When I began my internship with Sewa International at the beginning of June, I hoped to design a health needs assessment for the Bhutanese refugee community, create a resource guidebook/portfolio for future public health interns, and develop a working knowledge of the refugee population living at the Los Arcos apartment complex in Houston, TX.

While we were designing the health needs assessment, we learned that another organization recently conducted a very similar assessment. After working with the Bhutanese refugee community throughout the summer, it occurred to us interns that this missed opportunity (for us) was a blessing in disguise: it would have been very difficult to design and conduct the health needs assessment given our (wo)manpower and time constraints. Fortunately, the organization that conducted the health needs assessment provided us with access to their results, which we used to pursue a different goal.

In place of assessing the health needs of the community, we addressed some of those needs by hosting three health camps. These health camps proved to be much more realistic, given our resources. Each health camp consisted of an afternoon devoted to addressing one particular health issue. Refugees were invited to discuss health concerns over traditional samosas and chai tea. Although we faced some difficulties along the way, such as the need to reschedule one camp, each health camp received positive feedback from community members.

Despite the helpful information provided by the health needs assessment, one significant issue we (interns) faced regarding the health camps was that we had to build each from the ground up with little or no guidance from Sewa International. Beyond dealing with this matter in real time, I realized that we needed a resource guide to help future public health interns; that way, they wouldn’t face the very steep learning curve we did when it came to having a meaningful impact on the health of the Bhutanese refugees. While I think creating the
resource guide was a realistic task to tackle, it still required a significant amount of time and persistence to complete. I’m glad that future interns will be able to use this guide to quickly get up to speed about the refugee community, the structure of Sewa’s office, and the most significant roadblocks interns may come up against. With this knowledge, future interns will be able to more efficiently use their time at the internship to create meaningful, sustainable health programming for the Bhutanese refugee community.

Through my day-to-day interaction with the Bhutanese refugee community, our design and execution of the health camps, and my creation of the resource guide, I more than achieved my third goal of developing an extensive knowledge about the Bhutanese refugee community living at Los Arcos. When I first started this experience, I knew very little about these resilient people. Now I know what lifts them up and holds them down. In addition to helping the public health interns create better programming, this information has enabled me to see joys and worries that know no geographic or cultural bounds. Bhutanese parents worried about their children at school. Young adults told me about their dreams to do something worthwhile with their lives. The children I played with craved love and support.

I began this experience knowing that I wanted to work with a disadvantaged population whose primary language is not English. However, I had little knowledge about what this sort of experience would entail. I have learned that language is one of the biggest barriers to satisfying basic human rights like a good education and robust health. For example, even though patients are entitled to a translator (as dictated by law), none of the refugees with whom we interacted was aware of this law. From this experience, I have learned that a community’s health is a function of awareness-raising and advocacy. Although my courses at Brandeis have emphasized the differences between creating change on the macro vs. micro level, I have realized during my time with Sewa International that not everyone is aware of the macro-level policies in place to help them. This realization leaves me wanting to learn more about health policy in order to spread the information to communities such as the one I worked with this summer.

Related to advocacy, I also learned that I have to keep pushing for the things that I feel are needed. For example, one of the biggest hurdles for our health camps was the need for a translator. Sewa International board members were unsure that the organization had the money to spend on a translator; however, once our first health camp demonstrated to them that a translator was greatly needed, we received approval to hire one. Once we had the translator, communication was less of a barrier for our health programming. If the translator had not been at the women’s health camp, very few women would have learned anything at all!

Finally, my work with Sewa International helped me to focus my knowledge as an HSSP and Sociology double major into specific skills. Because of the internship’s balance between office and community work, I was able to identify my own strengths and weaknesses in each area. For example, I learned that I excel at creating programming and giving public presentations, but I am not as comfortable as my fellow interns going door-to-door to recruit for these events. I also learned that I prefer structure and organization in my work environment.

Given this experience and the lessons I’ve learned from it, my first piece of advice to internship seekers would be to identify internships that match about half of their interests, knowledge, and skills. This allows room for growth. Though I had experience working with
non-profit in another field as well as experience with the creation of health programming, I had never combined the two. In addition, I had never interned with other students. By melding my experience and interests, I was able to find an internship that was both challenging and incredibly helpful in shaping my professional goals.

I also encourage anyone who is about to begin an internship to ask questions, to conduct as much research about their internship site as possible, and to be prepared for – even anticipate – challenges along the way. My internship site provided little structure and guidance for us interns. Although this was frustrating initially, it enabled us to develop our own experiences. Working with Sewa International helped me to understand that, regardless of the setting, it is very useful to learn as much as you can, as fast as you can.