

Introduction

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During a presentation to the Brandeis community in December called “Unpacking: Six Journeys Towards Understanding Communities Around the World,” the 2007 Ethics Center Student Fellows brought their suitcases to the Brandeis Library to share an inside look, in more ways than one, at details of their travels. In the same way, they carried their baggage—literally and metaphorically—as they moved during the summer of 2007 from continent to continent, from community to community, from home to home. They also scrutinized it closely. What was the meaning of the contents of their suitcases: of the clothes, the iPods, and the toiletries that they brought from home . . . of the photographs, the pamphlets, the gifts, and curios that they collected along the way?

So just as they spent the summer unpacking their literal baggage as they undertook their work and travels, these Brandeis students spent the autumn “unpacking” their experiences. They looked deeply within themselves to explore their own motivations for wanting to help create social change in Africa, Asia, Central America, and the United States. They scoured their encounters with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances to understand the inner dynamics of their interactions with others. They analyzed the inner structure of the organizations where they worked, seeking clues about the combination of idealism and practicality that provides the most effective challenge to the status quo.

The narratives in this volume are the work of these student fellows, six Brandeis University undergraduates. Over the past ten years, more than 50 Brandeis students have served as fellows of the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life. They are chosen during the fall of their sophomore or junior year in a competitive process based on their academic achievement and their previous experience in working for social change. As part of the application process, students identify and line up field placements for a summer experience supported by the Center.

The fellowship consists of three parts. First, students choose a course in their spring term that will prepare them intellectually for the work that they will be doing in the summer field project; they also participate in a series of meetings and retreats designed to prepare them for the challenges of living in unfamiliar and sometimes difficult environments. In the summer, students work for eight to ten weeks in an organization where they have the opportunity to learn “in the field” about how practitioners address issues of coexistence, development, democracy, education, and other approaches to social change. Finally, in the fall

term, students return to campus and enroll in a writing workshop where they have the opportunity to integrate their academic and practical learning.

Students produced these writings during this fall course, co-taught this year by Mitra Shavarini and myself, in which they shared their work with one another, and explored in our weekly meetings issues and problems of common concern. The students were far-flung geographically, with placements in Rwanda, Guatemala, the United States, Tanzania, India, and Kenya. Their areas of interest varied widely, but a common thread was their ability to draw in significant ways on their previous academic and extra-curricular work at Brandeis. Jamie Pottern brought her experience as an environmental studies major and as president of a student environmental organization to the edge of a shrinking African rain forest, where she encountered close-up the difficult tensions between preserving the environment and ensuring the livelihood of local people and communities. Dan Koosed and Margot Moinester, who had travelled to Mississippi to explore issues of race and justice in a previous Brandeis class, found themselves addressing, in very different settings, the difficult aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Rachel Kleinbaum’s work on labor issues on the Brandeis campus served her well in Guatemala, where she witnessed and studied a labor movement beset by social, political, and economic forces. Ramon De Jesus built on his leadership work in the Posse Foundation as he reflected on issues of race and class in a camp for seriously ill children in North Carolina. And Neena Pathak found, somewhat to her surprise, that her previous studies of liberation theology in Latin America shed light on issues of organic farming in India. Together, over the course of the fall, these students “unpacked” their ideas about the nature of social change and their own role as outsiders in the communities where they lived and worked.

The narratives in this volume oscillate between big ideas and detailed descriptions of small moments in the lives of the students and of the people whom they came to know over the course of the summer. They represent simultaneous commitments to the tools of scholarship, learning through experience, and a passion for social justice.

Four of my colleagues deserve special thanks this year. First of all, it was pleasure to work with Mitra Shavarini in teaching the fall course. Mitra brought to the class a wealth of experience as a scholar and writer on culture, education, and gender. Her accounts of her recent work in Iran and our "sneak peek" at her latest writing were enlightening and inspiring. And the students benefited tremendously from Mitra's wise and conscientious commentary on their writing.

Barbara Strauss, in her role as the Ethics Center's department coordinator, contributed her energy and enthusiasm to the fellowship program, as well as her administrative acumen. Lewis Rice, the communications specialist of the Ethics Center, somehow managed to find time between a welter of other commitments to cast his fine editorial eye over the contents of this volume.

Finally, Marci McPhee, the associate director of the Ethics Center, has been the backbone of the ECSF program since its inception. Her leadership of the selection and placement processes, her guidance at the retreat and other preparatory sessions in the spring, her wise e-mails to students over the course of the summer, and her gentle but strict reminders to students about their obligations, are the foundation on which the program is built.