartwarming occasion. Before retiring for the night,
In fact, students in the *sramanera* school today who were once part of the villages in Uttar Pradesh have lineages tracing back to the Shakya Clan, a Vedic clan lasting from 1750-500 BCE to which Shakyamuni Buddha belonged. Other students from Ladakh, Tripura, and Maharashtra discovered the *sramanera* school through family members and friends, all coming for more hope in their lives and to revitalize Buddhism in India.

In addition to spending many hours dedicated to their education, students are also assigned duties and responsibilities. The *sramaneras* expressed that they found these responsibilities and duties a learning experience, enhancing their lives morally and ethically. The daily work that the *sramaneras* are required to complete make them feel more responsible for their own actions and for helping others. By fulfilling their tasks and duties, they better identify as a monastic rather than a layperson, as back home in their villages, there were no motives or targets in life that propelled them. Coming here, they have the opportunity to develop their skills and formulate larger goals for helping to propagate the Buddha's teachings.

Being a Buddhist *sramanera* has changed the lives of each of them dramatically. In addition to large changes such as developing responsibility and formulating motives, targets, and goals in life, these individuals have changed in the subtlest ways. Following strict rules and guidance, they feel as if their lives are more ordered. Unable to drink, steal, kill, have a partner, dance, wear casual clothing, and lie, the *sramaneras* focus more on meditation and practicing compassion. Much like their lives as “village boys,” they joke – but they do not lie. They control their attitudes and behavior, instead of speaking very rudely without manners. When something that is wished for is not granted, they come to understand that it is not theirs, and allow those feelings to subside instead of becoming angry. These students have also learned how to sit straight, eat with proper manners, behave themselves when around professionals and guests, and face difficult people and situations while remaining soft and calm.

Hearing of these benefits and stories from the *sramaneras* themselves further strengthened my commitment to hopefully one day participate in a short-term monastic retreat. I hope that the benefits that the teachings have brought to the *sramaneras* will impact me in a similar way. When I asked the *sramaneras* where they see themselves 10 years from now, many responded that they hope to be propagating Buddhism in India. They hope to manage centers that provide education and cultural activities to the youth, all while providing a space to change the negative aspects of people to positive ones.

I hope that one day, these young *sramaneras* become the future leaders of Buddhism in India and the world. May they help the Buddhists in India reconnect with their faith, and may they help all sentient beings realize their Buddha nature.

**In a Nutshell**

Since my return to Brandeis, I have reflected both on what I have discovered about myself and on the impact I had on the students back at the school. Even though my responsibilities and routines were practically identical each day, I was able to learn and grow from my experience. Without a doubt, the internship led me to understand aspects of Buddhist monastic culture better than I could have expected.

Even though I still hold the practices of Buddhism dear to my heart in college, having co-founded the University’s Dharmic Prayer Space and leading weekly meditation and chanting meetings, I am faced with all sorts of stresses being back in an academic environment. The competition among students and the ubiquitous pressure to excel remain as the never-ending suffering faced by students as they all savagely vie for limited seats in professional schools. From my personal experience, I have been unable to wholeheartedly practice Buddhism as a result of these widely recognized expectations and responsibilities as a student. As I focus on learning the most that I can and achieving to the best of my ability – all while balancing work-study, extra-curriculars, and connections with friends – I often find myself distanced from my faith.

The different insights of the teachings of Buddhism that I acquired during my two month stay at the Fo Guang Shan Sramanera School have provided me with ways to combat the stress of the academic environment. The different
meditative practices and principles as explained in various sutras I learned have given me different perspectives on what I do as a student. I now see that I should not compare myself to others, as doing so will never lead me to happiness. When doing something, I must be single-minded and concentrate on that one thing. Taking this advice in, I have hope that my attitude and behavior as a student will be improved, yielding less or even no stress. Furthermore, what I have learned about Buddhism has only deepened my interest in and commitment to studying and practicing the way of life.

However, I still wonder, “So in what ways has the internship changed me as a person and changed the people I worked with?” The internship has changed me in small and large ways. I now make my bed daily. I have a greater understanding of the Heart Sutra, a revered text in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Being able to educate the novice monks gave me greater inspiration to one day serve underserved communities by providing comfort, confidence, and education about oral hygiene care as a dentist.

I hope that my time as a volunteer teacher has left the students with greater willingness to learn and practice English. I questioned the novice monks about what they would do if they decided to propagate the Dharma in a part of India that does not speak Hindi, and helped them realize that English would serve as an alternative language with which to communicate with the locals.

Just like Master Hsing Yun once said, “Live For Your Faith,” these sramaneras are living the Buddhist monastic way of life so that they may one day propagate the Dharma in order to revitalize the rich Buddhist history and culture in India. Together with the sramaneras, today I am living for my faith in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) and the efficacy of the Buddhist path. Constantly reminding myself of my faith in Buddhism, I come to understand the truth in the ideals of cause and effect, and karma. As we live each day with certain expectations and hopes, we may not always get what we desire or hope. However, the guidelines provided by Buddhism help alleviate any sorrow we may experience and keep moving on, without faltering.

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Notes
Leila laughs through a haze of shisha and the sun sets over Bethlehem behind her. It is the last week of my internship with the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, and I have left Jerusalem for Bethlehem, to have dinner with an old friend from Seeds of Peace. Leila is in college now, studying law, so we discuss justice. She tells me the only justice she will ever feel is if Palestine becomes one again, for all Israelis to be expelled. I ask her if she sees this as possible. She tells me she only sees death and destruction of the West Bank and Gaza to be possible. We watch the sunset and smoke shisha and watch beautiful men with their beautiful wives eat dinner and be in love.

She says, “Remember those dialogues? They were a disrespect to my identity. But I got to travel.” She takes me to the center of town in Bethlehem, to the shared taxis. She lifts her chin as if in challenge. “Can you get home ok from here?” I nod confidently. I’ve been through checkpoints and changing buses and haggling prices late at night before.

I have been a “Seed of Peace” for seven years. I spent four years of high school as part of the youth peace-building program, Seeds of Peace International, gifting me the opportunity to know Israelis, Palestinians, and a further diversity of fellow Americans. During summers, we gathered in Otisfield, Maine with young people from Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, the U.S., and the U.K. to meet those “other” from us. With the summer camp located in my home state, I joined other Seeds from Maine during my academic semesters, to organize around issues relevant to our communities, such as race, gender, and education.

This past summer, I traveled to Jerusalem where I was both removed from and caught between identities of this conflict that I was seeing in person for the first time. Neither Jewish, Muslim, Palestinian, nor Israeli, I was an American with no personal connection to organized religion or the Middle East region – an outsider to dialogues on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as I was to the region. In those dialogues during my high school Seeds of Peace experience, I was grateful for the opportunity to form bonds and gain understanding from both sides. Now, as I began my summer, the nuance within those dialogue experiences forced me to hold a collection of difficult and often conflicting truths as I witnessed this conflict from both sides of the Separation Wall.

The Chorus

On my first Thursday in Jerusalem, I arrived at the Jerusalem International YMCA. A mighty building, I had seen the heights of its frame five minutes

Neither Jewish, Muslim, Palestinian, nor Israeli, I was an American with no personal connection to organized religion or the Middle East region.
out along Ben Yehuda Street. The clock tower seemed to look upon all of Jerusalem, East and West. Its front gates were open, like wings. Professionals in black suits and airy blouses glided past me and up the staircase to main and side entrances. The canvas of a banner announcing an upcoming cultural event flapped in the wind of mid-morning. Birds chirped. A small cat darted past my feet.

With its formidable columns, manicured lawn, and symmetrical domes of tan stone, the building seemed to have always been there. I walked by potted plants in the middle of the main pavilion and towards a message framed in blue tile, hugged by a set of modest staircases, to the main entrance of the building. As I moved closer, past an out-of-use water fountain, and along the terrace, I noticed carvings of ferns and birds enshrined on the outer walls, then a pelican, and a dove – symbols of the three Abrahamic religious traditions. Trees lined the walkway, pillars supported the building, birds embossed its exterior. And some of the central, exterior wall along the entire front of the YMCA, tan and formidable too, was torn through by bullet holes.

The message was written in delicate black ink, in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. I entered the building with the quote tucked tightly within the ventricles of my own heart: “Here is a place whose atmosphere is peace, where political and religious jealousies can be forgotten, and international unity fostered and developed.” – Lord Edmund Allenby, April 18, 1933.”

On entering the building, I was directly below the expansive clock tower, going into the main hall of the YMCA. Within the intricate body of this building, painted strokes of deep blue and gold flowers lined the main hall like veins. They were the muscle and bone of the main hall, a subdued ecology beckoning tourists and peacemakers alike. This would be the site of my work for the next eight weeks with the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, where music and complexity would meet to teach me another lesson in the reality of conflict, and the beauty of people.

In the first weeks of my internship, I worked on management, programming and organizing spreadsheets, importing data, and scheduling video conferences with my boss, Micah Hendler, while he traveled in America. I watched as workers fluttered through the Y in urgency. I saw small groups of chorus members singing and working with one another, but I watched it while busy with my work and very much removed.

Finally, my boss returned from America, and the chorus members came to the YMCA to celebrate their reunion, at the close of Ramadan, over an iftar dinner. I entered the community meeting center to the smell of spiced chicken and fresh vegetables, saw smiling, laughing children and bright mango juice in wine glasses. There was an open seat towards the front of the room and I made my way to it. The room felt brighter than I had seen it before. Those at this meal were part of something that could never be my community, and I felt grateful to bask in the warmth of all that this chorus was, to be enriched by this splendor. Was this part of the dream I had first heard at Seeds of Peace, years before?

This and later meetings, formal and informal, were my collective chance to interrogate the inner workings of the chorus, to know if what I had read and written about the chorus in those first few weeks held truth. I heard beautiful voices working out of dusty rooms in the depths of the Y. I listened as Palestinian students told me of their excitement to travel beyond the West Bank, East Jerusalem, or sovereign Israel. I listened as Israeli students from liberal families spoke to me about the responsibility they felt for coexistence. Across separations of identity politics, there was, too, a genuine interest in choral work. In these snapshots, there are conflicts and questions, and beautiful, complicated music around sustainable truths of peace, and
laughter between people who would not be friends without this framework, and stories of travel and love and religious experiences that would not have existed if not for what was here, what had been built by this chorus.

To Palestine

One Friday, before the sun welcomed day, I boiled tea with spices found half-price at the Ben Yehuda Market. I washed my hair in the kitchen sink to shake out Dead Sea salt resting days too long. Later that morning, I would tremble with excitement as I began my first walk from West to East Jerusalem.

Israel regards Jerusalem as its capital, though this is not considered legally binding according to many interpretations of international law. Palestinians regard Jerusalem – Al-Quds in Arabic – as their capital, although many have no legal access to the city.5 There is no discernible line separating East from West Jerusalem, where one side is sovereign Israel and the other is not. Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the West Bank, East Jerusalem (including the Old City), the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights, have been occupied by the State of Israel. Within all this complexity and drawing of legal boundaries, on the ground this means that in East Jerusalem, Israel maintains control of civil life, that the state provides for the municipal, health, and security functions of daily life.5

Descending along the hill to Damascus Gate, I saw East Jerusalem spread out before me. Jerusalem stone of the Old City walls stood to my right, and shops seemed to collect more dirt and trash as I moved downward. The looks from beautiful brown eyes stuck to me like baby hairs on my sweating neck.

I walked quickly, late already. I didn't have enough time not to know where to go, so I moved toward a group of men in all mute green, soft green, like America's army green. The IDF was founded following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, so ordered by then-Defense and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. The soldiers at this post, all men, were laughing together and rolling cigarettes. I said, “Excuse me, English?”

One near me picked up his large, black gun, moved closer to me, and smiled, “Yes?” “Where is the bus to Ramallah?” He threw his wrist backwards, to the row of white buses behind him. I nodded and smiled with pink lips and white dimpled cheeks. He smiled back curiously, shaking his head slightly as if I had offered him a joke. I crossed the street near the soldiers, taking advantage of the brief break in mid-morning traffic at the Gate to avoid the bustle of the traffic circle farther ahead.

At the stop, it became clear that the soldier knew English, but not the West Bank. I looked into the sun for a sign on the platform listing “Ramallah.” There was no bus to Ramallah listed on the platform, and families looked suspiciously at me as I paced up and down the platform. My lack of Arabic or Hebrew prevented my speaking, in greeting or in asking a question. I approached East Jerusalemites with freckled cheeks and wrinkled features. Or were they settlers? Palestinians?

Sweat formed on the back of my neck as minutes shuffled by. A couple of older men smoked shisha by the entrance to the platform. I smelled the sweetness of its water-pipe and apple, lemony fragrance. Farther down the platform, two young men rolled tobacco into small shoots with white sheets and I stopped them, hopeful. They lit up their well-made cigarettes as they tried to decipher my question. I watched the tiny shoots burning low in East Jerusalem's warm wind. The men spoke in slow, gravelly voices and broken English. It was then, in that mid-morning, that a young girl appeared.

Perfect English sang to me, “You’re looking for the Ramallah bus?” I turned to answer affirmatively. A girl, short and thin, reaching not even to my breast, responded as I looked down. “It’s not
Here, but the station you need to be at is close. Me and my cousin will take you. It will be faster if we go with you."

Before I answered, the girl had turned to take the hand of a smaller girl, her cousin, and began to march towards the end of the platform. I watched the taller girl tell her friends at the platform goodbye in Arabic and motion me along. I nodded to both cigarette rollers and smiled a goodbye. My guide’s name was Rawia, almost 16 years old. Her hair and her cousin’s swam through the air like raven feathers as we crossed the traffic circle adjoining Damascus Gate. Serious brows and a thin face, she began to ask a testimony of me, intelligence and bite roaring soft from the young girl’s mouth.

She asked question after question as we marched along the city streets: “What are you doing here?” “Who are you working for?” “Have you met a Palestinian before us?” “What do you think of international human rights?” “Can you describe the needs of the Palestinian people?” “Do you want to know what I think of Seeds of Peace, honestly?” “What does your family think of what you’re doing?” “Do you know a lot of Israelis?” “What do you mean when you say ‘peace’?” “Is that why you are here, to answer these questions, or some sort of Seeds of Peace normalizing bullshit?” In a voice new to English and only familiar with Arabic, the younger girl looked up at me during a crosswalk pause to say, “You are very pretty.” I pointed to her eyes reflecting light of all the suns I’d seen in this Jerusalem, saying, “Very pretty.”

There was God and fury thunder in nearly 16-year-old lungs, booming and assertive during the 15-minute-long walk, past shopkeepers and street beggars, and with input from her younger cousin who tagged along. Rawia was from Ramallah, but spent most of her summer days in East Jerusalem. It was clear she had a passion for reading. Rawia told me she wished to write books and teach. She couldn’t wait for her chance to travel. I had met her as she had been sitting at the bus stop, watching her cousin and talking with friends. “There’s nothing to do in Ramallah,” she said certainly, wrinkling her nose. She translated to the cousin, who nodded vigorously in agreement, pigtails bouncing in time. “Fasting begins in a few days, you cannot think of meeting me then. We will all be home, in Ramallah.” She was referring to the beginning of the month of Ramadan, believed by Muslims to be the time in which the Prophet Muhammad began receiving his divine revelation. Throughout this month, from sunrise to sunset Rawia and her family would not eat or drink and would abstain from physical intimacy. Families would gather each evening at sunset to break the fast together, when dates and milk, and sweets like qatayef, a crepe-like pastry stuffed with ground nuts or cheese, would be staples.

The bus to the West Bank was air-conditioned and full of curious, staring women who looked quickly away as I returned their gazes. In 40 minutes, we reached Qalandia checkpoint and “the wall.” The West Bank “separation barrier” or “security fence” or “apartheid
wall” or “anti-terrorist fence” began construction on April 14, 2002 in Palestinian, not Israeli territory. This building began at the height of the Second Intifada, where then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon declared it a measure to protect Israelis from Palestinian suicide bombers. Eighty-five percent of the wall runs east of the Green Line, which marks the 1967 boundary between Israel and the West Bank and East Jerusalem.7

As women and men re-boarded the bus following their walk through the checkpoint, we drove through the gates. I had arrived in Ramallah.

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“Sophi-a,” he sang at me across the bar, “You are being too accepting here. You heard me say I was not a feminist. This bothers you, correct? Then just say this. Your respect of my culture will be the death of you.”

“I’m talking about a word. I’m bothered because you seem gleefully dismissive of the idea,” I replied, shouting over the blaring Western beats of a Friday night in Palestine’s New York, its Tel Aviv–Ramallah.

The bar boy, 18, but so joyful in the way he communicated with those asking him for a drink that he seemed younger, walked quickly from behind the bar to the table I was sitting at with three friends, all male.

“Sophie, I came from the womb of a woman, how could I not respect women? She gave birth to me, to my form and my soul. I think God is a woman. My mother raised me alone and I see Palestine, in a way, like a woman. When I fight the Palestinian force, I fight for her. Those commies. Women are better than me, and if we valued humanity differently, they would be ruling us all. And I know it’s not that way. But you’re talking that American stuff. And I think we’ve got it the worst. I see women working in the home here, but we’re all working behind a wall. Maybe I should have a priority [for liberating women], though I’d never call it feminism here. But what are those factions for, in this wasteland?”

All four men rolled cigarettes, and I turned my head away from the smoke, but that smell was Palestine. And I continued questioning, maybe two feet too deep in a cultural relativism that halts creation or resolution or revolution. And then the bar closed and we danced in the streets and went to our homes at 2 a.m. and this joy, I was learning, was also Palestine.

My friend and I laughed our way to his house outside downtown Ramallah, blocks away from the occupied metropolis’ Old City. His name was Mohammed, a handsome, boyish 20-year-old Gazan, who had lived in Ramallah for the past seven years. We shared stories in the street as we kicked pebbles and yawned our way towards his home. He pointed out the lights of Tel Aviv from the Ramallah street. Ramallah, resting on the crest of the Judean Hills at an elevation of 2,861 feet above sea level, gifts its inhabitants with cool summer breezes and has long been a popular tourist site. The low hum of streetlights and club music filled the air while we walked to his family’s apartment building.

From there, I entered the warmth of Palestinian hospitality, of Mohammed’s home. His parents were in the living room, and gave me dates and tea, handshakes and hugs. I met his mother, a science teacher, and her husband, a local government official. They were handsome people. I would later learn Mohammed’s mother veiled outside the home, where she wore bright, stylish scarves and pendants around a beautiful, wide and welcoming face, and smart pantsuits. His father looked the 60-something version of my friend Mohammed, large brown eyes and brows, a strong nose and jaw, highlighted by a full head of thick, graying hair. His mother entered the room again, this time with a sandwich of hummus, lettuce and a mix of herbal sauces and spices. She spoke in stilted English and we struggled to communicate, though a deep smile and hand to my heart, I was beginning to learn, would show an equal appreciation. She nodded and laughed at the gesture. And there was a family before me, laughing softly over the rumble of a Syrian television sitcom. I went to bed at 3:45 a.m., full in stomach and soul.
Mohammed’s mother made a full breakfast of hummus, yogurt, cooked vegetables, and elaborate dressings, offering Palestinian and Lebanese and Syrian dishes I could not pronounce. The family insisted I was served first and often, and given chocolate chip cookies at the end of the meal to take to the sitting room where my friend and his younger sister were watching “Game of Thrones.” Mohammed’s father sat at the same spot he had been the previous night, reading the newspaper and looking up occasionally to question what exactly they were watching and why. The sons grinned and laughed and periodically seemed to give context to a scene quickly in Arabic during commercials.

Later in the day, Mohammed’s father wanted to take me on a tour of Ramallah, so we piled into a long, black jeep. Mohammed’s father drove. The Mahmoud Darwish museum and garden and a Nelson Mandela statue, the wealth and poverty of inner and outer streets to the city, the offices of Mohammed’s father, the school where Mohammed’s mother had been educated, and the school where she now worked. “She came a long way to receive that education, and look what she does with it now!” said Mohammed’s father, slowing down so I could read the sign and take a picture of the school. Then, we began driving down a hill and up another nearby. We got out and they showed me the new property they had recently purchased, the view, the small garden, the stone of the patio. “For the future,” said Mohammed’s mother, smiling, and Mohammed’s father nodded.

We moved along a paved street towards the refugee camp. Mohammed’s father told me about growing up in a refugee camp similar to our destination. He talked about his family, about Gaza. He talked about the sea that the babies we would meet here had never seen, and about the education they didn’t receive but deserved. He explained that the slum of permanent structures had grown from a mere tent camp. We passed by the rusted gate of the entrance to the camp. Small children were running through the streets, our car rolling lightly on the uneven path strewn with trash. The streets were narrow, more so than even in Ramallah. I felt like I had entered a new Palestine, but familiar to me through his words, his pride, his love for these people.

On the outskirts of the camp, we found the road blocked. We stopped fully, and he pointed to the Israeli settlement resting on a neighboring hill. “Another world. See the soldiers there, with their guns? They decided to close this gate. Only them. And if we went through it, they would shoot at us. They have the freedom to control all of that,” Mohammed’s father spoke in earnest. The soldiers seemed to look in our direction, to our car. Mohammed’s father turned the engine over and the car around. My friend Mohammed said to me, “Now, it will take us 15 minutes or more to get to a place that should have taken us 15 seconds. Watch, time our movement.” It took longer than 15 minutes, as we puttered through the camp again and around the swirling hills outside Ramallah on our way to Jericho.

I ended up staying the weekend in Ramallah and returned to Jerusalem Sunday morning. I ate dates, and sat in coffee shops, and asked Mohammed’s father about his home and his work. He showed me pictures of himself with the home he designed in Gaza. He told me about the men he knew in power. He wore smart collared shirts every day, and took important phone calls for hours at a time all through the weekend. He sat forward on the
couch. “If you can devise a way forward on this ground, you will be able to analyze any conflict, in our past or in our future…. If you can understand this conflict, you can understand any conflict.” He talked about ending the occupation. “None of this ends, or really improves, before then. Before civil rights.” He was focused, and considerate to explain and flex his thoughts to an undergraduate student from America.

On my final morning with the family, we sat together after breakfast, drinking mango juice. He asked me what I thought of his wife. Then, he told me about his love for her. About how smart she was, to be able to make art with food and as a teacher for young students. How much he thought his children looked like her, and how he hoped they’d be like her. And, for the first time, I was not intimidated by him. He asked me about my own family and I told him how I missed them, and what they were like. “Just make sure as you do good, you love them well, too.” I hummed into the morning air, thinking about what love looked like when acted upon.

To Jerusalem

In conversations during my final two weeks, the high school students of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus spoke in Arabic and Hebrew, in cliques Palestinian and Israeli. There was rhythm to their collective voice when singing that lulled comfortably between songs. Whispers across rooms or laughter, or those that showed up an hour late to each rehearsal, their points of connection were also rich with culture and personalities larger than rooms. They switched heatedly between languages, explaining that their right to worship as they please rests heavily on the ability to move freely in their communities. They talked about Gazan friends or IDF soldiers, and about how geography affects access to education, as well as access to water. They were whole people, willing to share with me. And in my final week, I saw the Jerusalem Youth Chorus perform for the first time. I was in the back with a video camera. These were, by then, lovely acquaintances. They started with the theme song of the Seeds of Peace International Camp, written on the benches at morning lineup at the campsite. I closed my eyes, full to the brim in momentary homecoming. I was in Maine again, years ago:

I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me, to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes.

You used to rock me in the cradle of your arms, You said you’d hold me till the pains of life were gone. You said you’d comfort me in times like these and now I need you. Now I need you, and you are gone.

I think on the things that made me feel so wonderful when I was young. I think on the things that made me laugh, made me dance, made me sing. I think on the things that made me grow into a being full of pride. I think on these things, for they are true.

I know a please a thank you and a smile will take me far, I know that I am you and you are me and we are one, I know that who I am is numbered in each grain of sand, I know that I’ve been blessed again, and over again.

They were charming. The crowd smiled. And I hummed as I walked back to my hostel: I think on the things that made me feel so wonderful when I was young….

Conclusion

After working these months with Palestinian and Israeli youth, observing the conflict experienced by my childhood friends within their homes and grown lives, and the lives of those who make up their worlds, I have begun to know a deeper sense of understanding of and responsibility to this conflict and the essential nature of human rights.

In bearing witness to the structural imbalances that exist for Palestinians, and the reality of fear that persists for Israelis, I am humbled and sometimes
lost, without knowing where justice sits within these great divides.

But I spent the summer listening, and cultivating my own capacity for empathy, and I know great work remains urgently needed to find compromise for the sake of the lives of real and beautiful people with whom I shared conversations. The tensions I feel leave me conscious of the chorus’s reconciliatory quality. Music can heal and has the power to build. It cannot fix the frameworks of a decades-long conflict, and the pitfalls of all the coexistence work of which I have been grateful to be a part continue, often leaving me frustrated. Identity and narrative mosaic-ed my summer; Noa’s Israel and Leila’s Palestine, merging with the youth of the chorus, and of musicmakers and peacebuilders on the ground.

I am not this conflict’s keeper, but feel more than a passerby. The future is uncertain, and people continue to suffer over the realities I saw and heard of this past summer. And I think about Rawia’s questions.

Notes

3. The Jerusalem Youth Chorus: http://jerusalemyouthchorus.org/.