THE “AHA!” MOMENT

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Nine Bhutanese refugee women gathered around the edge of Sewa’s kitchen at Los Arcos Apartment Complex in Houston, TX. For the last hour and a half, they participated in the first health camp held by the public health summer interns. Learning about nutrition, diet, hygiene and cleaning, the refugee women were enthusiastic and excited about our presentation.

In the midst of our discussion, an idea hit me. Encouraging the women to move into the kitchen area, I stood next to the closed dishwasher. “Do you know what this does?” I asked. Seven of the women shook their heads “No”. I opened the door to the dishwasher and filled it with the dirty cups that were sitting in the sink. We didn’t have dish soap, so I made gestures to suggest I was filling it. My fellow interns helped me explain this concept.

We closed the dishwasher, pretended to press the buttons on the machine, then opened it again. Taking a cup from the appliance, I held it up and said “clean”. One woman in the group understood English a little better than the others and translated what was said.

Bhutanese women gather around the dishwasher during health camp on nutrition and hygiene.

Their jaws dropped. Their eyes glistened. Two of them even squealed with elation. They began talking very quickly to each other in Nepali, gesturing and pointing to the dishwasher like it was the greatest thing to have ever happened to them.

Even though some of these women have been in the United States for a few years, they had no idea that their “strange cabinet space” was actually a machine that would wash their dishes for
them. Although many wonderful things happened at this health camp, something as apparently basic as teaching these women about the dishwasher was the most exciting.

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Each week at Sewa International is different than the last. There are always meetings to attend, activities to plan, and people to meet. The interns spend between 25 and 40 hours per week between the office and the community. I work Monday through Thursday as well as the occasional weekend.

On Mondays, I am at the office planning for the week ahead. I make my weekly schedule, contact the public health team advisor, and create programming for the upcoming health camps. Tuesdays and Thursdays involve tutoring immigrant and refugee children in the Alief Independent School District (ISD), meeting with the public health team advisor, and meeting with a member of the board of directors. On Wednesdays, the interns spend the day at Los Arcos working directly with the Bhutanese refugees living in the community. As a result of my interactions with both the children and adult refugees, I am able to learn more about their daily life and design programming the best fits their needs.

Even though there is an overall weekly rhythm, we deviate from it to include special events and programming – this usually means we get to spend more time with the refugee community. For example, the public health team coordinates three immunization drives throughout the summer. These drives are held at Los Arcos and in Alief ISD. Three health camps, one of which was described above, are held exclusively at the Sewa office at Los Arcos. On these occasions, we are working more intensively with the community, so less time is spent at the office.

My favorite aspect of the internship is the ability to create health programming for the refugee community. Since Sewa is a small non-profit organization, interns have the opportunity to create their own experience by doing what they discover is most helpful for the community. From my own research on the Bhutanese refugee community and the word of refugees living at Los Arcos, we have been able to prioritize three topics for our health camps: nutrition/hygiene, women’s health, and tobacco awareness.

The least stimulating aspect of my work is the amount of time spent in weekly meetings. Because interns meet separately with board members, team mentors, and supervisors, we tend to repeat a lot of the same information throughout the week. Although it is important that we communicate with these people on a regular basis, the current schedule could be better managed. By consolidating the meetings into one weekly get-together with the board, team mentors, and supervisors, we could spend more time working with and for the refugee community.

Overall, this internship experience is a positive one. I have been able to understand the basic health needs of the refugee community at Los Arcos through research and community interaction, develop plans to implement change, and create programming for three health
camps. The HSSP major has taught me many things, the most important being that good health is not always an individual’s battle but a community’s crusade. Both my time at Brandeis and my work with Sewa have opened my eyes to the connection between the way a society functions and how adequately individuals’ basic needs are met.

For example, for the Bhutanese refugees in Houston, TX, knowing English, learning how to use a computer, and having reliable transportation are all gateways to having even a basic social life and stable health. I’ve realized there is so much I take for granted, having grown up in a world full of technology and privilege. Most Bhutanese refugees at Los Arcos have never seen a computer, much less learned how to use one. By teaching them how to access our technology, they will soon be able to engage the world in which they currently live. If Sewa is able to work with as few as ten refugees to help them learn about the topics of interest to them, I will consider this experience an unqualified success. Just by teaching a group of eager women how to use a dishwasher, I have learned that I can make a difference by taking the time to “invest” in others and demonstrate, through action, that their community deserves to thrive.

Without my combined education in HSSP and Sociology, I don’t think I would have realized any of this. And without working with Sewa and my fellow interns, I wouldn’t have been able to act on my knowledge.