

# Contrasts & Connection

Nine Students Reflect  
on Their Worldwide  
Internships/2008



The International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life  
Brandeis University

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# Introduction

MITRA SHAVARINI

This volume presents the experiences of nine Brandeis University undergraduate students. This past summer each traveled to unique destinations across the globe and the United States to challenge him/herself in contexts drastically different than what they would call their own. Their internship opportunity afforded them a chance to catapult their education to new heights. By spending time “in the field” they were able to apply and expand their thus far textbook-acquired knowledge of coexistence, peace, community building, leadership, and social change, among a host of other issues, to a deeper level of understanding. Not only did they enhance their college education but also laid an important building block as future practitioners. Their narratives reflect their idealism, courage, and passion, inspiring us to consider realities beyond our own, allowing us to understand the questions they sought to answer, the trials they faced, and the changed individuals they became as a result of their journey.

An introduction to these remarkable Brandeis students:

**Benjamin Bechtolsheim** spent his summer in Uganda. His narrative probes the concept of humanitarianism, daring to ask questions that we oftentimes don't have the courage to ask of ourselves.

**Aaron Breslow**, who was shaken at a young age by the devastation of AIDS in a friend, traveled to New York City and immersed himself in the Gay Men's Health Crisis Center. There he challenged himself to do more, to stay committed, and not to give up hope.

**Rachael Chanin** interned at the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Chicago, where her preconceived notions of post-traumatic stress disorder gave way to its human side: the one she once saw on her father's face as he touched the names of fallen brethren at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

**Hannah Janoowalla** worked with sex workers and drug addicts in India. Not only did she learn about the depths of their destitute poverty but realized her own identity's strengths – and inevitably – weaknesses.

**Catherine McConnell** interned at South Africa's Artist Proof Studio and wondered how art could ever heal the devastating scars left by apartheid.

**Avram Mlotek**, carrying both music and faith in his heart, discovered the essence of leadership in two distinct parts of the world: Ethiopia and Israel, where he worked with Ethiopian Jews.

**Judith Simons'** introspective narrative examines the principles of ethics and justice with which she was raised and which she applied in trying to comprehend the plight of Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

**Angela Tse**, at International Bridges to Justice, an NGO in China, examines the concept of being an “outsider,” inquiring whether one can bring about effective change in a society that is not one's own.

**Aaron Voldman**, already a longtime peace activist, traveled to Nepal to understand peace building in a country that, despite being torn apart through a decade-old civil war, has established a Ministry of Peace.

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These students began their work during the spring term of 2008. In addition to taking a course that intellectually prepared them for their summer field project, they also participated in a workshop I conducted that introduced them to the social science research method of “portraiture.” During this training, they learned about gathering data (including observations, interviews and journal writing), as well as data analysis (by way of finding themes). They came to understand the nuances of portraiture and how it differs from other research methodologies, the importance of context in our understanding of social phenomena, and how a context’s texture – sound, smell, sight and even taste – is an essential part of human behavior. They also learned that portraiture broadens the audience of social science beyond academic walls by making it accessible and engaging. As Benjamin Bechtolsheim aptly remarked during the semester, “Portraiture is almost like a *New Yorker* article.” In many ways that is true, though portraiture also requires us to use rigor in gathering data. It behooves us to continuously scan our observations and interviews for patterns and themes to support our claims, and to validate our findings with supporting literature. So while portraiture holds an artistic element, it is also bounded and guided by social science methodology.

For more than ten years, this fall course has solely been comprised of Ethics Center Student Fellows (ECSFs). This year, however, Brandeis provided substantial additional funding for summer internships through other new award programs. Consequently, the Ethics Center made the decision to open the fall ECSF course to recipients of these other awards. Our six ECSFs (Benjamin, Avram, Aaron V., Angela, Hannah, and Catherine) were joined by two recipients of the Hiatt Career Center’s World of Work Internship Program (Rachael and Aaron B.) and a Louis D. Brandeis Social Justice Internship recipient (Judith). Their addition to our fold made for an even more dynamic classroom environment.

It has been a pleasure for me to work with these nine committed students. As the British writer James Howell once said several centuries ago, “We learn by teaching.” How true that statement holds when I apply it to this class. Through their writing, these students have provided me with a refreshing perspective of the world in which we live.

For this opportunity, I owe a great debt to Dan Terris, director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life, who entrusted me with the responsibility of teaching this course. Last year, we co-taught this course, and it was upon his pedagogy that I etched this class. I am also indebted to Marci McPhee, the associate director of the Ethics Center, who, echoing Dan Terris’ words, is “the backbone of the ECSF program since its inception.” Supportive and guiding, Marci is an integral part of the ECSF fellowship. I am also grateful for the assistance of Barbara Strauss, the Ethics Center’s department coordinator. She is the magic glue that keeps the fellowship process moving coherently forward. And finally, to Lewis Rice, the communications specialist at the Ethics Center, who has swept through the following pages with his deft editorial eye. I, along with the students, give him our most sincere appreciation.

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*Mitra Shavarini teaches in Peace, Conflict, and Coexistence Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies at Brandeis.*

# Barriers and Solidarity: An Outsider Navigates Northern Uganda and its Humanitarian Enterprise

**BENJAMIN BECHTOLSHEIM '09**

## Entering Uganda

**O**n May 12, 2008, as my Boeing jet took off, I left behind American comforts and familiarities. From the air, paved streets neatly lined with suburban homes disappeared below me. My iCal – which had been packed with classes, clubs, finals, committees, meetings, meals, and friends – had given way to two months of unplanned days, bookmarked by transcontinental flights and punctuated only by a weekly reminder to take malaria pills.

Two days later, as I descended from the fog of intercontinental travel, I could see grass thatch and mud cake real estate haphazardly scattered across fields and connected by worn paths. Each hut is an image of the other, differentiated only by the sleights of the hands that shaped them – sleights invisible when viewed from above. Their uniformity comes not from an architect's blueprint but from the paucity of material with which to do otherwise.

As I walked among these huts, their shape and form was so different from anything I had ever known. I realized that at some point between the beginning of time and May 14, 2008, when my plane touched down at Entebbe International Airport, the forces of geography, ethnicity, race, linguistics, and economics conspired to erect considerable barriers between the people of Uganda and me. While this narrative of events may be a bit deterministic – and wholly self-centered – for three months, it seemed to explain my situation well.

And it was because of these barriers that I was drawn to Uganda. I had chosen my destination precisely because it was exotic, precisely because it would be so foreign. The situation of the people with whom I would be working could not be more different from my own. They are internally displaced persons (IDPs) – refugees inside their own country. For twenty years, a civil war between the Ugandan government and the LRA rebel group has trapped millions of people across northern Uganda in its crossfire, leading to massive displacement and casualty.



The summer of 2008 came during a lull in the civil war. Just four years before I stepped foot in Uganda, Jan Egeland, the United Nations emergency relief coordinator, described the situation as “the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today.”<sup>1</sup> While the war has reached a tepid stalemate, little has changed since then. The thousands of people killed, raped, maimed, and injured in the conflict are still forgotten. The hundreds of thousands of people displaced from their homes and forced to live in IDP camps are still neglected.

The barriers of distance and economics have made Uganda's civil war of little importance to the West. It has not disrupted our supply of oil or other resources. It has never threatened to spill into our borders or affect our countrymen. It has been easily forgotten and neglected. But people are suffering.

I have a home, stable and secure. The people with whom I worked live in IDP camps. I have spent my entire life in schools, well funded and well stocked. They have spent their youth fleeing from war and grasping at education only when stationary long enough to organize schools for themselves. I have been blessed with health, and when it has left me, I have been blessed with medical professionals and remedies. The IDP camps are filled with disease, incubated by the cramped quarters and lack of sanitation.

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My desire to see directly how one organization combated these challenges was coupled with my desire to peer over the barriers that separated me, as an American, from war-torn northern Uganda and its people. I spent my summer interning for Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU), one of the many civil society organizations that has stepped in to fill the gaps and deprivation left by the war.

Upon landing, I knew little about the work that I would be doing. I knew nothing of the texture of Ugandan life. I did not yet know the stench of densely populated IDP camps or the sense of desperate anticipation that accompanied seemingly endless lines for basic medications. As I stepped off the airplane, my surroundings were novel. The language was unfamiliar. I was armed with little more than a Lonely Planet guide and good intentions.

And soon, I began to see good intentions confront desperation around me. Expatriate NGO workers distorted local economies. NGOs funded by foreign donors employed locals, which in turn reorganized social structures and created new hierarchies. The Ugandan government's policy of placing people in camps in order to "protect" them wound up killing so many as disease festered in the cramped quarters. A volleyball game of American expatriates in the midst of someone else's war zone became a proving ground for racial stratification.

Amidst these images, I also saw incredible acts of generosity and healing: the RHU workers who devoted hours to dispensing medication for illnesses that would otherwise remain untreated. The logisticians who delicately, and with the know-how of their engineering degrees, figured out how to site new developments and camps to protect them from floods. The agricultural experts who worked with local communities to sustain themselves through techniques that produced fuller yields. My friend, Ocitti Samuel, an IDP and a casualty of the war, who would offer me a warm soda and a chance to relax and reflect on my final day in his resettlement camp.

These two narratives – of Westerners exacting a cost on the local community and of Westerners doing good while being honored by the host community – compete in my mind as I reflect on my summer. Each is present and each is grounded in something I observed. To acknowledge just one of these narratives is to either resign oneself to the inevitability of war and poverty or to blindly attempt to do good with little cognizance of how one can do better. I have left Uganda with a commitment to neither fall into fatalism nor to ignore the adverse effects that so often accompany good intentions.

To live in Uganda as an American is to stand at the precipice of an odd collusion of cultures and economies. Regardless of how much good one may do, the "humanitarians" and "aid workers" from around the world who have descended on the humanitarian emergency of northern Uganda remain distinctly outside. Even when geography has been erased by plane rides, so many barriers remain firm. We visitors are largely unaffected by droughts and unmoved by rising food prices. We are separated from crime and war by guarded compounds and high walls. We are insulated from disease by prophylactics. We are protected from changes in situation by passports that allow us to depart swiftly.

And so armed with prophylaxis, my passport, and a fellowship worth more than a Ugandan family of four's annual income, I entered Uganda.

### **Landscape**

Going from Chicago to Uganda is akin to cultural whiplash. Uganda could not be more different than the surroundings to which I am accustomed. The suburbs of Chicago, where I grew up, are crisply defined. Streets neatly bisect towns, houses have fences, traffic follows patterns, and commerce is neatly laid out in strips along parking lots. In Uganda, there is no such definition. Homes open to fields and fields bleed into roads or burst into trees. The mud walls and grass roofs of a Ugandan home are, in many ways,

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as natural an extension of their environment as the steel rising from American asphalt. Instead of concrete foundations anchoring the structures, I imagined that the huts, like the trees shading them, had roots burrowing into the soil on which they sat and from which they were made.

Uniform in basic shape, but differently weighed by the forces of weather and primitive construction, the huts seemed to be alive. And the streets were as well. Roads are fiercely contested liminal spaces where vendors fight with cars and cars with bicycles and bicycles with pedestrians for a piece of dirt-pack real estate. Unlike America, outdoors is not the space in between

life's zones. In Uganda, life is lived outdoors. People cook outdoors; people laugh outdoors; people walk outdoors.

The vitality of the outdoors emerges throughout the day. At midday, adults are in the fields and children at school. As the sun sets, however, life is breathed into the landscape. Children, walking hand in hand, shout and laugh their way home. Women walk with their day's gather perched in baskets atop their head. Men emerge from their huts or return from their fields to congregate while sharing stories and drinks. When the sun hits the earth at a shallow angle, contrasts are heightened, so that the mango trees, at the peak of ripeness in early July, reveal their colors. The oblong, yellow fruits seem to pop off the trees after having been hidden and washed out by a harsh midday sun. The mud huts, which seem to be of one mold when lit from above, reveal their contours.

My first days in Uganda were a series of unfolding novelties: the novelty of life lived outdoors and the novelty of life lived in vibrant color. Gray asphalt streets were left in America. In Uganda, streets are a deep orange, turning to an earthy brown when dyed by the rains. Lawns are not turfed in green but rather layered by scratchy yellows and greens, and interrupted by bursts of wildflowers. Women are wrapped in swaths of color that seem to mirror the palette with which the crested cranes, guinea fowl, and kingfishers swooping overhead were painted.

The colors, the wildlife, and the people are densely packed. Chickens roam through yards and people cook on their patios, so that by late evening, the smells of a neighbor's dinner waft through the streets and into open doors. American life, on the other hand, seems to be drawn on a rubber sheet and then pulled taut – so that the sinews of daily commutes are all that connect one's office with one's market with one's home. Homes are evenly spaced and dinner is a private affair. In Uganda, the trees that surround me are the same that feed me, and the homes in which my neighbors live spill into the area around them, and our lives run together in the streets. As I fall asleep at night, I can hear the shouts of soccer fans huddled around a radio nearby mix with the ecstatic songs of the community's Pentecostal church.

I focus my eyes and with the patient guidance of a local companion, I can begin to make sense of my new surroundings. The trees become legible, so that I can read the market's offerings into them. Bunches of plantains erupt from a palm, while avocados hang gently from their rounded trees. Papayas cling to the tops of thin trunks and large jackfruits seem to defy gravity as they hang. When looking closely, I have learned to identify the cassava or yams growing below the soil by the shape of their emerged leaves.

As I focus closely, I can also see the scars upon the land: scars of 20 years of civil war, of landmines and displaced persons, of abducted children and buried dead. The Uganda that I know is not what it was twenty years ago. Two decades earlier, it was the bare feet of subsistence agriculturalists that wore the roads. Now, it is the boots of army patrols or the spitting tires of humanitarian assistance. In some parts of the country, the scattered huts have been abandoned and hastily recreated in the neat rows of IDP camps – as if a piece of American urbanism had been transported halfway across the globe.

Except it doesn't fit. Such close quarters are unsustainable – fields are far away, water is scarce, and sanitation is inadequate. Now, the sinews of American life seem to emerge, except they seem to be pulled too tight, ready to snap. Food is not borne from fields, but rather arrives monthly in a convoy of United Nations trucks accompanied by army escort. New diseases have found hold in the cramped quarters of the camps, with medicine coming in weekly deliveries, doled out by credentialed individuals transplanted from universities in the capital.

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The harmony that I saw when I first arrived in Uganda gradually faded throughout my summer. The wounds of war have challenged the long established ecology of the land and also my first impressions. Hunger, malnutrition, malaria, parasites, and poverty are all easily missed behind the unmistakable beauty of the lush, rolling landscape. But they are there.

### “The Field”

I spent much of my summer in the IDP camps, where malaria and absent sanitation have challenged a long established order. Each morning, I arrived at the office of the RHU, the site of my summer internship, prepared for another day in an IDP camp. We called these camps “the field” – an oddly sterile term that seemed to normalize the fact that I would be the most transient of presences in the home of someone else.

This parlance is not my own. Rather, I quickly adopted it from my peers at the RHU. I took comfort in its sterility and the distance that it placed between myself and the world I was entering. I think it did the same for my Ugandan counterparts. Although I was the only American working at the organization, none of my coworkers ever expressed any sense of kinship or connection to the displaced persons we were helping. They expressed sorrow at their condition and extraordinary compassion for their situation. But they made plain that we were not IDPs.

We were “humanitarians” – an identity confirmed by the emblem blazing on the side of our pickup truck. The people we served were our “clients”: refugees, war victims, witnesses, child soldiers, child mothers, abductees, and orphans – a litany of evidence to contemporary atrocity. Their homes were our “field”: refugee camps and resettlement villages. Each day, when we ventured into “the field,” the litany of conditions would be matched with names and faces.

Our team was made up of two clinicians, a counselor, an educator, and a driver. Before we arrived, long lines of people waiting to see the clinician were already formed. Malaria and parasites from unsanitary water accounted for nearly the entire caseload. Antibiotics would be dispersed while the line would slowly move. One hundred people would turn to fifty in two hours, and after two more, the clinicians would begin to pack up their medicine, if any remained. Sometimes the supply of medications dwindled before the line did, and the clinicians would be forced to turn others away. While the line neared its end, the educator would speak to women about available methods of family

planning while their children would watch videos about hygiene.

As the intern, I was often tasked with keeping records of our clientele. Later, the data would be compiled, packaged in tri-fold brochures, and sent to donors in a country far away. The names of the clients were also noted, but stored separately for medical records. For the brochures, it was not names that mattered; it was condition.

David Rieff, a war journalist of twenty years, refers to the “caricatural journalist who arrives in some zone of atrocity pointing a microphone and asking, ‘Anyone here been raped and speak English?’”<sup>2</sup> This comes unnervingly close to my own role this summer. Stories were unnecessary and personalities superfluous; the categories I recorded were two-dimensional tales of hardship. How many malarial orphans did we treat? How many former child soldiers came to our programming? How many witnesses to violence sought our counseling? I penciled numbers on my yellow notepad. When I returned to town, they migrated to an Excel spreadsheet – the most antiseptic of media for the most horrific of data. A few clicks and the records would be e-mailed to the organization’s central office, where they would be repackaged for the brochures destined for more affluent hands.

I have spent much of my life reading these very documents. I remember that when I was growing up, every few months an appeal from a humanitarian organization would arrive in my family’s mailbox. The round-eyed, emaciated children would stare out from the glossy brochure. I knew nothing of who they were nor the countries in which they lived. Black skin told me it was Africa. Gaunt faces told me they were poor. The urgency of the appeal told me they were suffering. And the check my mom wrote told me that they would be helped. The money would go from our mailbox to a noble humanitarian who would deliver the necessary succor.

In Uganda, it was I who was documenting for these appeals. The data I collected has made its way to brochures. The photos I took – of gaunt faces and emaciated bodies – are currently splashed across the RHU’s website: “credit card donations are accepted.”

As I would venture through the “field,” I felt as though I were retracing the steps of the RHU’s foremother. In the mythology of the organization, enshrined on brochures and websites, the RHU was created when Edith Gates, an American, first visited Uganda in the 1950s. “Dismayed by the state of prevailing poverty, high maternal deaths, closely spaced children, malnutrition and the poor health



of women,”<sup>3</sup> Edith Gates was determined to do something. Hers is a wonderful story of despair being turned into action; still, in my most cynical moments, I cannot help but also read paternalism and imperialism into her story.

And, in my most honest moments, I cannot help but read the same into my own project. How else could I venture daily into “the field” aboard a vehicle – with its humanitarian emblem displayed in bold blue lettering atop the gleaming white surface – and leave armed only with data for someone else’s consumption? I think money given to the RHU is worthy and warranted, but what could be more paternalistic than being prodded to give by the most anonymous and caricatured of faces: place money in an envelope, help a round-eyed, emaciated child.

After having stood both in “the field” and at my kitchen table in front of the brochured image of the same, I am painfully aware of the inherent tensions in the enterprises of charity and humanitarianism. Without these images, it would be easy to remain obdurate to the plagues of the poor world.

However, even while I claim the most cosmopolitan of values, it is domestic ills that move me most. As another season of hurricanes punishes my country’s southern shores, I am moved more deeply as flood waters rise than I was this May, when an earthquake rocked so many schools

off their foundations in Sichuan. For me, New Orleans is not “the field”; Galveston, Texas, is not the “field.” They are pieces of my own country and their citizens are members of my own community. In the face of these emergencies, my cosmopolitan values seem to collapse watching my co-nationals flee their homes; my heart breaks wider than when faced by any of East Africa’s wars.

Seven years ago, when a Tuesday morning shattered into a plume of smoke, I remember the shocked silence of my classmates as we heard the news. It is a silence that still rings in my head. Six years prior, I remember no similar silence accompanying word of Bosnia

or Rwanda. In the years since, I have never had a class interrupted for news from Somalia, Zimbabwe, Liberia, the DRC, or Darfur. Yes, I have heard the indignation

at these conflicts. Yes, I have heard the sorrow at their occurrence. However, after the loudest of crashes in a field in Pennsylvania, at an office building in D.C., and at the tip of Manhattan’s southern reach, the mournful and stunned silence that gripped my class was unmatched by any memory since. Lower Manhattan is not my “field.”

And so, as I went in and out of the Ugandan “field,” the term felt accurate. I was an American. The plight I saw in Uganda’s camps was not my own, nor were the joys. I empathized deeply with the condition of our “clienteles.” I was humble about the work that I did. But it is an odd testament to the barriers between our continents and worlds that Ugandan pain does not move me as much as American pain, and the term “field” seems to fit so well.

### Volleyball

The barrier between “the field” and myself that was so present during work hours would remain on the weekends. Every Saturday, a group of expatriate NGO workers would gather at an ex-pat’s compound to play volleyball. The homes in which the ex-pats lived were nothing like Ugandan homes. The only mud-brick structures that existed on the property were the high walls, topped by protruding shards of glass, that ran along the property’s periphery. The houses that sat in the middle of the compound were modest by American standards, but their plumbing, electricity, shingled roofs, and refrigerators dispensing cubed and crushed ice set them apart from the local real estate.

And so, at 3 p.m. every Saturday afternoon, NGO workers would descend on one of the compounds. The four-by-fours would roll in. During the week, they were used to carry medical supplies over potholed roads; on the weekends, they carried ex-pats to volleyball. The assembled group would laugh as a wild shot brought the ball soaring into the logo of the Norwegian Refugee Council on the side of a Toyota Land Cruiser. In between sips of iced cola and glances at a pair of young, wide eyes peeking over the wall, I took solace in the knowledge that I had walked there. Walking – the local mode of transportation – was some small gesture of solidarity with my host population, those who lived outside the compounds. This smug sense of solidarity dissipated quickly; when the game was over, I jumped at the opportunity to be driven home, delighted by the thrill of riding in a vehicle with the bold letters “UN” stenciled on the side.

Outside the mud walls surrounding the compound, children from nearby villages would climb trees and peer over the wall that surrounded the property to catch a glimpse of our

**The high walls surrounding the property, crowned by shards of glass, manifest cultural barriers that were in place long before the walls were erected.**

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game. The talent present at the game deserved little notice – but the congregation of white faces, off-road vehicles, and the luxuries of a volleyball and net, were novel enough to bring the children to the trees. The high walls surrounding the property, crowned by shards of glass, manifest cultural barriers that were in place long before the walls were erected. The separation, white people inside, black people out, left little question as to how racial assumptions are inculcated. It also suggested that for those of us on the inside of the walls, humanitarianism was not a philosophy, but rather a vocation, easily put aside for a weekend's recreation.

These barriers are easy to criticize, and the scene is one that easily plays to cynicism. Rieff says, "The moral test of being an onlooker at other people's tragedies is one that few of us are likely to pass reliably."<sup>4</sup> And I am left asking, did I pass? From Monday through Friday, I was in IDP camps and resettlement villages. I committed myself to walking as lightly as possible and doing everything within my power to respect local customs. However, Hippocratic oath aside, "doing no harm" is a low bar. Of his journalism, Rieff says, "I have done far less, not to mention risked far less, both physically and psychologically, than many of my colleagues in this peculiar amalgam of voyeurism and witness that we all practice."<sup>5</sup> A peculiar amalgam indeed. I may have spent my summer being a voyeur. If only what I saw might be for some good, perhaps I could be called a witness.

Humanitarianism is founded on a principle of human solidarity. To be a humanitarian is to be in solidarity with the impoverished and infirm across our world. I don't think that one needs to embrace asceticism in order to do good work in desperate situations. But in Uganda, to do anything less was to immediately erect barriers between myself and those with whom I was ostensibly in solidarity. Cell phones and cameras erected barriers as sure as glass shards atop high walls. The luxuries of volleyball and iced glasses of cola did the same.

I suppose that life is a balancing act between one's noblest intentions and reality. I can add humanitarianism to the long list of ideologies that, when confronted with reality, seem to lose their surety. The barriers are too thick, political economies are too intransigent, racial ideologies are too firmly set, and mud walls are too high. My summer was an exercise in chipping away at these barriers. At moments of connection and laughter they seemed to come tumbling down. But the pretense of solidarity would quickly shatter whenever I took out my cell phone, went to an ATM, or, in a final act of treason, boarded a plane and went home.

## Ocitti Samuel

Ocitti Samuel was one of the many people I met in the field. My relationship with him was the deepest that I formed with any of the people I met there. While an ocean and wholly different experiences separate our lives, our relationship became a tunnel between my world and his.

When I first met him, we went for a walk. He winced, planted his crutch in the brown earth a few inches ahead of his leading, bare foot and took another step. When his weight shifted to his left foot, a look of relief replaced the wince, and he looked back at me, smiled, and kept talking. Another step, wince, planted crutch, smile. We walked on.

He was 28 years old when I met him on one of my first trips to the field. The introduction was made because I was supposed to profile him for an RHU publication – a story of a needy client receiving valuable services. He had lived in Owoo Resettlement Village for two years. Resettlement villages are a sort of halfway point between the displaced person camps where he had lived for so long and his original home in the bush. He was eager to return but knew that his injuries would prevent him from doing any intensive work in the fields. Owoo had become his home. For me and the workers at RHU, it was one of our many "field" locations, the site to which we would make our weekly visit each Tuesday.

Wince, planted crutch, smile. Like most Ugandans, Ocitti Samuel was shorter than I. At 28 years old, I could see that he had traces of grey that stood out amidst the black of his hair and the black of his skin. His large eyes seemed to dart back and forth as we spoke, looking at me and then at the ground, and then at my shoes, and at my bracelets, and at our surroundings. His eyes suggested a sort of eagerness that was reflected in the quick cadence of words. Speaking in chops, he would jump from thought to thought. At first I thought this was to complete a thought before the wince that would accompany weight on his right leg, but when I sat down and talked to him for the first time, the wincing subsided but the cadence endured.

When he looked at me, before his eyes wandered on, I could see that he had a ring of red that seemed to dissipate outwards from the piercing center of his black pupils. The whites of his eyes were yellowed, as if years of the dust that stung my eyes for a summer had dyed his after years. I knew that the discoloration was from years of malnutrition.

When we were first introduced, we shook hands. We made small talk – about the RHU, about Uganda, about America. I asked where he would like to do the interview and he suggested that we do it in his home, one of the grass thatch huts that made up Owoo Resettlement Village. I was excited, not for the intimacy of entering the home of someone I knew well, but rather for the novelty of entering a grass thatch hut. We walked across the village to his home. Wince, planted crutch, smile resumed.

We arrived and he showed me in. I ducked to avoid the thatch that hung down from the roof above the entrance. As my eyes adjusted after a day in the bright sun, the interior of the hut came into focus. A sheet with a floral pattern hung from a string and divided the round room into two sections. On one side rested a foam mattress and on the other were a few scattered objects – a battery powered radio, a kerosene lantern, and a metal tin that read “USAID Vegetable Oil: A Gift From the American People.” He glanced around his space with a look of satisfaction. The hut was smaller than my dorm room and its contents fewer. I thanked him for inviting me in, and I took a seat on the stool that he offered me while he sat on the dirt floor.

I asked him about his experience with the RHU. I knew that I was speaking to him because his story was dramatic – the perfect fodder for a brochure aimed at garnering publicity and funds – but quickly our relationship became collegial. Our roles were understood, but the friendship that ensued would, at least for a time, erase such formalities.

It was when we first sat down together that he told me about the events that caused his stuttered gait. He pulled up the frayed bottom of his right pant leg to show me the entrance wound from a bullet that found residence in his ankle two

**The RHU could do little for Ocitti’s ankle but give him medication to ease the pain.**

years ago. It was still there, encased in scar tissue that made his ankle bulge. He had never had an X-ray, so he didn’t know where the bullet rested nor what it had done to the bones of his ankle. He suspected they had been broken and had settled in new form, ill fit for bearing the weight of his step.

He was shot when rebels ambushed the car in which he was riding. It was two years ago. The exact details are hazy for Ocitti. He remembers shots fired. He remembers trying to run away. He fell. He didn’t know why. He looked down and saw that the ankle he was trying to run on had been split open. Later, it was clear it had been a bullet.

I had no way of relating to such a story. While I knew something of war, my knowledge was gleaned from books, images, and memorials, not the pain of a gunshot or the fear of approaching armies. As he spoke about the ambush, he never abandoned the same clip of speech that I had heard when we first met. I nodded and jotted notes. His eyes continued to dart around and his face looked the same as if what he was saying was mundane and no different than the small talk that we made upon first meeting. I sat there and tried to be as receptive as I could. He didn’t remember much more from the ambush. For the purposes of the brochure, this would suffice, and I didn’t want to prod any further. Our conversation turned to other matters.

Each week, when I visited Owoo again, I would seek out Ocitti. Our relationship evolved beyond an interviewer and his subject. We became friends and we looked forward to seeing one another every Tuesday. Our greeting evolved from platitudes to notes of genuine interest and concern. War and injuries drifted into our conversations, but they were not the focus. Instead, we spoke about our families and our lives. When I came back the second time, I brought with me a black-and-white copy of a photo of him that I had taken and printed on a grainy inkjet printer in town. I presented it to him, and as I did, his eyes froze on the image for longer than I had seen him look at anything. After a moment, his eyes moved from the photo to me, and his grin turned into a wide smile. I had wanted to give some small token of gratitude to the subject of my questions, and I was glad that my gift was well received. In the weeks that followed, I often returned to his hut. The picture rested on top of the vegetable oil tin.

And so, what began as a documentation of a “success story” for the RHU concluded with a friendship. But the RHU’s success was a limited one. The RHU could do little for Ocitti’s ankle but give him medication to ease the pain. He was deeply appreciative of it, but the care was strictly palliative. Like so much of the humanitarian aid that descended on Uganda, it eased pain but did not foster any lasting solution. For Ocitti Samuel, it was fourteen ibuprofen tablets for the week, then fourteen again the next, and the next. He needed an X-ray, and he needed surgery. But these were unavailable. Instead, he got a weekly dose of painkillers followed by another.

Once, we arrived at Owoo to a line longer than we could possibly see in our short visit. Ocitti Samuel was waiting towards the back, but he quickly stepped out of line to come greet me. I told him it was my last time in the village. For only the second time, his eyes seemed to freeze. He looked at me and pointed to a hut about 200 meters away and said, “Let’s go there.”

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We walked. He winced, planted his crutch, and smiled. By now, I was accustomed to walking slowly to match his pace. We entered the hut, and there were a few boxes of soda, snacks, and candies on one side. I didn't know that such a convenience shop existed in the village. He bought us both sodas on credit. I knew that this was more than he typically indulged in, and I accepted the warm drink, knowing that to do otherwise would be rude. The act was selfless and I appreciated it deeply. We sat on stools in the hut and talked about my time in Uganda. After we had finished our drink, we returned back to find that the clinicians had run out of most of the medications and were packing up for the day. Many people had to be turned away.

I looked at Ocitti and saw the resigned look on his face. He was used to not getting his medication if the lines were long. He always let children, women, and the more infirm go first. "Wait here," I told him. I ran to the clinicians and asked if they had any more ibuprofen. They pointed to the bottle, so I grabbed fourteen tablets, put it in a makeshift envelope of folded notebook paper, and ran back to Ocitti.

He took the pills and smiled at me. The gesture was appreciated. I felt good – I had given him medication that would be helpful. But I know, and knew then, that it was little more than a Band-Aid where a scalpel was required. I smiled back and then we said our goodbyes. He told me to return; I told him I wanted to. We hugged. His crutch fell on the ground and I picked it up for him. He looked at me and then his eyes darted on. I walked away to help the clinicians pack. He walked back towards his home where we first sat together. Wince, planted crutch, smile.

### **Band-Aids**

Ocitti's story provides a touchstone for the broader issues facing the humanitarian enterprise. The RHU provided Occitti with palliative care. The broader humanitarian enterprise, whose presence is so pervasive in northern Uganda, is, in many ways, doing the same. The United Nations provides food assistance while fertile soil, far away from the IDP camps, lies fallow, waiting for the war to end before people can return home to these fields. The RHU provides ibuprofen where a nurse, a surgeon, and a physical therapist are necessary.

Sadaka Ogata, the former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, captured this well when she said, "There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems."<sup>6</sup> The problems in northern Uganda are not a result of too few humanitarians or too few aid workers. They are a product of a government and a rebel group: a rebel

group that has horrifically uprooted so many while under the sway of a charismatic, and by all accounts, delusional leader and a government with only the most tenuous division between civilian and military leadership, which is too eager to consolidate its rule and profit from the war.

But before regimes change, wars end, and economies develop, there is great and immediate need. Providing assistance without fostering dependence is a tension that is not easily navigated. The process of extricating the humanitarian organizations that currently do so much work in northern Uganda will be a painful and delicate process. Returning to a culture in which people must provide for themselves must be done expediently, but doing so too quickly could well be disastrous. This tension between providing assistance and remembering that the ultimate goal is that such assistance will no longer be necessary is a profound tension that is not easily operationalized. However, it is clear that a lifetime supply of Band-Aids is not the answer.

### **Family**

My trip back to the US was made via Germany, where my father is from and where my brother and grandfather live. In Germany, like America, my complexion is not novel. My cell phone is not a marker of distinction. My name is neither odd nor a mouthful.

After a summer of traipsing in and out of IDP camps – always the outsider – I was enveloped in the comforts of family for a week. For the first few days, I stayed with my grandfather in his large estate in the Bavarian countryside. I rose not with the sun, but with the chime of the stately grandfather clock that stood outside my room. A typical day at my grandfather's might begin with a cheese platter, end with a glass of wine, and be filled with visits to art museums or comments on the state of contemporary opera: cultural whiplash after a summer of rice and beans.

But the whiplash dissipated quickly. After a day, my surroundings felt vernacular. I had spent two months slowly learning about the forces that structured Ugandan society. And although Germany is thousands of miles from my home, after years of being raised in the West and by a German father, the cultural milieu was not so foreign. Thanks to the rearing of my father, I could offer incisive comments as my grandfather bemoaned a recent production of a Puccini opera. Thanks to the political acumen of my mother, I could offer commentary about the U.S. presidential election that extended beyond discussions of whether or not Barack Obama was in fact from Uganda.

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After three days with my grandfather, I went to my brother's house in Salzburg, Austria, just across the German border. The train that carried me there hummed the entire way as villages passed by, flowerbeds neatly lining the windows of climate-controlled homes. The train left and arrived on time, an impossible feat in Uganda, even for those modes of transit that attempt to set arrival and departure hours.

My days in Salzburg would begin each morning at 8 a.m., when my nieces Julia and Andreea, nine and twelve years old, would come to wake me up. After a few courteous pounds, the door would swing open, and they would run in, shouting "aufwachen, aufwachen" (wake up, wake up). I would open my eyes to see my nieces hovering over me, waiting for my next move. They are tall. Their faces are flush. And their stomachs are flat, not rounded by kwashiorkor.

On the first morning of this ritual, I got out of bed and reached into my bag to pull out the gifts that I had brought them – small wood carvings of a giraffe and elephant, hand-made in Uganda. I told them where they came from,

**I didn't tell them about the thousands of children their age who had been abducted by rebels.**

and with the help of a nearby atlas we located Uganda on a map. Their eyes grew wide when I told them about seeing real giraffes and real elephants while on safari. I left out stories of IDP camps and wars. I didn't tell them about the thousands of children their age who had been abducted by rebels. I told Julia that no, ice cream was not a popular dessert in Uganda.

Andreea looked at me a bit puzzled for a moment, as if recalling some memory that didn't fit with what she was experiencing. "Sie sind Armen?" (They are poor?) she asked. I smiled

and replied, yes, they are poor. She looked down at the map then back up at me. My sister-in-law called from downstairs that breakfast was ready. Andreea perked up, looked at me, and said, "Frühstück!" (breakfast) before Julia grabbed my hand and we went downstairs to eat.

I was not in the "field." I was not there to "help." I was in Germany and Salzburg because that is where my family lives. Humanitarian solidarity and cosmopolitanism are worthy aspirations, but they are just one side of a tension. On the other side is my own background, inborn and ingrained, carrying its privileges, as much a part of me as anything else. I do not know whether to be comforted or unsettled by the sense that I, myself, may never be in such great need of assistance as what I saw in the "humanitarian emergency" of northern Uganda, or that Julia and Andreea have little need for concern about where their next meal will come from.

Going from rice and beans to cheese platters and wine seems treasonous. But while I need not indulge in every excess available to me, there is little that gives me as much pleasure as sitting across from my grandfather in his family room, its shelves sagging with books about history and art and its oak floor glowing from the reflected light of brass fixtures. As we sit there, he often tells me, between sips of white wine, about being a child during the war. He recalls seeing Munich, his city, and a city I have come to love, slowly fall to pieces as block by block, night by night, bombs would chip away at its core. For me, World War Two is distant – an inherited and fogged memory, not my own. The city of Munich was rebuilt before I was born, its scars unseen to me.

While the form might be different, I am left hoping that those in Uganda, who have seen their lives uprooted by instruments of war far more primitive than those which ignited Munich, may one day sit across a table from their grandchildren, conversing about rebels and conflicts to which their grandchildren cannot relate. It is a perennial call; Isaiah spoke of swords being beaten into plowshares, and it has been echoed ever since, seemingly beaten into cliché.

I don't know if it will ever happen, but I see no other option but to think and act as if it may.

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## Notes

1. "War in northern Uganda world's worst forgotten crisis: UN," Agence France-Presse, 11 Nov 2003, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/AllDocsByUNID/ef17689443ofdeec1256ddb0056ea4c>, Accessed 11 Nov 2008.
2. David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2002), 3.
3. "The Story of Reproductive Health Uganda," Reproductive Health Uganda, <http://www.rhu.or.ug/>, Accessed 20 September 2008.
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# Searching for Relief from an AIDS Epidemic: Clients and Community at Gay Men's Health Crisis

AARON BRESLOW '10



“It may be that the equal measure of fear and hope has brought us together, but the great thing is, we are together. We've got to fight back. We've got to show each other and the unfriendly world that we've got more than looks, brains, talent, and money. We've got guts too. Plus an awful lot of heart.”

—Paul Popham, first president of Gay Men's Health Crisis<sup>1</sup>

## In Passing, In the Halls

It broke my heart when I met AIDS, that wretched disease that plagues my community, and learned that I will always be a part of it.

Though it took an academic fellowship in New York City this summer, I discovered what AIDS was when I looked it in the eyes, twenty-seven years since that “gay cancer” was born, and watched it tear my community apart.

It was June this year when I met AIDS in person; we had only known each other in passing, in the halls. In high school, back in California, I had a distant friend whose boyfriend died of AIDS-related causes. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome took the young boy's life, and my acquaintance ran away to New York City to meet the disease that took his lover from him.

I didn't know what that meant at the time, as I'm still not sure whether I do now. Yet this past summer, I too took off for New York, in hopes of finding some answers. I was fulfilling an internship at Gay Men's Health Crisis, searching for some truth in helping others like my long-lost friend. And it wasn't until I took a flight to New York City and a subway car down to Chelsea on that screeching, subterranean number 1 train that I felt I truly met this disease.

On my first day at work, I nervously asked my coworker why Gay Men's Health Crisis had the name it was given in the early 1980s. After all, I argued, the agency has grown from that nearby living room it started in. It now works out of a 12-floor corporate office and serves every demographic affected by the epidemic.

“Gay Men's Health Crisis,” I said to him that sunny June morning. The heat poured in the windows by my desk, and he looked suspiciously into my eyes. “GMHC,” I continued. “Surely, those four letters are a misnomer, too dramatic to speak to the progress we've made.”

He looked back at me, watching my confidence fade. “You'll see,” was all he said, before telling me to wait in my cubicle while he helped a client through an overdose.

As the summer continued and the humidity rose, I began to learn what AIDS was by becoming a part of it. The crisis sat next to me on my way to work, lurking over my shoulder and following me out of the subway car. It rang on the hotline's telephones and printed itself on the ink of condom wrappers.

I learned what the virus was when I saw it during apartment inspections, squeezing its way into pill boxes and being swallowed as an antiretroviral. I smelled the epidemic in our agency's kitchen during lunchtime, its old, leftover stench piling on our homeless clients' plates. It stank in the hot Manhattan sun that muddied through the skylight, reeking of old politics, of money lost, of lovers dead.

I learned what AIDS was when I looked it in the eyes this summer, almost thirty years after it began and only three years since my high school friend fled for New York. But as my summer began, and I acquainted myself with this wretched disease, I learned I had to meet it to know how to fight back.

I did this in therapy with clients, actively listening to the catharsis of their stories. I fought the bureaucracy that AIDS became, as I worked with New York City housing authorities, pushing to secure poor people of color stable apartments and rent. AIDS became real, and I soon learned how much there was to be done.

As I began to find my place, I wondered what my friend had done when he came to this steaming city. I thought of him when I landed in New York this summer, exiting the plane and taking an overpriced taxi to my wildly expensive apartment. When he traveled from coast to coast, where did he live? Would I run into him, on the streets, or at a restaurant?

Would I see him at my agency, in passing, in the halls? I was terrified when I landed in New York, and I realized in that moment how much I still needed to learn. AIDS, I would soon discover, was not a story, nor a statistic, nor a friend's lover whose time on this Earth was too short. HIV was the summer heat; it was crystal meth. It was intravenous happiness and interracial homelessness. AIDS was the dirt on the sidewalk that the city never paid to clean.

And all I knew, as I looked out the window of my taxi cab and into the dark eyes of the night skyline, was that I would only know AIDS when I allowed myself to meet it.

### **Heat: A Sauna of Sweat and Relief**

When I left the subway on my first day of work and walked a block uptown to that towering office, all I met was a brick wall of humidity. Chelsea is sweaty in the summer, and if you can't feel your own, you see it roasting on everyone else.

You smell it at the coffee truck; you hear it dripping on the treeless sidewalk. On West 24th Street and 7th Avenue, Chelsea is a cement sauna, and it's the sweat that consumes you first.

The boys of Chelsea sweat north of Greenwich Village, and just south of the Garment District. They hover above the Meatpacking District, hanging onto the foundation of Hell's Kitchen. The neighborhood is post-industrial, and the variety in the architecture shows it. Some buildings seem eager to topple over, while the new ones are glass boxes, reflecting the detriment of the ferocious sun. Furnished with hip art galleries and boutiques, Chelsea is often called a "gayborhood." It's easy to see why.

Chelsea is always busy, packed with people of all genders, ethnicities, and anxieties. They sit on stoops of brownstone apartments or outside at restaurants. They bustle around, sometimes running, and far too often passed out on the burning hot cement. On 24th between Sixth and Seventh Avenue, there are rivers of perspiration on the exposed thighs of the neighborhood sex workers. These men come from all walks of life to Chelsea, where they are paid to sweat. Each lunch break, I pass thirty or so of these desperate looking boys on my way to Whole Foods. They say hello, friendly, shaking.

I wave, and we begin to become acquainted. Yet as I greet them day after day, I know I will never truly feel the crisis in their lives.

When in Chelsea, head a bit east of the booming gentrification, and you'll see Gay Men's Health Crisis stretching its twelve stories up towards the sky. If Chelsea

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is a sauna, then GMHC is the cold shower that rinses your sweaty demons away. The building is monstrous, brown and white, yet it somehow still seems rooted deeply into the sidewalk. Its twelve floors let the harsh sun in through muddied windows.

Our clients enter the wide, double doors to escape the powerful heat. Up the elevator, there's an artificial breeze from an overhead vent. "Relief," it seems to hum, and it pours chilling air on the clients' bodies. The walls are lined with portraits, paintings, and collages. GMHC prides itself on its commitment to community, and all its artwork is client made. Get off on the fourth floor and immediately ahead is an eight-foot-tall photograph of a naked, white man. He lies on his stomach above a table covered in condoms. Copy machines are broken, missing pieces and machinery like the people this community has lost.

But still, GMHC is full of relief in the summer. I left 24th street my first day of work and walked through those heavy doors into a cold shower. Relief from everything, from life, from Chelsea, from abusive relationships or unsafe sex, from the projects a block away, or the intoxication of flashing clubs. You smell it in the pastries in the cafeteria, hear it buzzing from the white noise machines in the counseling rooms. You taste it in the water you throw across your face in the sink, washing off the dirty streets and the sounds of sirens in the intersections.

On West 24th Street and Seventh Avenue, Chelsea may be a cement sauna, but the relief is what consumes you next.

### **Death: A Life Voyager's Journey**

It's another sunny day in Chelsea, and I excitedly walk in to find my first client dead on the table. Her head is flat, motionless on the cheap, wooden surface, and I look down to see her coarse hair spilling out of her dead head like a soul escaping a corpse. The table is crowded with a jungle of papers and a passport from "República Dominicana." She's dead; I'm sure of it. I drop my clipboard to the floor, and her file flies off of it, name and proof of AIDS symptoms drifting slowly onto the table.

"Beatriz Vidal," the hospital records say. I look back and forth from the file to the faceless figure. I am here representing Coordinated Integrated Care, a program that determines who qualifies for a one-time financial grant paid directly to one's landlord. Clients like Beatriz must show HIV symptoms and owe rent on previous months to be eligible.

A solid minute goes by, and I stand still, looking down again at the client's file. I find it ironic that, in Spanish, "Beatriz" is a voyager, and "Vidal" is a term for life. This "Life Voyager" apparently has taken a trip to Gay Men's Health Crisis and died on my interview table.

I look back down at Vidal and can't help but note her purple denim shorts, and a skin-tight white T-shirt. It's sleeveless, and I see messes of armpit hair, an extension of the bundle on her head. I wonder what has brought this woman to GMHC. According to my supervisor, Beatriz is a client of HASA, or HIV/AIDS Services Administration, a department of Social Services that places people with AIDS in stabilized housing.

I try to check myself and try not to be fazed, when suddenly, the monster before me raises her head up and yelps, directing her bloodshot gaze at my face.

"Faggot!" she belts, throwing her animated body forward. She's alive, it seems, though my history as a gay rights advocate fighting that particular term influences me to fear her a bit more because of it.

"Another white faggot," she proclaims, her voice rougher than sandpaper. I'm too frightened to cringe, so my face stays unmoved. "What the fuck you doin' here?"

After a deep breath, I take a step forward, force myself not to flinch, and eventually sit down across the messy table. "What chu doin'?" she repeats, and I begin to hear my foot tapping at the floor.

I remember my supervisor, who spoke to me the day before about creating a culture of inclusion here at GMHC, and what it means to maintain perspective. "Always check yourself," he warned me. "You come from a place of privilege. People may offend you, scare you, and threaten you, but remember what you're doing here."

"Well," I stutter, digging inside myself for a bit of tact, "I may be a white faggot, but I am here to help you out." I hold my right foot down with its counterpart to the left, and force my lips apart to explain my role in Beatriz' life.

"I'm here to interview you, to determine your eligibility for our back rent program. Over the course of an hour, it is my job to take note of your background related to AIDS, citizenship, housing, and finances. If you are eligible, we will pay the majority of your rent arrears."

I do not mention that eligibility includes being too sick to work, and too poor to live on welfare alone. The most “eligible” clients struggle under the poverty line, and most receive Social Security benefits, which pay a portion of New York City rent every month.

“Benefits,” just like “Life Voyager,” seem to be a bit of a misnomer. I can’t deny the irony that clients in the worst of situations have the best chances of being successful here. Those with the lowest CD4 count, or the weakest immune systems, have the highest probability of their rent being paid. A CD4 count below 200 denotes an AIDS-positive status; Beatriz has a count of 121. I try to question my judgments, yet I can’t help but feel relief when I see this. At least I know I can send her home with a check.

“So,” I say, “why don’t we get started? Did you bring your Social Security card and a picture ID?” I unfold my interview booklet and look around the cramped box of a room, while Beatriz rifles through a plastic bag that reads “I LOVE NEW YORK.” Though I’m new to Manhattan, I can’t help but wonder if, in her place, I would love this city too.

She seems angry, scraping holes in the plastic with her acrylic nails. I imagine her digging them into my face if I ask a question the wrong way, or bring up something a bit too personal. “This is for wondering about my sexual history!” she’ll scream, tearing at my flesh with her pink, manicured weapons. Or that delightful “white faggot” proclamation as she gags me with her shopping bag.

“Here it is. Enjoy,” she says, producing a ripped card that now reads “Soci Curity.” I reach across the barrier of the table, and try again to check my own biases.

Have I been socialized to fear a Latino woman living in poverty? I ask myself, as I write the numbers on her torn picture ID. I know the answer is yes.

How is it fair for me to judge someone’s homophobia when she lives with a world of disease commonly blamed on gay men? Entirely unfair.

“How much money have you made this year?” I probe Beatriz, and guilt fills me like helium in a balloon.

“What was your mode of HIV-transmission?” I ask.

Apparently, she forgets. “Do you live alone? How often do you use intravenous drugs?” On and on, I jab at her memory and personal history, scratching down her responses with an almost inkless pen.

As she spits her words at me, I try not to trust my initial judgments, though it is not easy. I am a white male from California, whose gayness was a relatively small point of vulnerability growing up. My family is well off, unshaken by anxieties of homelessness.

“Which HIV meds are you taking?” I ask Beatriz, and it hits me that I don’t have to worry about these things in my own life. She tears her plastic bag apart in search of her child’s birth certificate. When I begin again to fear for my safety, I look down at my side to see my own bag: suede, designer, a Chanukkah gift. It’s full of privilege that I have yet to unpack.

Beatriz and I finish our session, and I am thankful that she is my first client. As I demand that these strangers detail the pain in their lives, I will know that I need to remember mine. Their histories, prejudices, and backgrounds may seem foreign to me, even offensive. However, I know to remind myself where I come from, and why I am here, in this cramped, freezing room with a woman named Life Voyager who wishes I were somewhere else.

I was given \$3,500 through a Brandeis fellowship to work here this summer, and the contrast here hits me hard. As I speak with this woman, I realize that her landlord has threatened eviction because she owes half of my grant.

I am an outsider and an insider, a foreigner who has been granted a summer visa, yet there are conditions to this privilege. I may use it not to judge, but to help. I’m here to listen, to empathize, functioning as a foreigner but also as a citizen. After all, I may be HIV-negative, but I’ve been affected by AIDS in other ways, and I am a member of a larger group of people who want so desperately for all this death to come to an end.

“I think we’re about done here,” I tell her, and I look up from my booklet, maintaining a level perspective with her disgruntled gaze. “Welcome to GMHC,” I say, finally feeling more comfortable with her. “And I’m really glad you were only napping when I walked in this afternoon.”

**I may be HIV-negative, but I’ve been affected by AIDS in other ways, and I am a member of a larger group of people who want so desperately for all this death to come to an end.**

She grins at me and laughs, and I'm thrilled to see her animated. "Well, honey," she says, "Welcome to your internship. Anything else you need?"

"Just one last signature," I say, flipping the page around and handing her the final drips of my pen. Beatriz signs the end of the booklet, and my ink fades on the last stroke of "Vidal."

"Life."

### **Life: Vibrantly Alive**

"Forty senior AIDS center are going to close," Annie says, pointing to the number on a whiteboard and knowing the lives that this numeric value will affect. "Forty!"

A big red four next to a tiny zero glare bleakly at the room, the red ink bleeding down a dirty, overused board. I loosen my tie. It's hot in this stale room up on the twelfth floor, and the other twenty-three members of the Public Policy Department stare despairingly back at the number's significance.

Annie is a well-educated, 30-something white woman who coordinates the Action Center at GMHC, a new activist group with only five years under its tightening belt. This afternoon, as the sun pours mercilessly through the room's five large windows, the dust that coats them leaves a shadow in the cheap carpet. The streaks of shade speak to how long it's been since this building was cleaned. Annie is tired, but she continues.

"While Mayor Bloomberg cuts 6 million dollars from AIDS prevention, there's a surplus in the New York City budget. So...where's the disconnect?"

I hear a sigh burst out of Max, a 72-year-old client who helps run one of these forty senior centers in the Tribeca neighborhood of Manhattan. Max looks wearily over at me, and I wonder how he does it, day after day. I hear his charcoaled, weathered knuckles grind desperately against each other, and he reminds me of GMHC: old and weathered, but still fighting. Max has been HIV-positive since 1982, the year Gay Men's Health Crisis opened its first office down on West 22nd Street.

Max explained to me that, in 1981, eighty or so men gathered in writer Larry Kramer's living room to organize and raise money for relief. Twenty-seven years later, here's the world's first AIDS organization: a twelve-story building

in the heart of Chelsea. And today, here's the relief: twenty-three members of an advocacy group meeting to battle financial depletion.

Yet Max's age shows, and the agency's does too. Copy machines stay broken, and the dining hall often is too crowded to fit all of its hungry clients. The building lives on, as does Max, year after year. With his age cracking his forehead, he turns to me, and puts up a fist.

"Be strong," he mouths. "Fight on."

We look forward as Annie continues. She knows the AIDS fatigue the world is feeling right now. New drugs have been invented, and new cures are being found, so why fight? As people roar in Spanish and complain in English, our leader tries to appear confident. But the room is getting even hotter in the shadow of the sun.

I leave the meeting feeling helpless, wondering what I can do in this enormous struggle. It's my afternoon break, and I walk around the dining hall where our clients eat five lunches a week and dinner every Friday night. I feel guilty as I finger the Whole Foods bag in my left hand, so I hide it behind my back, and sit down with Max and a woman from the meeting whom I haven't yet met.

After saying hello, I look up at painting by our table. It is beautiful and striking: fifty or so people, all nude, of different colors and sizes, stand outside in a busy city. They hold each other's hands yet seem to frown, looking down sadly like a disaster has just occurred. The charcoal skyline is gray, though yellow painted streaks of sun beat down on their backs. I can't help but interpret that they're being burned by it, scorched by its harsh light.

I look across at Max, and admit the painting reminds me of GMHC: a diverse community struggling to smile in a harsh urban disaster zone. Sadness is ubiquitous in this building; it is spoken in clients' words, in their therapy sessions, even in the art on the walls. Sadness is in the agency's history, hiding in free condom wrappers and withdrawing blood through a thin, testing needle.

Yet when I look across at my clients, I don't see sadness on their faces.

The woman sits across the table from me, smiling, with very tan skin and dark hair. Instead of the heat weighing her down, she seems only to reflect the light, and Max holds his signature fist up in the air.

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“Like my painting?” she asks, smiling as her strong, muscular jaw line shakes the gold hoop earrings hanging by her face.

“It seems sad to me, but yes, I like it.”

She cracks a smile and rolls her eyes.

“Look closer,” she says, and I do.

As I lean in, I drop my Whole Foods bag on the table. “Exposed!” I think, embarrassed, but I lean anyway. I see something written toward the top of the canvas, tiny cursive words etched thinly into mounds of oil paint.

Reading them out loud, I recite, “Today is a beautiful day, and I am vibrantly alive.” I look back at my new friend, and finally crack a smile. The art may be steeped in victimization, in sadness, but it is also bursting with hope.

“My name is Koa,” the painter says, as she extends a muscular arm to offer a strong handshake. “It’s Hawaiian for ‘strength.’”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thanks, dear,” she goes on. And she winks, smiling with those full red lips. “Chose it back when I moved to New York and started coming here.”

As I look across the table at Koa, Max, and two others, I can’t help but smile. The heat may pour down through the room’s gaping skylight, and my hands may be exhausted from handing out clean syringes and newly printed pamphlets. My heart may be exhausted from facing the facts: the financial let-down and the horror stories of my clients. But I think of what this agency has accomplished and suddenly feel so proud.

Like its community, GMHC has changed its face over time. Since the late 1980s, when the newest AIDS cases were attributed more to needle sharing than to sexual contact, GMHC began to house a needle exchange. Since the early 1990s, when the newest AIDS infections were mostly among women of color, the Women’s Institute was born, and more hope was delivered to Chelsea.

I begin a sigh of relief, and untie my tie completely, looking up at Koa and Max gleaming before me.

“Six million dollars is nothing,” she says, shaking her large head from left to right. “Forty senior centers... we can rebuild.”

Max looks up at her, and again holds that old fist up in the air.

“Today is a beautiful day,” he says. “And I am vibrantly alive.”

### **Community: The Game of Life**

“You just don’t *feel* it, Aaron,” Wayde told me from across the table. He said it with a force he knew would kill me, but hey, at least I wasn’t *actually* dying.

I’d gotten closer with my clients throughout the summer, and discovered new faces of AIDS I thought I’d never meet. Wayde was one of them. He was a middle-aged, heterosexual-identified man who had sex with men. Wayde got HIV through sharing a needle during crystal methamphetamine use, a highly addictive drug and common source of HIV infection.

He held up his wrist in the fluorescent light, needle marks scarring the flesh, and repeating his charge. “You don’t feel it. AIDS ain’t a part of you.”

And neither was “Tina,” a common sobriquet in the black MSM community (the public health term for men who have sex with men.) “Tina” is a sex-enhancing, life-destroying drug, and I worked with Wayde’s addiction to the substance through helping him remove “triggers” from his life. These included items and people who reminded him of using.

I looked down at the board game on the table, then back up at him. It bothered me to consider how much this comment affected me; after all, why would anyone want to feel AIDS? It could have been easy to distance myself from the disease, from drug-using clients and from a person whose skin color and sexual orientation were far from my own.

The air conditioning blew at full blast, and Wayde shook; he was too thin to stay warm in the artificial chill. He looked down at his cards. These hour-long support groups used board games as a tool for homeless drug users with HIV to find an easier way to speak to their struggles. On this day, we were playing the Game of Life, but winning wasn’t the goal of our Friday afternoon.

Yet as Wayne moved to finish and pierced my gaze, laughing at my bank loans and desperation for a new career, I wondered how much it mattered that I was simply an ally, not a client.

I wasn't the first person to feel like an outsider here. Gay Men's Health Crisis was founded not only by AIDS survivors, but also by their lovers, friends, and their families. In 1981, volunteers and community members met to set a foundation for how to fight, even collecting \$7,000 the first evening of their battle.

AIDS activists like them, according to researcher Suzanna C. Ouelletta Kobasa<sup>2</sup>, felt victimized by social ostracism, and found their basic rights violated. "In this atmosphere," Kobasa states, "they realized they would have to continue to turn to each other for help" (283). Because

of this marginalization, GMHC is a specialized organization for a specific community that, Kobasa explains, "felt powerless to get health care institutions to respond appropriately and quickly to the growing crisis" (283).

I got to New York in June, when the sun made the locals sweat until 9 at night. Through work such as the support group, it didn't take long for me to learn what Kobasa meant about powerlessness and to see AIDS in people I wouldn't expect to. Wayne was the first client to ask what I was doing there, yet he wasn't the last.

While Kobasa's writing paints a grim picture of reality for those with AIDS, her theory as to why people become involved in the fight gives me some hope. She says that "AIDS voluntary activities and associations reveal important facts about how we, as individuals and as a society, respond to modern health

crises" (281). I saw this in my work every day, as I helped case managers and social workers secure stable housing for AIDS patients. I saw society respond to modern health crises when I heard psychotherapists give catharsis to their clients.

Yet for me, as I woke up every day in the Upper West Side and rushed onto the downtown 1 Train, I wondered if this community would ever be mine. I tied my tie on that subway every day, watching myself as the doors slid open and closed all the way down to 23rd Street. My reflection wavered in the windows, and I couldn't help but stare open eyed into the depths below Manhattan. Before the summer, I'd always felt like I was peering at AIDS through dirty glass, like an onlooker who'd been affected, but never truly felt it.

And in support group with Wayne, I came to realize that this does matter to many but certainly not to all. By the middle of the summer, I knew what Kobasa meant when she said that "participation in AIDS voluntary associations offers an opportunity for empowerment, an orientation toward self and world that allows one effectively to respond to the many stressors of contemporary life" (281).

Kobasa interviewed GMHC volunteers, and found that there is an immense amount of meaning to be discovered in giving time here. There is a stable reflection to be found, a clearer window through which to look at a community.

Though Wayne confirmed my anxiety as an HIV-negative outsider, I learned to accept that part of my role is this community is owning my limitations and celebrating the limitlessness of others. The gay men who came together to form GMHC, as Kobasa explains, were not part of a single movement. They simply knew that they "needed to be organized in a critical new way if their association were to respond effectively to a challenge as formidable as AIDS" (284).

And that was what I was at GMHC to do.

I looked across at Wayne, his six-foot-three frame held weakly by his middle-aged, disease-ridden bones. "You're right," I said, "I don't feel it. I don't *feel* AIDS because I thankfully don't *have to*."

Wayne's stern look faded into a smile, and he closed his eyes, touching that jagged wrist to his heart.

"And thank God for that," he said. "Thank God for that."

He reached his hand away from his chest, and Yolanda looked down at me and smiled. Wayne spun the dial on the board, the arrow landing on blue.

**Though Wayne confirmed my anxiety as an HIV-negative outsider, I learned to accept that part of my role is this community is owning my limitations and celebrating the limitlessness of others.**

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“But I know you’re still a part of it,” he continued, moving his car up to the green rectangle reading “PAY DAY” in big, white letters. He collected his fake cash for that fictitious “athlete” career, and held it up for me to see. I was anxious, but congratulated him for his success.

“And I know,” he said in response, “that you’re here for me too, to celebrate when I’m doing well.”

“Of course I am,” I said, relieved.

It was my turn to spin the dial. I reached out for the cheap plastic decider of my fake fate, knowing it made no difference what it landed on. After all, I would still go home after work to my queen-sized bed and rest well, knowing I was healthy. But for the afternoon, as I lost the Game of Life, and for the summer, as I helped others get through theirs with a bit of relief, I finally knew how it felt to be part of the struggle.

### **Silence: Relief in the Afternoon Rain**

“Think about it this way,” I tell myself, glaring up at the overbearing sun. “That red, bursting ball of fire is the only force in this city with more power and pride than this goddamned march!”

After all, despite the heat and all the trials of the AIDS world, today is *finally* a day of celebration: the LGBT Pride Parade. We are taking to the streets of Manhattan to treasure what we have gained and to mourn for all we’ve lost. I glance left at our enormous float, a beautiful mess of banners, clients, and employees ready to roll down burning summer streets.

I finally feel that sense of community I’ve been searching for.

Ahead, on the corner of 52nd Street and Fifth Avenue, I see Paulo. A 35-year-old Peruvian transgendered man, Paulo is a client of mine who was evicted from his housing project because of his illegal residence in the United States. Paulo has fought to find his place in New York for 15 years now, since he moved here and first tested positive for HIV. It has been a struggle for him to find community, to find some relief from this treacherous disease and this blistering summer heat.

“Hey, Aaron!” he screams, panting after each breath. “Glad I found you!”

He smiles, bending forward to catch his breath. I’m glad to have found him, but I began to worry. He’s been sick since recently starting a new brand of antiretrovirals and his thin frame drips sweat before the parade has even started.

“Hey, how are you?” I ask, smiling back despite my concern. “A bit hot, huh?”

“Just a bit,” he says, wiping his brow and drying his hand with his navy blue T-shirt. “But I’ve been marching in this thing 15 years, and ain’t nothin’ gon’ stop me now!”

The parade begins, and as Paulo and I march on, New York City becomes a sea of madness. I move my sweat-soaked silver ballet shoes to the beats of salsa, reggaeton, and merengue that pump out of local radio stations. It’s roaring loud in the blistering streets, and I see naked women ride past us on unicycles as we walk by 48th Street. At 45th, people hang off rooftops and balconies; they drink beer and hold banners celebrating the communities that thrive despite all their pain.

Drag kings bicycle past our float, throwing condoms at the lines of observers on each side of the street. I hear engines roaring over Spanish chanting. I smell hot dogs roasting in vendors’ carts. Up ahead at 41st Street, I see Marjorie Hill, the first black female executive director of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, an agency notorious for catering to white gay men.

“She’s beautiful,” Paulo says, pointed at the dreadlocked woman holding an eight-foot-tall rainbow flag. It’s a revolutionary thing for this woman to be in charge; after all, what is a community-based organization if not accepting of everyone in its community?

We sweat together, Paulo and I, marching in a mob of sticky celebrators who trudge together down the streets of a ceremonial city. It’s 1:50 now, and the sky begins to gray, the clouds darkening like sinister puffs of smoke. Paulo is too hot, and I hand him a fan for some relief. I worry his legs are too skinny; I worry his white blood cells are too low.

But Paulo marches on.

We pass 35th Street at 2 o’clock and pause for a moment of silence. I look over at him, and see the fan’s red ink of “Fight AIDS” flap feverishly beside his sweaty face.

To my left, “Brothers and sisters!” explodes from a megaphone on GMHC’s float. Paulo and I look up to see a skinny, beautiful drag queen project her voice over the burning crowd. Her back reads “Our VOTE!” and she grips the megaphone with a bedazzled hand.

“This is for our brothers and sisters who died of AIDS!” she projects. A moment of silence, to remember those who suffered, and to stand with those who suffer now.” More grey clouds collect above her head.

And New York City, that self-righteous city that never sleeps, finally shuts its mouth. The heat ripples over silent sidewalks; it reflects on the windows of hushed boutiques and noiseless cafes. I look uptown, and the unspoken sadness of a 27-year-old HIV agency stands before me. I hear Paulo crying beside me, and I feel the pain and hurt of that torturous disease that consumes my community every single day, like the heat bearing down on us this July afternoon.

But something changes in the air. I feel a splash on my right shoulder, a loud drop of rain that breaks the silence. Within a minute, the rain begins to fall, and with it goes the silence. Clouds feverishly explode over our heads, washing the quiet away, and the heat and struggle go with it.

GMHC’s float becomes Noah’s Ark in that moment, and the plagues of New York City drown beside it. The ark floats down Fifth Avenue, but this time, *everyone* is spared. The observers run into the street, clutching each other’s hands in a sea of celebration. There is no “two by two,” no judgments placed on whose lives are worth saving. No crisis, no Mayor Bloomberg taking six million dollars from HIV relief.

Instead, in this moment, an entire community swims in the streets and dances its miseries into the past.

The rain continues to pour and, for an ephemeral moment, it washes sickness into history. No more AIDS, no more need for relief services. No need for a minute of silence, or for Paulo to cry for his people or be evicted from his neighborhood. It is like 1981 never happened, like the Center for Disease Control never declared that wretched “gay cancer” an epidemic.

The sky continues to fall apart, and I feel more connected than I ever have in my life. So celebrated, so powerful, so relieved. Paulo and I lift our hands in the air, eyes closed, and dance our feet downtown,

swimming in the celebration of the summer cement. That afternoon, on Fifth Avenue, I feel relief like I’ve never felt before.

It was the heat that consumed me when I first came to New York City. Yet this hot afternoon, surrounded by a community of relief and support, Paulo and I march on, and surrender to the rain.

### **Conclusion: Fighting in the Fall Breeze**

Chelsea is sweaty in the summer. But on my last day at work, as I walk the two city blocks up from the 23rd Street subway, I feel a breeze hit my cheek. My eyes cross, perplexed; it came out of nowhere, this gust of wind. I thought this heat would never be over, like this disease that seems to have no end. And then another gust comes, and another, and I know the season is nearing its end. When I pass the usual sex workers who solicit on the corner of 24th and 7th, I see that they notice it too. The two men are clients of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, and I say hello as they cock their heads at me in the cool air. They wave, laughing at the abrupt freshness of the seasonal wind.

Chelsea is a sauna in the summer, but as I pack my cubicle into two little boxes, I look outside and see fall subtly moving into the neighborhood. When I sit in on my last support group and listen to three HIV-positive clients tell the stories of my community’s pain, I begin to look forward to the relief the autumn months will bring. I switch off my desk lamp after lunch with my supervisor and shut down that slow, stubborn computer for the last time. I close the files I’ve written, the grant proposals, the event details, the resource guides I’ve composed. I peer outside again at that one solitary tree across the busy downtown street; I won’t be here to watch its leaves fall.

The hardest part of the end of my internship at Gay Men’s Health Crisis is the knowledge that, despite all I’ve done, AIDS will not be leaving Chelsea with me.

So as I pack up fliers and pamphlets to bring back to Boston, I wonder what will happen to my clients. Will Wayne ever live in a room with walls and sleep on a bed instead of the sidewalk? Will New York City pour funding into senior centers and allow its citizens the right to live? Will AIDS ever end? When will Paulo find a home, and what if Beatriz is found sometime next week, *truly* dead on a conference table? Will I ever live in a world where I don’t have to watch my friends suffer, where simple things like the heat won’t cause my community to despair?

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My work was nothing if not rewarding, of course. Yet, as I pack up my things my last day of work, I confront myself with the fact that staying here another month won't stop my community from suffering. Pills get smaller, lives grow longer, and the air gets cooler, but I honestly don't see an end to AIDS and HIV.

I walk with my belongings down those old, rickety stairs. I've said my goodbyes, yet I'm still not sure I've done all I could. As I leave the building and walk onto the cement, that breeze strikes my face again. The season is changing abruptly to fall, and I suddenly feel some relief from the heat, the same celebratory feeling I had in the pouring rain during the summer Pride Parade.

So as I pass those same two sex workers, standing six hours later on the same corner, I wave goodbye, and acknowledge that I have no idea what will become of them. Yet there is so much more work to be done to fight for these lives. AIDS must be seen not as a white gay man's disease of the past, but as a crisis that affects *everyone*. It is an epidemic that must be treated not through shame but through prevention awareness, through relief services, and through community development, especially in underserved areas.

Though a breeze hits my cheek on my walk home toward the subway, I leave these clients behind and hope for a better future for my community's approaching seasons and coming generations.

And as long as the disease isn't over, neither is my fight. Even if AIDS plagues my community my entire life, I will always be a part of it as well.

Fighting.

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# From Where I Sit: Disconnected Memories and Thoughts From Beneath the 58,000

RACHAEL CHANIN '10

I pull open the glass doors of the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum and walk inside. The heat on my back fades away as the cool air conditioning presses in on me. With each step, the brightness of the sun is slowly replaced by fluorescent lights. As I walk across the lobby towards the entrance, I pass a small café and a welcome desk on my left. The museum's eight-foot-high, barred gate moans as I push it open.



For a moment, the onslaught of sculptures, paintings, and photographs is overwhelming. All around me, items cry out for my attention. A sculpture directly in front of me captures my gaze. From a distance, it looks like a miniature of Michelangelo's *Pietà* – the famous marble sculpture of the Virgin Mary cradling the lifeless body of her son moments after he was taken down from the cross. But as I get closer, the sculpture reveals itself to be of a young marine and small child. The marine looks up at the sky, his arms clutching the child's limp body, his eyes seemingly searching for some answer, some reason. The sculpture seems to contain the short intake of breath before his inhuman wail of anguish explodes through the air.

I've seen the *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on two separate occasions, but I've never felt like this before. I feel like something has knocked the wind out of me and detached me from reality. This young boy in front of me looks to be about my age. He could be my best friend, my brother, or even a younger version of my father. For all that I know, this same scene is happening right now somewhere in Iraq or Afghanistan. And that scream ripping through the air halfway around the world is the same one reverberating throughout my body. I don't want to keep staring at the statue, but I cannot look away. I take a step back, trying to ground myself in reality, wanting to feel something besides the pain emanating off the sculpture.

Standing in front of the statue, I can see my reflection on the steel entrance to the elevator behind it. The black skirt and high-heeled wedges I had carefully picked out to wear seem

foreign amid the images of warfare, camouflage, and men. I ask myself, how did I end up here, interning at the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum? I don't even like war. In fact, I would describe myself as strictly the nonviolent type. Well, except for the occasional spider that unluckily finds its way into my bedroom. Yet, here I am, at a museum dedicated to veterans, a place that by definition implies the presence of war and violence.

My reasons on paper for this internship seem solid, or at least they did before I entered the building. I'm an undergraduate psychology major interested in post-traumatic stress disorder and art therapy. Yet no article about the theory behind trauma or any accompanying photograph in a textbook has ever made me feel like I do now, staring at that statue. I'm so used to speaking about emotion in the callous words of psychology, so used to memorizing terms and theories and regurgitating them into thick test booklets. Now, all that knowledge, all those long classifications and terms seem euphemistic, the jargon stripping the humanity from the human experience, detaching the emotion and casting it aside.

The other reason I use to justify my internship, that I am the daughter of a veteran, looks better on paper than it does in reality. My father may be a Vietnam veteran, but I have never understood what that meant. He never discussed his time in the Navy, and the only things I know about it are what I have pieced together from various items scattered throughout our home: a blue woolen Navy jacket aging in the spare-bedroom closet and a small wooden box locked in a child-proof drawer containing some medals and a few photographs. These items

always seem so distant, so far removed from the man that I know, like things bought at a garage sale, someone else's history, someone else's life.

The only time this hidden past emerged was on a family trip to Washington, D.C. We were standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial Wall and I watched a few feet away, as my father traced a finger over the name of a stranger, tears rolling down his face.

To me, the moment was unfathomable. This was my father, my superman. The person who gave me piggy-back rides in the den, coached my baseball teams, and filled the hours of long car rides with math games. I have kept this memory of him distant from the others. I never knew how to integrate it and so it remained separate, tucked away.

Standing in front of that statue, I feel like an outsider, like I am behind enemy lines. I may be the daughter of a veteran, I may live in the same country and speak the same language as the veterans who work alongside me, and I may know the history of the Vietnam War, but the atmosphere inside the museum is worlds apart from the one I have lived in for so long.

While I am not the most outspoken opponent of the war in Iraq, I am coming from a liberal, East Coast university known for student activism, and in some ways I feel like a representative of that culture. The very same culture that forty years earlier gave birth to the antiwar movement, pitted the world of academia against the world of the military, and vilified returning soldiers as baby killers.

It's been a few decades since the war in Vietnam ended, but the divisions it created within American society still stand today. Some of those barriers are self-made, others imposed, yet either way, they have created separate realities contradictory to each other. As I stand inside the museum, in front of that statue, I feel like the product of those two legacies. I wonder how to tear down the wall that has so long divided civilians and soldiers. I wonder if it is possible to tear down the smaller one that separates a father and a daughter. I turn away from the statue and head upstairs.

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From my seat at the information desk, I watch people pass by on the street. I can see a woman pushing a stroller, a couple on a bicycle built for two, and a young girl rollerblading. As they pass by, they seem so full of life. The sun beats down upon their skin, reflecting off their sunglasses, and the cool breeze ruffles their hair.

Inside the museum, I feel like I'm watching these strangers on television going about their everyday errands. Most don't even look up or break stride as they pass the faded purple banners with the museum's logo printed on them. Of those that do momentarily pause and peer into the windows, the majority step back as if something inside warns them to stay away. Not even the presence of the small café draws them in. As if the plain brick building and sound of coffee grinding are only an outward façade of normality, the stranger offering candy to lure little children into his car.

Most tourists do not know the museum exists. A few of the Chicago maps I have seen haven't even highlighted its location; 1801 South Indiana remains dark, while the beacons of other museums, parks, and monuments burn brightly. It's there, but only if you know to look for it. Even the museum's location isolates it. A half hour's walk south of downtown is too far for the time-strapped tourist and too short a distance to pay for public transportation.

Only a fraction of the people that walk through the glass doors are here to see the museum; the majority turn into the restaurant. Yet the museum's visitors are easily identifiable. It's something about the way they walk; there is purpose in their step. Nothing distracts them from their mission, not even the beauty of the courtyard next door or the cool breeze wafting in from the coast of Lake Michigan. Those few visitors that do come here make the journey for a reason.

**I wonder how to  
tear down the wall  
that has so long  
divided civilians  
and soldiers.**

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A pilgrimage made not because they want to, but because they need to: to remember a friend, honor a parent, or acknowledge their own past.

\* \* \*

*“Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity.”*

During the half second it takes me to breathe, I prepare my answer. “Unfortunately, we don’t have any brochures at the moment. *But*, I can give you a print-out that tells the history of the museum and how it was founded.” I reach across the counter and pick up the topmost sheet. I feel slightly embarrassed. The corners of the thin, white computer paper are bent and the ink is faded almost to the point of illegibility. I examine the man’s face, desperately hoping the solution will appease him. But something about the man tells me he is the worst kind of visitor, the one ready to explode at the drop of a pin.

He is wearing a blue Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts. A large camera hangs around his neck, leaving the area red and puffy. His wife stands a few feet away, crossing her arms and tapping a foot anxiously. She alternates impatient glances between her watch and her two small children dashing across the floor playing a game of tag. The dark circles under both their eyes imply an early morning flight, most likely on a delayed plane with a screaming child. And the veins protruding from their temples indicate they are about one more shrill, prepubescent shriek away from canceling Christmas this year.

Trying to avert the pending eruption of anger, I offer an explanation in my most soothing voice, normally reserved for talking to small children or fluffy animals. “The museum is undergoing a name change from the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum to the Veterans Art Museum. Although the museum was originally founded by Vietnam veterans and the majority of the collection focuses on their work, we want to expand the mission to be more inclusive of all veterans, regardless of nationality or the war they fought in. Until the change is made, we are hesitant to order more brochures with our old name and logo.” I hold my breath and wonder if he would even hear my explanation above the loud screech of his children and hope that the bit about inclusion tugs on his heartstrings enough to avoid an outburst.

As he opens his mouth, I flinch, expecting the worst. Instead, in a calm and even voice, he says, “That’s really something. It’s like I always say, we veterans need to stick together. Never again will one generation of veterans turn its back on the next.” He smiles to himself and lets out a short laugh.

I am stunned by his reaction. How could this simple mention of older veterans embracing the next generation be able to instantly quell his flame of anger? Never in my entire experience of working in customer service have I seen someone pacified with a single phrase. Even after he and his family have walked out the door, I half expect that he will run back to the desk, his eyes bulging in anger, and demand to speak with the manager.

When I first walked through the museum, I was stunned by the full spectrum of emotions presented in the art. I guess I had half expected the majority of pieces to be about emotional turmoil or isolated suffering. And while the museum has its share of this kind, alongside them are those that depict unity and brotherhood. Until this moment, I have never been able to reconcile the differences.

I smile to myself and look up at the dog tags blowing gently in the wind. Each of the more than 58,000 represents a soldier killed during the Vietnam War. As I watch them move together in unison, I think back to a sentence that I had previously not understood. It is from a collection of stories, told by a doctor who worked in an Army hospital during the Vietnam War. Each story is more devastating than the last and at times I found myself not wanting to hear anymore. Yet, now, amid all the pain, I can see the hope.

“As for me, my wish is not that I had never been in the Army, but that this book could never have been written.”<sup>2</sup>”

\* \* \*

“Are you a veteran?”

I look up. The speaker is an elderly man hobbling out of the museum towards the desk. He is leaning on a cane and wearing a black baseball cap with “WWII Veteran” embroidered in gold. Beneath his thick glasses, his eyes are moist.

“Are you a veteran?” he repeats.

“No,” I reply.

“Well, you must be an artist then, right?”

“No, but my father is a Vietnam veteran.” For some reason, I find myself desperately wanting to justify my presence to this complete stranger.

“Interesting,” he says. “When did he serve?”

I furrow my brow and look off to the right. Why do I not know this answer? It’s such a simple question. I frantically search the recesses of my mind, hoping an answer will miraculously appear. A few seconds pass. The man’s gaze does not waver. “I actually don’t know,” I say. “He never really talked about it.”

As the man walks out the door, a thought fills my mind. My father may never have spoken about his time in Vietnam, but that doesn’t explain why I had never asked.

\* \* \*

I admit that I have never been able to walk through the museum in its entirety. Unlike other museums with walls covered with tranquil images of landscapes and haughty-looking aristocrats, each item here tells a story and reveals something personal about the artist. I will not allow myself to just walk by any piece; I feel as if these artists deserve at least a moment of my time. After all, when they were my age they were halfway around the world fighting for their lives, and I’m spending the summer inside an air-conditioned building catering to tourists.

\* \* \*

The collection is a wound that refuses to heal; its containment inside the unbecoming brick building is the bandage that keeps it out of view from the general public.

\* \* \*

*“If you hold a real weapon in your hand, you will feel its character strongly. It begs to be used. It is fearsome. Its only purpose is death, and its power is not just in the material from which it was made, but also from the intention of its makers.”*

*It is regrettable that sometimes weapons must be used, but occasionally, survival demands it. The wise go forth with weapons only as a last resort. They never rejoice in the skill of weapons, nor do they glorify war.*

*When death, pain, and destruction are visited upon what you hold to be the most sacred, the spiritual price is devastating. What hurts more than one’s own suffering is bearing witness to the suffering of others. The regret of seeing human beings at their worst and the sheer pain of not being able to help the victims can never be redeemed.*

*If you go personally to war, you cross the line yourself. You sacrifice ideals for survival and fury of killing. That alters you forever. That is why no one rushes to be a soldier. Think before you want to change so unalterably. The stakes are not merely one’s life but one’s very humanity.”*

—“Thoughts on War” quoted from Den Ming-Dao, a Taoist monk, several hundred years before Christ

Inscribed on the wall of the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum

\* \* \*

I reach my hand up in front of my face and rotate the one-inch, square slide before my eyes, trying to make out the image despite the lack of light. Although out of focus, I can see the form of a small jet taking off the deck of a large ship. My eyes water from the strain of squinting; I can feel the distant rumblings of an oncoming headache.

I put the slide back into the dusty container and pull out the next one. Like many of the other slides in the box, the one I hold now is damaged. Rusty dots and mildew freckle the surface, a reminder that forty years have passed since these snapshots were taken. I try to gently brush off the blemish with the corner of a tissue, but the damage is permanent. I raise the slide above my head and squint my eyes, hoping that the residue will resolve away.

A whisper from across the desk interrupts my concentration, “Tell me, is it a dangling or pregnant chad?” I laugh as the famous photograph from the 2000 presidential election pops into my mind: a balding man, eyes magnified through his glasses and eyebrow raised, stares intently at a ballot raised above his head.

Standing in front of me is a young woman in her late twenties. Dark curly hair much like my own is pushed back from her face by a pair of large aviator sunglasses. Despite her smile, her eyes look sad, as if her joke was a last and futile attempt to cling to something positive. I welcome her to the museum and begin to give a brief summary of the collection’s history. She cuts me off. “No need for explanation. I make the trip here every year. My father was a Vietnam vet and died from complications of post-traumatic stress disorder.” Her smile falters and her voice cracks as she finishes her statement. Without waiting for a response, she walks into the museum.

I let out a long sigh and sink even further into my chair. The silence of the lobby is broken only by the soft jingling sound of the dog tags hanging twenty feet above my head. Although

**My father may never have spoken about his time in Vietnam, but that doesn’t explain why I had never asked.**

I cannot see it, I imagine the ringing is emanating from the solitary black one hanging slightly removed from the rest. The one that stands for those never found or who died after the war from the emotional or physical injuries they obtained from their service.

Although I will myself not to, my mind wanders to my own father. Throughout the years, our relationship hasn't always been the best. I remember a time when I refused to speak to him for months on end. We were moving again and I was angry about leaving my friends behind. It seems silly now, especially in comparison. I know that girl would give anything to have one more conversation with her father.

I pick up the next slide and hold it up to the light. I groan. Another photograph of an airplane. What is it with this guy and airplanes? Out of the hundreds of slides I have already looked at, the majority have been devoid of people. Instead, the slides capture the infinite number of angles and variations of lighting that can be used to highlight the mechanical features of planes. My mind wanders to a memory of going to an air show with my father and older brother. Both of them stood transfixed, rattling off names of jets and gasping at their prowess. Meanwhile, I huddled on the ground covering my ears and drew stick figures in the dirt with my toe. I never quite understood or shared the fascination my father had with airplanes.

I pull out the next slide and a well of excitement erupts inside of me. The slide is populated not by inanimate objects, but people. I chuckle as the image reveals itself to me in the waning light. It shows a young man holding up an open issue of *Playboy*. His shoulders are slightly hunched and he has a guilty look on his face, as if expecting that the door behind him would open and display the angry face of his apron-clad mother. The look on the young man's face is so familiar. My own mother has a talent for walking in on the five-second period of nudity or the singular slew of obscene remarks in a movie. I know that the young man in the slide is now my father's age. He's probably a business man, married, has a few kids, lives in Ohio. But I imagine that every now and then that same guilty smile still graces his face.

I close my eyes and try to imagine what my own father would have been like at my age. Yet my memory of him perpetually wearing a business suit and continually worrying about what could go wrong won't allow me. Sure, I've heard stories about his youth, but they always seemed censored or edited. He lived the American dream as the son of a truck driver who became a successful engineer. His goal in life was to have two children that would grow up to be doctors, lawyers, or scientists. He would aspire to live in a suburban home with a white picket fence and a free-spirited,

Frisbee-retrieving dog. A propagator of 1950s American values, chasing after the dream of *Leave it to Beaver* or *I Love Lucy*. The infallible imagery, too benign to be believable.

As I continue to imagine my father in my mind, I realize that the image I have conjured up is exaggerated. The holes in my memory have been filled not with facts but stereotypes. I have relied on images of others to give me answers to the most personal of questions, "How has the war affected him?"

I finish sorting through the rest of the slides and begin to pack up my stuff. When I pass through the glass doors of the museum, the irony does not escape me that I now know more about a stranger's experience of war than my own father's.

\* \* \*

Except for the group of hungry patrons congregated in the restaurant, the museum is devoid of people. Only five visitors today, all of them veterans. I spin around in my chair at the welcome desk and look up. Fifty-eight-thousand dog tags stare back, winking in the light.

No matter how many times I look up, I am always stunned by the amount of space they cover. Each tag is only an inch apart, yet in total they take up the entire ceiling of the lobby. Alone they do not have a voice, but together their faint song fills the silence.

I marvel at the number. Fifty-eight-thousand, almost double the size of the town I grew up in.

As I focus on them, I find myself searching for one in particular, the one that belongs to a stranger. It carries a name known only to my father. Hidden amid tens of thousands of others, I know I will never be able to locate it. But I do know that it is there, always in the background.

\* \* \*

### 309.81 DSM-IV Criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

A. *The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following have been present:*

- (1) *the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.*
- (2) *the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.*

B. *The traumatic event is persistently reexperienced in one (or more) of the following ways:*

- (1) *recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions.*

- (2) recurrent distressing dreams of the event.
- (3) acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur upon awakening or when intoxicated).
- (4) intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.
- (5) physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.

C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by three (or more) of the following:

- (1) efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
- (2) efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
- (3) inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
- (4) markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
- (5) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
- (6) restricted range of affect (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
- (7) sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span)

D. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by two (or more) of the following:

- (1) difficulty falling or staying asleep
- (2) irritability or outbursts of anger
- (3) difficulty concentrating
- (4) hypervigilance
- (5) exaggerated startle response<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

The sound of her black pumps on the tile floor echoes throughout the lobby. One manicured hand clutches a magenta purse while the other holds a white iPhone to her ear. She is wearing a miniskirt and a pink T-shirt with “Blondes Have More Fun” written in rhinestones. Without giving it a second thought, I sigh and look away. She’s not here for the museum.

Yet, instead of turning into the restaurant, she remains inside the lobby talking on her cell phone. Periodically, I look up and watch as she drifts about the lobby, traversing it like an elaborate pre-choreographed dance. As the volume of her voice increases, she moves faster, stopping only when she is listening.

After she hangs up the phone, she seemingly takes in her surroundings for the first time. She is standing in front of one of the museum’s pieces. It is a large mirror with an

oath written on top that soldiers are required to take before entering the military. For a moment, she just stares at it, her eyes focused narrowly on it. She furrows her brow and walks closer. I creep forward in my chair to get a better view. I have never seen someone so enthralled by this piece; most simply walk by it.

She places her hands on her hips and lets out a long sigh. For a brief second, I think she might actually start crying. I hold my breath. What if this moment is the one that changes this girl’s life forever?

Then, she reaches into her purse, pulls out some mascara and begins to fix her makeup. No, she is not here for the museum.

\* \* \*

An elderly woman approaches the desk. She walks toward me with purpose, throwing each step down forcefully. I look up and welcome her to the museum. She returns the smile and says rather matter-of-factly, “I’m here to see a painting. The one by Cleveland Wright.” She waits calmly as I frantically search my mind. Nothing, not even a blurry image appears. I honestly have no idea who Cleveland Wright is.

For what seems like the thousandth time, I feel inadequate and out of place. Is my presence here even meaningful? I can’t even answer questions more complicated than “Where is the bathroom?” or “What time is it?”

Focusing my attention back on the woman in front of me, I meekly ask for her patience as I find the location. It’s times like these that I wish the museum were run by museum professionals and not artists. I take for granted having a database of the collection at the Museum of Fine Arts. All it takes is a simple search and I can pinpoint the location of any piece inside the museum within a few feet. As I head towards the intercom, I try one more time to place the name Cleveland Wright somewhere in the museum, but I am no more successful than before. I switch the dial to the third floor and call upon the closest thing the museum has to a database: Jerry, the general manager. After a short exchange, he says he’ll be right down.

While I’m waiting for Jerry to come to my rescue, I pull out the only thing I can think of, a publication of the museum’s original collection. Although it’s out of date and won’t help me find the location of the painting in the museum, I figure it’s worth a shot. I search through the index looking for the artist. Bingo. I flip to the page and turn the book towards the woman. She lets out a small squeal. “That’s it! That’s my brother’s painting.” She closes her eyes and runs her fingers

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across the page. The tenderness of her gentle caress makes me imagine she is touching a real person and not merely a painting of one. I hear footsteps behind me and look up. Jerry has arrived. After brief introductions, I explain the problem.

Jerry takes a quick look at the book and frowns. “That painting is actually out on loan right now. It is part of a traveling exhibition.” He looks at the calendar behind the desk, thinking for a moment. “But it is still in Chicago at the DuSable Museum.” Noticing the look of sadness on the woman’s face, he continues, “It’s about a half hour trip from here. I can drive you there if you would like.”

As Jerry and the woman leave, I turn the book towards myself. On the page is a painting of a seated woman. One hand clutches a red handkerchief over her face, the other lies limply in her lap on top of a letter. The title, *We Regret to Inform You*, seems to encapsulate it all. A lightbulb above the woman’s head illuminates this private scene, and her pain seems to pass through the paint into my own body. I read the short paragraph next to it and discover the artist died sixteen years ago. He made this painting as homage to a friend who died the day before leaving Vietnam.

Unlike my other encounters with art inside the museum, my feelings of sadness are fleeting. For the first time, I understand that while there is no shortage of pain inside the museum, there is also a strong sense of hope. I can hear it in the voice of the man with the Hawaiian shirt, I can see it in the compassion Jerry showed to a complete stranger, and I can feel it within my own desire to forge a connection with the artwork.

\* \* \*

*“Recently, journalists and film makers, generals, diplomats and politicians have decided to tell Americans how and why that boy died. Much of their tale has concentrated on the silences of the closed casket. As the story unfolds, it either ignores the humanity and individuality of the boy inside the box, relegating him to the cold storage of statistics, history and politics, or it capitalizes on the mystery of the coffin’s contents, elevating the blood and the bones to a mythic realm of heroism or evil or rock ‘n’ roll madness.”<sup>4</sup>*

Before I came to the museum, the majority of the images of veterans I had seen portrayed on film had depicted them as infallible heroes or damaged souls. Those veterans from wars that we had won, WWII, were always categorized as the former and those from wars that we had lost, Vietnam, were always categorized in the latter.

Until I arrived at the museum, I thought nothing of this dichotomy. In fact, I even applauded those descriptions of veterans as somehow damaged. I had believed it raised awareness about the psychological damages war can inflict. Yet now, after having spent a summer listening to veterans tell their own stories, those black-and-white characterizations seem to lack truth. Those depictions take the story away from those who lived it and instead force it into neat boxes of either patriotism or antiwar sentiment. The replication of these themes reinforces in the public mind that veterans are either one or the other. Without ever asking, we assume we know.

\* \* \*

Maybe the reasons I thought I was spending my summer surrounded by veterans aren’t the real reasons why I’m here. Maybe I’m here because the few memories that I have of my father in which his image as infallible figurehead have been shattered are the moments I have felt the closest to him.

\* \* \*

Before I met Joe, I knew his birth date, where he was born, and that he was a prominent Chicago artist known for his wildlife illustrations. I also knew he was a Vietnam veteran, the years and location of his service in the army, and I knew that he had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. I learned all of this from his biography located inside the museum’s main catalogue. In some ways, I felt like I had read his diary and then attempted to befriend him without ever letting it slip that I knew his secrets.

Akin to the other dozens of times I have spoken with Joe, I find myself unconsciously searching for some indication, some sign, some outward scar or mark that reveals his past. But I find nothing. He reminds me of my father. They both have a quiet, warm presence about them. They never dominate the room, but you’re always drawn to them. Maybe that’s why I like Joe so much, why I look forward to Thursdays. Those conversations I have with him are the conversations I wish I would have with my own father. And maybe I hope that each exchanged word will give me insight into my father’s experience in Vietnam.

Today, Joe and I talk about the book he is reading. It’s the personal account of a frontiersman who was integral in the expansion of American settlements. It’s his fourth time reading through the book and his eyes light up as he speaks about it. We continue talking for the better part of an hour. Our conversation, mostly guided by him, covers a brief biography of his life. He tells me about his love of museums and how as a child he would sneak into drawing classes at the Art Institute and sketch the nude models. We talk about his love of nature and he tells me that he once lived in the

woods. He tells me about his career and how he once created a large diagram of Lake Michigan from the Paleolithic era, and that he learned leather working from an old, crotchety European man who refused to answer questions. Yet nowhere in the conversation do we ever speak about his experience in Vietnam. We talk as though the area of his life that connects most strongly to the museum does not exist.

I've seen his artwork. In fact, his pieces are some of my favorite in the museum. One in particular comes to mind whenever I think about Joe. It's a lithograph entitled *Going Home Early*. The brown, earthy tone and gradual layering of color give the piece a calming feeling. Three faceless men, their backs hunched, trudging through thick, knee-high grass barely stand out. Two of the men carry a man on a stretcher, his arms hanging limply over the edges. Unlike the three men, the body looks flat, devoid, missing something, like an imitation of its former self. The tranquility of the scene almost fools you enough to believe this is just another nature scene, that there is hope for the man and that he is just sleeping. But death, the hidden fifth character in the image, trudges silently along, whether it is admitted or not.

It's like that part of Joe that created the artwork about Vietnam has been relegated inside the museum, placed inside frames and on top of pedestals. He once told me that he doesn't think about the museum when he isn't there. The only reason he still volunteers to help restore damaged and deteriorating pieces of art is because he wants to help out, wants to make sure the museum will continue to exist. Its very existence proves that veterans are not alone and that the truth has not been stripped entirely from public memory.

\* \* \*

Across the counter from me is a man I have known my whole life. We have the same blue eyes, the same long, rectangular face, and the same large nose. There is a desk separating us, yet for a brief second it feels like there is nothing else in the world but him and me. The man across from me is my father.

I watch as his eyes look up to the dog tags hanging above. His smile falters, and is slowly replaced by a look of hesitation. He seems to be saying, "What have I gotten myself into?"

This summer was supposed to be about career development, about increasing my knowledge of post-traumatic stress disorder and art therapy. Instead it became about my father. It became about the relationship I have with him, about the things we say and the things left unspoken. It became about my trying to reconcile the two opposing images I have of him: the tall proud man who taught me to play baseball in our front yard and the hunched man with a tear-stained

face touching a name on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. It became about trying to fill in the gaps with pieces I found at the museum. I wasn't looking for my father, but I saw him everywhere.

As my father walks inside the museum with my mom, I remain where I am. Although I don't completely understand why, I know that I cannot go inside with him. In much the same way I finally realize that no matter how many war movies I watch, how many memoirs I read, or how hard I try, I will never completely understand what it means to be a veteran. Instead I wait where I am, at the welcome desk.

From where I sit, I'm not entirely inside the museum, but neither am I entirely outside. I occupy that space in between, a place where those from the military and those from the civilian population cross. If enough people can walk through those doors, stand beneath the sea of dog tags, and connect with something inside, I believe the separation between the world of civilians and the world of soldiers can fade.

I look over my shoulder as my father comes out of the museum. He is speaking with the general manager. I watch from a distance as my father turns towards him and shakes his hand. His eyes are moist and his voice breaks as he says, "Thank you for what you do. This place means so much to us." For a fleeting moment, before he blinks away the tears from his eyes, I see that same man from the wall.

Watching my father inside the museum, I realize that the most important thing I could give the veteran community is my willingness to listen and share my experience. I realize that the greatest gift I could give my father is a phone call made simply because I wanted to hear his voice.

A few minutes later, we walk out together. Like everyone else that comes to the museum, we walk out differently than we entered. We walk out carrying a piece of the museum with us.

### Endnotes

1. Herman, Judith. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books. pg 214
2. Glasser, Ronald J. 1980. *365 Days*. New York: George Braziller. pg. xii
3. <http://www.mental-health-today.com/ptsd/dsm.htm> Mental Health Today Website
4. Baker, Mark. 1981. *Nam*. New York: William Morrow and Company. pg xi-xii

**I wasn't looking  
for my father,  
but I saw him  
everywhere.**



# Expectations

HANNAH JANOOWALLA '10

It is my fifth day in Mumbai. I am about to meet a heroin addict for the first time, during my first visit to the drop-in center. Although it is midday, the sky is filled with swirling monsoon clouds, casting a gray shade over the city. The city's bustle is not subdued. The bamboo shade that serves as a door parts to let me in, and I step into the cramped, dimly lit space. I am in the middle of an overcrowded space filled with the very depths of physical and emotional suffering, and I cannot escape. I am assaulted all at once: the sight of men and women with bony arms, legs wrapped in



rags, dark red scars running the length of their veins, unkempt and tangled hair. A large color TV in the corner of the room plays a low-budget movie from South India. It is interspersed with the drunken mumblings of those who are high. The smell of sweat, marijuana, alcohol and Mumbai's sewers emanates from two dozen unwashed bodies. I can still feel the humid air from outside on the back of my neck but the ceiling fan cools my face. What assaults me most is the visceral taste of hopelessness, bitter and raw. These are people who have given up on life, who are knowingly and gladly killing themselves, evading their horrible realities transiently with the nectar of the opium poppy until their final escape comes to claim them. I can do nothing but let it enter me. The shock is so powerful that I cannot fully feel the emotions it will provoke in me yet.

This has become my new classroom. After a couple of days, I've forgotten all about the neat rows of chairs and desks back at school. I adapt quickly. Kamathipura becomes my element. I have always felt a deep connection for this country, and I am excited for a summer of "becoming Indian." I have never lived in India, but have never belonged anywhere more than I belong here. I miss the beautiful beaches and delicious sunflower seeds of Kenya, my birthplace and home for the first nine years of my life. I appreciate the open atmosphere and opportunity of the United States, my home for the past nine years. But I love India with my heart and soul. I love the way the word "thank

you" is implied and not said. I love how only Indians can understand the characteristic head wag that can take on any meaning. I love the pot-holed roads, decorated trucks, clanging temple bells, deep-throated Azan, strong scent of coriander and cumin, bright red dots on the foreheads of old women, and incessant honking. Most of all, I love the people. These are my people. The same blood runs in our veins, the same sun shines on our faces, the same shade of copper colors our skin, and our eyes are as dark as the earth of our beloved Mother India, the land of my great-grandparents and now mine.

I have many expectations for myself as I start this journey. Mostly, I want to be turned into a veritable Mother Theresa. I believe that witnessing suffering will mold my incomplete character into my idea of an ideal one. My thoughts will be concerned only with helping those in need. I will give generously to beggars and greet everyone with a smile. Upon returning to Brandeis, I won't make superfluous conversation or laugh loudly at politically incorrect YouTube videos. I am excited about my research on heroin and harm reduction, and want to become an expert on the topics I'm summarizing. I want to learn the names and stories of the drug users and sex workers who inhabit Kamathipura; I want them to become my friends. I know I will miss Mumbai sorely when I leave, but I am sure that I will have been transformed into a better person.

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*“The curse of the romantic is a greed for dreams, an intensity of expectation that, in the end, diminishes the reality.”*

~Marya Mannes

After a three-year absence from Mumbai, my transition into the rhythm of the city has been as smooth as the creamy chai I’ve already developed the habit of drinking every three hours. I already have a routine, as if I have been living here my entire life. My mornings begin at 9:30 by walking down a staircase covered in red paan<sup>1</sup>, being careful not to step on sleeping goats. The road is already filled with the ubiquitous black and yellow taxis carrying burqa<sup>2</sup>-clad women and bearded men, horns blaring, swear words in Hindi flowing swiftly out of the drivers’ mouths at hand-cart drivers who block the road. I walk past the furniture bazaar filled with wooden cabinets, past parked horse carriages decorated with silver peacocks, and thin horses with moist black eyes framed with feathery eyelashes. A boy about my age carrying a baby comes up to me. He is caked in dirt and his bony legs show through the tears in his brown shorts. He calls me “*didi*,” sister, and tells me his younger brother hasn’t eaten in two days. I give him 100 rupees, about \$2.50, and he thanks me gratefully, asking God to find me a good husband.

I continue underneath the JJ overpass, an imposing grey convex ceiling protecting the heroin addicts and rabid dogs that take shelter underneath it from the monsoons, and into Null Bazaar. Null Bazaar is one of the innumerable marketplaces in Mumbai, small streets lined with storefronts covered by street stalls that take up the entire sidewalk. As a result, I am forced to walk in the middle of traffic. What used to be a sidewalk is cluttered with stalls selling shoes, umbrellas, kaja<sup>3</sup>, small children sleeping on tarpaulin covering the wares. Bicycle bells ring, brushing past me. “Oh, madam!” men in lungis yell in warning, pushing wooden carts loaded with pounds of steel past me, sweat streaming down their faces and backs. On my left are a row of bangle stalls that have naked bulbs strung in front of them and light

up blindingly as soon as the sun shows the slightest sign of retiring for the night.

I walk straight on through Null Bazaar, past the pink temple in the middle of the road that rings its bells at dusk and which always has devotees inside, no matter what time of day. On the left of the temple are hordes of lower-class men chatting, smoking charras<sup>4</sup> or cigarettes, chewing paan and spitting out the red residue, or squatting on the road, waiting tiredly for a large truck that will come and pick them up and sweep them away to an unknown location to do some sort of construction work or heavy labor.

Null Bazaar abruptly ends and I enter Khetwadi, a residential area adjacent to Kamathipura, Asia’s largest red-light district and my workplace. Past Khetwadi, into the shopping area of Girgaum, are several music stores that line both sides of the road, painted sitars and tablas adorning the old wooden buildings. The burqa-clad women of Dongri have gradually faded into jeans-wearing high school and uniformed primary school students who attend the numerous schools around Khetwadi. A man selling coconuts sits near a narrow lane lined by teetering, peeling apartment buildings. A left down this lane and I come out near my office, but a twenty-minute walk to my right lies the infamous Kamathipura. Many Bollywood and independent movies, all dealing with prostitution, have taken place inside its walls. The physical location of Kamathipura and the phenomenon of prostitution are inextricably linked. Kamathipura during the day seems like any poor area of Mumbai, except for the large yellow signs depicting a smiling woman waving a condom and “USAID- From the American People” in large letters. During the day, the only other way one would be able to identify Kamathipura as a red-light district are the very few women with copious amounts of makeup soliciting clients on street corners or haggling with fruit vendors.

To discover its true nature, however, I will take you inside the brothels.

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**Beds in the  
brothels are  
high-demand real  
estate. A vacant  
one is snatched  
up by a woman  
needing a place to  
live and work.**

These crowded buildings are filled with small 5 by 15 foot rectangular rooms lined with beds stuck to the wall. Each room may be home to two families. Underneath the beds, or slabs of wood, young children sleep on cement floors next to a portable stove – the kitchen – where, during lunch hour, the cooking turns the room into a sauna. Two beds on the left and right as soon as one enters the narrow and low door may belong to a pair of sisters and their husbands, many of them about my age. Venturing further into the room, about six to seven feet in, there is another pair of beds with the same set-up underneath

them. Another family lives here, who may or may not be acquainted with the people whose feet are a few feet away from their heads every night when they sleep. Some sex workers come and leave without warning, no one knowing where they are coming from and under what circumstances. Beds in the brothels are high-demand real estate. A vacant one is snatched up by a woman needing a place to live and work. All that is needed is a little space. The identity of one's roommates is little cause for concern or anything more than the slightest bit of interest. Appearances of new faces and disappearances of old ones are as commonplace as the daily chore of buying vegetables.

The vegetable market in Kamathipura is like any other poor Mumbai vegetable market. So are the numerous shops that sell saris, petticoats, and fake gold. Identical copies of these can all be found in Dharavi, Asia's second largest slum, located several miles north. Kamathipura is busy during the day, the roads choked with colorful lorries painted with lotus flowers, the sign "Horn OK Please" adorning their backs. There are dozens of empty taxis parked along the streets, the drivers drawn here for the area's specialty. It is hot and dry and dusty, except when it rains, a rare occurrence before the monsoons. Then, small naked children come running out into the street, splashing in the puddles, screeching with excitement and pleasure. They gather water in buckets and empty them over their heads in innocent bliss, shivering and laughing, not yet knowing about where they are and what their future holds.

I watch these kids play from the shelter of a HIV/AIDS voluntary testing and counseling clinic. I smile. In only a week, this has become my home. I have recovered from my initial shock of going into the brothels. I expected the

brothels to seem familiar after watching every documentary or fictional movie about sex work in India that I could get my hands on. I thought I would be all efficiency and business when I finally entered them, not allowing my emotions to get in the way of an amazing real-world learning opportunity. Very few people, especially women who aren't sex workers, have access to the brothels. There is hidden and complex legal and violent reality of the area, due in part to its turbulent relationship with the Mumbai underworld, which has great power and influence in the area. Corruption in the Mumbai police force and municipal government also play a part. The police protect their stake by banning journalists and filmmakers from filming openly and interviewing sex workers. Much of the footage of Kamathipura has been taken by cameras hidden in pens or duffel bags.

I have the unique status as being the first and only intern of Population Services International Mumbai, an organization that has been functioning in this area since 1988, working to educate their target group, sex workers, about HIV/AIDS and its prevention. My vision of what the summer will be is clear: I am interviewing sex workers and drug users, learning from their stories. The women and men I walk to love me, the dynamic and outgoing American who defies stereotypes and understands the very root of their struggles.

There's nothing like actually being here – I can't smell the rotting trash and feel the wretched air in a movie, or see the glistening rats and rabid dogs. The brothels are old rickety buildings with narrow entranceways and stairs with no railings, covered in trash, which are terrifying to climb. But the worst part is those stretches of empty space from one part of a building to another where there is absolutely no light and the ground is covered with rainwater flavored with sewage. I can't see where I am stepping but I can hear the squeaks of large rats all around me. I forget about all the human suffering going on around me. I forget about the young girls who haven't even entered puberty being raped by old men, by women who have been born into this horror and have known nothing else. I am overcome by the air and the suffocation, and it overpowers me. I forget why I came here, and I can think of nothing but escape and sunlight.

*"Progress lies not in enhancing what is, but in advancing toward what will be."*

~ Kahlil Gibran

Population Services International Mumbai is a chapter of an international organization with offices in far-flung corners of the world. Even in Mumbai, there are multiple offices, drop-

in centers (DICs) and clinics. Its buildings and rooms are in distant parts of the city, located hours away from one another, as culturally and socio-economically varied as the people that make up this multifaceted organization.

The head office is located in the shopping area of Girgaum, a crowded Hindu vicinity filled with young middle-class students. Groups of boys order sandwiches from the sandwichwallas<sup>5</sup> who roll their spicy wares around on little metal cabinets. Middle-class ladies in their forties and fifties yell at tailors about botched orders. Jain priests wrapped in plain white cloth bless lower-class white collar college boys on their way to work. Elderly women on a visit to their grandchildren wait for bus 121 to take them to the poorer suburbs that they call home.

The shops lining the streets sell fancy saris geared towards the middle class. In the midst of these is Kulkarni Brothers, an eyeglass clinic. Its glass windows are decorated with pictures of beautiful young Italian men and women in passionate embraces. Next to Kulkarni Brothers is a small candy stall, about a foot wider than a red telephone booth, where my sister, Zazu, and I say hi to the candy boy, Arun, every morning. Arun is in his twenties and with his green eyes and perfect smile is astoundingly good-looking. He can't speak a word of English, and gives Zazu and I red and white Alpenliebe lollipops for two rupees every morning without us having to ask.

After getting our lollipops, we enter the landing next to the candy stall, ascend a narrow staircase, and find ourselves in a small, cramped network of offices that are the headquarters of PSI. PSI has been working in Mumbai since 1988, marketing oral contraceptives, male and female condoms, lube, safe sex practices, and information about AIDS to sex workers and their families, as well as the general population. Balbir Pasha, a fictional character created by PSI to spread AIDS awareness through mass marketing, became a household name in the nineties. He was an icon of Mumbai's pop culture during a time where talking about AIDS and safe sex in mainstream media was much more taboo than it is today. The campaign consisted of television, radio and billboard advertisements with conversational questions and statements about AIDS. The ads involved other people asking questions about Balbir Pasha's sexual activities, and the question "*Balbir Pasha ko AIDS hoga kya?*" meaning "Will Balbir Pasha get AIDS?" in conversational Hindi. The campaign targeted young lower-class men as the segment of the general population most at risk. It used catchy slogans that really resonated with the audience and didn't seem too lofty or academic. This is one of PSI's greatest strengths, and why they have been

so successful in their efforts. They understand the target group and how to reach it, and therefore, the target group is willing to listen.

The Green Dot program is PSI Mumbai's newest initiative, focusing on providing harm reduction and HIV/AIDS prevention outreach to the unknown number of heroin addicts who live on the streets of Kamathipura and Dongri. Harm reduction is a philosophy of drug abuse control that recognizes the fact that it is near impossible to reduce the supply of and demand for drugs. Harm reduction focuses on reducing health related harm, such as providing needle and syringe exchange programs to prevent the spread of HIV, and advocating for the use of chasing heroin or opioid substitution therapy to replace injecting instead of advocating for detox and rehab programs with high relapse rates.

I work eight hours a day, five days a week, researching and creating training modules on various topics related to heroin addiction, harm reduction, and behavior change communication.

I have become somewhat of an expert on all topics pertaining to heroin use and addiction. I've read and summarized books and articles on addiction counseling methods, the physiological effects of heroin addiction, United Nations-recommended approaches to drug-related harm, and 12-step group facilitation guidelines. I've gone into the field and met addicts from all walks of life, seen them preparing injections and shooting up, and helped them get out of the street when wandering around high. I have become close to the other outreach workers, both in the Green Dot program and the sex worker program, who feed me, take care of Zazu when I'm in the field, and ask me every day when I will be removing my dreadlocks, which are reserved solely for ascetic holy people in India. I am doing important, meaningful work with people I love, and will leave something concrete behind.

Every day, three times a day, groups of two or three outreach workers go into the field wearing white T-shirts with large green dots, carrying blue bags full of new syringes, needles, condoms and flipcharts. Their job: find as many heroin addicts as possible and teach them something new about AIDS, persuade them to get tested for VCT, exchange their used needles and syringes for new ones, and just be friendly and see what they need.

**I am doing  
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concrete behind.**

I am now one of these outreach workers, seeking out and speaking to sex workers and heroin addicts, both young and old, HIV positive or very close to it.

*“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls;  
the most massive characters are seared with scars.”*  
~Kahlil Gibran

The drug users are the most real people I’ve ever met. In my conception of the world, I believe that only suffering can bring out humility, and humility is the very essence of goodness. All of the people I’ve met, even the disgruntled Kalpana, a female addict who yells about everything and isn’t treated with half of the respect I am given by the male drug users, have something real inside them. They know *that we know* they have been reduced to the ghettos of humanity. They are slaves – slaves to a substance, and everything they do hangs upon that substance. We outreach workers see them when they are high, when they are irritable, when they are bleeding from multiple abscesses. We see their stick-thin legs, a symptom of spending all their money on garrad<sup>6</sup> and none on food, and we know their deepest desire: to rid themselves of this curse.

It is my second visit to the drop-in center. Sex workers, their children, and heroin addicts congregate in these centers all day long. They come here for meals, for chai and biscuits, and for companionship. They come here because there is nowhere else for them to go. There is nowhere to experience

their sadness and joys. The stagnant and sick air of the brothels stifles the sex workers, and the suffocating smell of the sewers in which they live stifle the heroin users. Only in these small square rooms lit by cheap fluorescent lighting and covered with pictures of the outreach workers and Ashley Judd (PSI’s Global Ambassador) do they find solace. Here, they feel as if they are somebody, with a name, a face and a personality. People care about them here.

In the afternoons, at the drop-in-center for addicts, the outreach workers take turns conducting

activities. For the rest of the day, addicts stumble in, drunk or high, and collapse on the floor. Others, sober or almost there, watch low-budget action flicks on TV. Today’s activity is charades, but there is someone new who would like to speak. He walks in dressed in real clothes – a light pink

collared shirt and grey slacks. They are made of a flimsy material, but stand out in sharp contrast to the tattered rags in various shades of brown predominant in the room. I am shocked by the fact that he has a cell phone. He enters the doorway, pressed his palms together and greets me first with a “Namaste,” a greeting to the only woman in the room, to show respect. He tries and greets the other users, but they are too high to respond or feel like ignoring him, disdainful towards his rich appearance. He takes a seat on the floor and interrupts Amol, the outreach worker whose turn it is to facilitate the activity, as he is trying to begin charades.

He introduces himself as Mahesh and then begins to speak about his addiction, looking around him at the other users, in their eyes. Mahesh’s voice is calm and soothing. He used to inject for many years, then one day he decided that he had to quit. He speaks about the physical and mental pain that he suffered through, the trouble he had with his family because of his addiction. Gradually, addicts wake up and become more attentive. They murmur words of acquiescence and shake their heads when they hear something especially poignant, an expression of pain on their faces. By the end of the half-an-hour-long talk, everyone wants to speak. Amol tries to get the room under control, and asks simple questions like “If you could, would you quit heroin?” to facilitate the discussion. The overwhelming response is yes, addicts sucking their teeth and shaking their heads to indicate agreement. One, who has a spiky haircut that I particularly like and who always sits nears the door, says, his eyes completely focused, “There is nothing more than we want in the world.” A loud murmur of accord accompanied by vigorous head shaking ripples through the room.

They are dirty, unkempt, sick and still, they are wonderful. They are real people, and cannot hide their true selves: intelligent, respectful, quiet, introspective, humble, and genuinely good. It is hard to explain why I feel this way. I can see who they truly are, past their societal status as someone who has committed a great sin against the state, themselves, and their families. Drugs are a horrible curse on society and cause great pain to everyone involved. But the drugs are at fault, not the users. Not one of them started using by choice or with adequate knowledge of the consequences of drug use.

Abdul, a 26-year-old intravenous drug user who I interview, has a story of addiction that is standard among most users. At seventeen he was a clothes seller and was introduced to marijuana by friends. He began smoking, knowing nothing about what it was or what it could do to him. All he knew was that it let him escape the world, a world that consisted of constant worrying about his empty stomach. He was twenty-two when he started chasing. “All of a sudden, I closed

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the business. I had a loss, and started selling cosmetic items at the trains. There were people there at the trains who did heroin...now I'm 26. I started chasing...After a year, I started fixing<sup>7</sup>. One of my friends told me that by fixing, you get a lot of "nasha,"<sup>8</sup> a different fix. I still didn't fix, but once I couldn't find good heroin, I started to fix."

Abdul says all of this simply, as a matter of fact. There is no emotion in his words that hints to his past full of suffering. At the beginning of the interview, I tell Abdul that if he doesn't feel comfortable answering a question, he doesn't have to. He smiles, shakes his head and sucks his teeth to indicate that such a notion is preposterous. Why would he have anything to hide? He answers all the questions as if I were asking him about his favorite movies or happy children, but in his eyes I can detect a deep sadness. Most of the drug users are like this. They are unafraid to disclose their most intimate details to us outreach workers, even if they are meeting us for the first time. They are totally honest.

I feel a connection to them. I believe I will take on these qualities that I hold in such high esteem by the end of the summer. I want to rid myself of my American-ness, my pretense of civility, my need to be polite to cover how I really feel and what I really think. I want to be brutally honest like they are, but I don't want to have any thoughts that need to be hidden. I want to expose myself to the world, my flaws and positive attributes, and let people take me as they choose. I am tired of hiding behind a phony American self-identity I have constructed for myself and show who I truly am – Indian.

*"There are moments in life, when the heart is so full of emotion  
That if by chance it be shaken, or into its depths like a pebble  
Drops some careless word, it overflows, and its secret,  
Spilt on the ground like water, can never be gathered together."*

~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

My last week in India, an intense panic suddenly grabs hold of me. I want nothing more than to see my mother. I break out into tears without warning, in public, several times. I need to get to my mother, and I need to escape from Mumbai, the city I love most. I will not understand until later that I don't need to escape from Mumbai so much as I need to escape from myself, the person I have become in Mumbai. It's as if I think that if I was at home with my mother, who knows nothing of what I have become in Mumbai, it would be like it had never happened.

In my quest to become an Indian, I have unexpectedly taken on the negative aspects of the people that surround me instead of the positive. Like my lower middle-class Indian family and coworkers, I have stopped giving money to beggars, started yelling at taxi drivers who try to overcharge me, suck my teeth at slow bank tellers, and bargain with street vendors down to every rupee. I am upset at myself and conflicted about why this is happening, but I can't control it.

My words and anger at strangers start flowing before I can try and stop it. I need to get \$200 to change my airplane ticket. Mumbai is plastered with bright yellow and black Western Union signs but only about ten percent of them are still functional. When I enter a bank with the promising sign on its front and ask for Western Union, the guard looks at me with a confused expression and leads me to a teller. She shakes her head "no," and I erupt, yelling at them in Hindi, "Well then, why is there a sign outside?" I storm out, slamming the door. It's not their fault – they are simply trying to do their jobs, but I have lost the ability to control my emotions, even in the face of reason.

I premeditate my stinginess. I purposely carry bills too large to give to beggars because I know that if I have small change, I will give it all away. I don't know why I have taken on more negative characteristics, but it is an unexpected development in my character.

The night before my flight I lose my ticket – and my self-control. The idea of not being able to see my mother for an indefinite amount of time – until I find the ticket – is terrifying. The sobbing begins, in waves of varying intensity, but the shaking is constant. I lose my temper at the woman who has taken Zazu and I in as part of her family, forty years older than I. She wants to help me find the ticket, but my mind has shut off: I ask her to leave me alone, and when she doesn't I snap and yell, slamming the door in her face. I can't feel guilt or remorse – I can't feel anything. The tears keep flowing and my hands keep shaking. I make frantic phone calls, my speech stuttered with deep breaths in between each desperate plea. I find the ticket packed away in one of the suitcases some time later, but the panic stays for another hour.

*"Life is so constructed that an event does not, cannot, will not, match the expectation."*

~Charlotte Bronte

Six months later, I walk to class with textbooks in one hand, tea in the other, a scarf wrapped around my neck. My mind replays my daily walk to PSI in the summer heat, through a loud and bustling market, the scent of spices and sweat in the air. The emotions have had time to settle into my thoughts, feelings and actions, but their effects have not started to fade away yet. As the leaves fall outside my window in suburban Boston, the disparity between my present surroundings and my summer environment serve only to make me think about Mumbai more.

I think about my first step into Mumbai. I had high expectations for my summer, having waited to feel the pulse of the city in my veins for more than a year. As I stepped off the air-conditioned airplane into the infamous Mumbai humidity, I left behind my emotional and environmental comforts for the unknown. I wasn't sure what I would encounter, but I was sure of who I was and how I would change. Towards the end of my summer, however, I found myself exhibiting the same qualities that I had condemned. I stopped feeling compassion for the hijras<sup>9</sup> who asked for ten rupees in exchange for a blessing, and I became a bargainer to rival the stingiest old woman. And now, I have fallen back into the everyday charade of college life.

Despite this discrepancy between my expectations and reality, I am beginning to appreciate my newfound self-

knowledge and understand that it will eventually help me understand my summer and change me for the better.

**My days are filled with exams and meetings, but my mind now thinks in Hindi and is filled with the summer, good and bad.**

My days are filled with exams and meetings, but my mind now thinks in Hindi and is filled with the summer, good and bad. I think of the brothels and sewers in the dusty heat where the sex workers and heroin addicts I have come to know and love are dying of AIDS. But I also remember the beautiful Marine Drive, where my sister Zazu and I spent countless hours hand in hand besides the sea, the moon over our heads, the cool, salty breeze playing with our hair. I remember

my first shocking encounters with the city and its people, which eventually became the routine and ordinary. I hear the blaring horns and clanging temple bells during my daily walk to work through a bustling market. I feel the air suffocating me during my first time in a brothel. I can

recite statistics and facts about heroin addiction and harm reduction after three months of research. I have leftover needles, syringes, condoms and a bright blue PSI umbrella as part of my job as an outreach worker. I know the faces of the drug users I interviewed and relaxed with at the drop-in center and think of them often, even though I never did learn their names. And I remember my emotionally charged last week, as much as I try to forget.

The anthropologist Annette Leibling, in "The Hidden Side of the Moon, or "Lifting Out' in Ethnographies," writes about her ten years living and conducting research in Brazil and the emotions and identity that went along with it. She discusses "data in the shadow," or the "situations where the borders of personal life and formal ethnography begin to blur and the research field loses its boundedness" (Leibling xi). Like Mumbai for me, Brazil had become a home to her, and the emotional issues arising from her connection to the place colored her experience. As Leibling illustrates, my experience is one of many researchers who go into the field with untenable expectations. When that reality hits them, they are lost and confused. My constant "looking at the past" more than my present reality reflects my need to understand "the data in the shadow" of my summer, and the implications it has for helping me to understand my identity.

Leibling writes, "A dialogue with the past does not mean the discovery of a final truth or an archaeology of the inner self, but a process of sensibilization towards one's own and other's categorizations of the world" (141). This has helped me come to terms with my emotions. I still want to understand how and why I changed, so that I can work to change its negative effects. Constantly thinking about my summer, however, will not lead to discovery of my "inner self," but rather help redefine my view of myself and the world.

What was most wrong with my summer was not my experience, but my expectations. Now that the cloud of smog suspended over my experiences has been cleared, I can look back to decide how to move forward. My summer was spent with my favorite person, Zazu, in my favorite city, Mumbai, doing work that may continue for the rest of my life. This summer contained some of the best moments of my life, and some of the worst. I am trying to live in my present moment without forgetting my memories. Instead of longing for Mumbai's blaring horns during a quiet Massachusetts night, I will incorporate my newfound Indian identity in who I am here.

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There is much research that may still be done on this subject, exploring the multifaceted, complex relationships people have with places in their realities and imaginations, and the emotional color they give to these relationships. This emotional color affects research. It is a crucial factor in determining the validity of research and conclusions drawn from encounters between researcher and subject. But more importantly, it affects each one of us, as researchers and individuals, deeply. It must be understood in proper context and perspective if we are to extract as much value as possible from each experience and use it to move forward.

I am now ready for my next adventure. This time, however, I will go in with very few expectations, an open mind, and the knowledge that I will learn at least one thing about myself and the world. However significant or trivial, it will take me one step closer on my journey from the girl I am today to the woman I want to become.

## Notes

1. a mixture of sweet fillings, spices, areca nuts and tobacco wrapped in a betel leaf spit
2. Traditional Islamic loose-fitting outer dress, usually black
3. eyeliner containing camphor to cool the eyes
4. marijuana
5. The suffix “walla” signifies an occupation, so a sandwichwalla sells sandwiches.
6. heroin
7. Injecting
8. ‘High’, lit. feeling
9. The “third sex” in India, with no Western equivalent

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# Discovering the Role Art Plays in Creating Social Change

CATHERINE MCCONNELL '10



## Where It All Began

The welcome area of the Tambo International airport in Johannesburg, South Africa, was under mass construction, with fiberglass and plaster everywhere. Despite its appearance, the area was full of people anxiously awaiting loved ones to arrive. I entered this area having never before met my welcome party. I would not be embraced like the families and friends reuniting after weeks apart, or the lovers that stood at the elevators to go check in, giving each other one last kiss before separating.

I clearly remember thinking, “What am I doing here?” as I waited for Kim Berman, the woman with whom I would be staying and director of the organization for which I would be working, to pick me up. I had entered this country alone, with only questions that I hoped the next two months in South Africa would answer. I was about to go to a printmaking studio, something that I knew relatively little about, still very much questioning what role art was to play in my life. Could I make change with art? Could I touch people’s lives with paint? My canvases seemed small compared to the larger world: how would I make my voice or image matter?

I went to South Africa in search of answers to these questions. The country’s rich, turbulent and tragic history has given way to a culture that uses art as a tool for re-growth. Apartheid, defined by the United Nations as racism made into law<sup>1</sup>, took hold of the country in the 1940s, giving the white minority the authority to discriminate against the native black majority. This legal system was officially abolished in 1994, when Nelson Mandela (Madiba) was elected the first black president in the first democratic election held in South Africa’s history. Although this took place eighteen years ago, the legacy of apartheid remains in the fabric of society. It will take generations to be able to undo the decades of discrimination, and the country is now in flux, trying to rebuild.

My time in South Africa has shown me the power of art. It has allowed me to see the many different ways that it affects peoples’ lives, from the family at Artist Proof Studio and its ability to inspire people through art, to conversations with Kim Berman, the founder of the studio and a committed

artist for change. I also witnessed the capability art has as a therapy tool, observing how children use it to process the horrors that have placed them in refugee camps. I am now trying to use art in all of these ways: as a tool to empower people, as a positive message calling for change, and as a way to process the world around me. In those first moments in South Africa at the airport, although it may not to have appeared to be all that foreign a place, I was unaware that I was stepping into a completely new culture, a culture that I now carry with me and hope to bring wherever I go.

## Art Heals Scars of Violence

In Johannesburg, the city I called home for two months, I could still see the marks of apartheid as I walked down the street. I experienced the racial tensions that exist by the way people looked at me, a white American woman, walking down the street. This is something that most white South Africans recommend not doing for fear of being harassed or robbed. Most of the time, as I would walk from the bus stop to work each day, the only white people I would see were those sitting in the comfort of their cars. The divide between who walks and who owns a car is only one of the many divides between this country’s black and white races. Each day, I’d see and understand more of these divisions. Blacks seemed to be relocated into white suburbs to work for grocery stores and other similar businesses, to hold positions that were almost exclusively filled by blacks. Even with wealth redistribution, whites still control the majority of the country’s resources, and it will take time for the wealth to be shared more equally.

Despite this society's scars, a community has emerged that is using art as a tool for healing and creating change. As someone studying to be a painter, I know from experience that creating an image is a personal process; it requires self-reflection. It causes me both to look within myself and to comment on the world around me. The process of making art is therapeutic, allowing me to process what I interact with on a daily basis, and think about what role it has in a larger context.

In response to such a tenuous culture and history, institutions such as Artist Proof Studio, a community printmaking studio in Newtown, were established to offer hope to a nation that was desperately searching for it. The studio was founded in 1992 by two artists, Kim, a white woman, and Nhlanhla Xaba, a black man, proving that art can be a unifying force that crosses racial boundaries. They founded the studio with the belief that students could be empowered through learning the skills of printmaking, having art create change on the individual scale. Nhlanhla, asleep in the studio, perished in a fire that destroyed the studio. The studio continues on in his memory in a new building through the lives that the studio continues to touch every day. Today, Kim still sits at the head of the Artist Proof table, facilitating everything else that takes place around her.

Art functioned as a tool of rebellion during the struggle to end apartheid, and this legacy continues in using art in current attempts to rebuild the community. Kim Berman and Stompie Selibe, a former teacher at the studio, have collaborated in writing *Artist Proof Studio: A Journey of Reconciliation* (a working paper of Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts). It is the story of how South Africa's history extensively feeds in to this need to create art. They state: "The joint vision and commitment to this new society produced a kind of magical energy in the studio, in the common belief that art could play its part in imagining and creating a better life for all of South Africa's citizens (4)." The traumas that the nation underwent during the years under apartheid remain very much in the forefront of the communal mind. Art is a tool helping to heal these wounds.

### **The Family Table - Art for Empowerment**

In an octagonal shaped room that sits right off of the kitchen stands a round wooden table. This table is like any other, made of wood and held up by four posts. Yet this table is special in that it holds countless memories of my childhood. It is the gathering place where, after a long day, my parents, siblings and I come together. The focal point that brings us all around the table is always food, a concept passed down to me through my Italian heritage. Each of my family members sits down with their unique perspective. Although normally there are only five chairs for the members of my immediate family, other chairs are scattered around the room, waiting for the inevitable moment when others join us, sharing in our family ritual.

Thousands of miles away from my home in Providence, Rhode Island, sits another table, this one long, white and rectangular and far from the traditional conception of a kitchen. At Artist Proof Studio, this table stands parallel to a row of printing presses on the second floor. Taller than most, reaching about halfway up my torso, the table is somewhat pushed into the background because of everything around it, yet stands out because of the constant movement that encompasses it. This table has the unofficial title of the "third year students' space." Although it may be their space at the beginning of the day when formal classes are in session, by noon, when lunch breaks out, the space becomes the watering hole for everyone, young and old.

During the first weeks of my two-month internship at Artist Proof, I admired this table from afar, never getting too close. There were people constantly gathered around it, either conducting mini critiques of artwork, working on etching a plate, sketching in a sketchbook, or simply eating their lunch. Since all the chairs already at the table were usually taken, I did not feel comfortable enough to pull another one up to join those already sitting there. Maybe I felt ill at ease to join the table because I am still learning to become an artist, or because the art that I am being trained to do is painting, something very different than printing. Also, all the students at the studio were older than me, compounding

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my feelings of inadequacy in critiquing their work, or even to vocalize opinions beyond the generic “oh, very nice. I like it.” Whatever the reason may have been, it took me a while to pull a chair up to the table.

Other gathering areas, such as the table where the first year students congregated, were a different story. Although many students were still older than me, I felt more equal to them because they were still just beginning to learn the skill of printmaking, and I was not as far behind them in comparison to the other advanced students. Also, this area is far removed from the center of the studio. Whether or not it was true, when I first arrived I felt that my race and nationality separated me from everyone else. In my constant effort not to appear as an imposing foreigner, I did not allow myself to sit at the table, and because of it remained separated from the community.

Unlike my family where food is what calls us to the table, at Artist Proof the food is art, specifically art used to inspire and to create change. Because of the unusual height of the table, tall stools were scattered all around it. Each chair is a welcoming beacon to the diverse members of the studio

**The passion and drive to make something of themselves is the force that compels them.**

community. Every person has their own history and story, and yet all share a place at the family table through the common goal seen in their work. The passion and drive to make something of themselves is the force that compels them there, yet it is different for each person.

Sitting on top of the table, Maria, with her fake plaid Burberry hat, has a different story from anyone else. This twenty-one-year-old with wide eyes and freckles scattered across her cheeks has earned a seat in order in

order to make something of her life. Shy and quiet compared to many of the other characters, she lives with her mother and feels somewhat isolated from the rest of the Artist Proof community. Her art speaks of hidden pain, consisting of shattered images of youth and innocence. Her art expresses what her silence cannot. All at the table have different paths that have led them to Artist Proof; hers is not more unusual than anyone else’s, just different.

I think it was Maria’s quietness that first got me to talk with her. I felt less threatened when approaching her than some of the other students, perhaps because she had a calm nature about her. She has a smile that literally stretches from ear to ear that welcomed me to take a step closer to the

table. It started when I looked from afar, admiring her art as she worked. Slowly, I started to feel comfortable enough to walk directly up to her working at the table and talk with her, not yet sitting there by myself, but heading in that direction.

The studio itself is very much a table, a sturdy framework in which different parts come together around one collective idea. In this context the goal is art for social change, and each chair provides a different way to reach that goal. The chairs symbolized the multiple functions that the studio has, all gathered together and connected by their identities as different ways to create change through art. One chair holds the role of uplifting individuals and changing their lives by giving them the tool of art to hopefully make a living for themselves. Walking into the studio, I saw this passion in all of the student’s eyes. Each student, whether a second year who is thirty-two years old and trying to straighten out her life after having two children, or an eighteen-year-old first-year student fresh out of high school, all are determined to succeed. The atmosphere is laid back here, exemplified by the loose definition of time; I learned very quickly that if I wanted someone from the studio to be anywhere at a specific time, I had to add a half hour to the time I actually wanted them. Despite this fact, the students were driven to make something of themselves, and art is the mode through which this happens.

At another chair around the table, holds the practice of creating change through a different type of education: AIDS awareness. Separated from the three-year teaching program that consumes most of the studio, the Paper Prayers program invigorates women affected by HIV/AIDS by making felt animals as a means to an income. The program also runs workshops teaching about the dangers of AIDS and how to protect oneself from it. There is also the chair that is the gallery, helping to empower young and upcoming artist by promoting their work and getting it into the public eye.

One of the most recent and last chairs to be added to the table was community outreach. The studio has several outreach programs, one of which started because of the xenophobic attacks against foreign Africans in South Africa. Murals were designed and painted all over the city, depicting different images around this subject. Refugee camps were also established around the greater city limits, and the studio set up an art therapy program at these camps.

This last chair was my chair. My first real assignment at the studio was to coordinate the efforts working at the camp, and this provided me a seat at the table.

With the help of people like Maria, I learned to use my role of coordinating volunteers at the camps as my way to integrate into the vibrant community that is Artist Proof. Needing to ask all the students if they wanted to participate in this endeavor made me physically approach the table and talk with the students, giving me a role in the larger institution. It allowed me to get over some of my initial fears about being inadequate to judge artwork, because my stool had nothing to do with that. This helped me in the process to overcome the cultural barriers that separated me from folding into the Artist Proof community.

### Kim Berman - The Power of the Image

Artist Proof Studio exists today thanks to Kim Berman, co-founder, current executive director, and for most of my trip, also my landlord. If you were to meet Kim while in a store, you may not turn your head or think twice; at a glance she blends in with her surroundings. She is a white South African, and although whites are in the minority here, they still make up a sizable portion of the population. She stands around my height of 5'7" and has dark brown hair with just a bit of a gray. The streaks of gray do not make her appear old, but rather, as I'd like to put it, "experienced." Her wavy hair is neither short nor long, but at that in between stage where it falls just touching her shoulders. Her bright blue eyes pop out from the mainly dark palette of clothes she usually wears, ranging from black to dark blue, with the occasional bright blue jersey that her partner Robyn buys for her to wear to a photo shoot. Physically, Kim's appearance does not represent the wonder that she is. She can blend into the crowd, but absolutely nothing else about her is ordinary. Kim is one of the most extraordinary women I have ever met, and she is making a name for herself using art as a vehicle for create change.

Similar to the table that sits in the studio, the center of Kim's house is the kitchen table. Situated in one of the suburbs of Johannesburg, the kitchen is the last room in the house, requiring you to walk through the entryway, living room and dining room before walking through a door to get to a typical rectangular wooden table. Surrounding the table are walls full of artwork, paintings or prints. Small figurines, beautiful woven baskets and thrown pottery are scattered across a built-in shelving unit, taking up one full side of the room.

During my time in South Africa, Kim gave me a chair at her kitchen table. In providing me with a chair, she made me feel like a part of her family. This gesture reminded me very much of my own family table, for similar to my family, each of us had a specific spot. Kim's chair was at the head of the table, her back to the kitchen; Robyn, her partner, sat to her left, and I sat across the table from Robyn. In many ways, I felt that the three of us were a family, each having our own

responsibilities, mine normally included clearing the table and doing the dishes. When I arrived, Kim told me of bad experiences she had had with other American interns in the past. In the first few days, I tried to shatter that impression. This manifested itself in several ways, one of which was trying to appear to be as helpful and non-imposing as I could, taking on the role of doing the dishes not because I was asked, but to feel as if I was being useful. Eventually, this became ritual, as it came to constitute my nightly "chores" in many ways.

I have heard that all works of a good artist, no matter their subject matter, act as a self-portrait. The finished product says a lot about the artist; choice of color, subject matter, use of light, shading, size, medium and composition are all conscious choices that an artist makes. This hold true for Kim. Looking at her work, you can start to get a picture of who she is. She is a printmaker, but does not limit herself to just one form of printmaking. She combines monotypes with dry point or other combinations of printmaking techniques. She is unconventional, challenging what has been established as truth and rethinking it.

Although Kim has explored many different subject matters, she has recently focused on landscapes. Her print "Through the Wire: Lowveld Fire II," done in 2003,<sup>2</sup> is an eleven color lithograph, an extensive process that I am currently learning to do with one color and cannot imagine doing for eleven.<sup>3</sup> The litho is an image of a field after it has been rampaged by a fire; the smoke rising up over the burnt stalks left standing and a barbed wire fence that stretches into the distance. The image speaks of the history of South Africa, specifically apartheid. Fire is a devastating force, yet it leaves room for and even encourages re-growth. In other words, South Africa needed to experience the devastating aftermath of apartheid in order for the country to start creating a new type of society where race was not a divider.

This image does not say anything more about who she is than any other print Kim has made; rather it shows her involvement as an artist in her artwork. The history of apartheid is very much invested in all that Kim creates. I attribute this to her background. While growing up, she was privileged by being white in Johannesburg. Despite this race-driven privilege, Kim had a sense of moral responsibility. She left South

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Africa for the United States so that she could go to school. Kim did not want to take part in the discrimination that was taking place back in South Africa and describes her refusal to go back as self-imposed exile. It wasn't until seven years later that Kim felt the need to come home to South Africa to help rebuild the community. Nelson Mandela had assumed power and Kim wanted to contribute to the re-growth of her nation. Her subject matters are just one of the many ways she demonstrates her passion for her country. And it is through this medium – art – that she hopes it will reach its fullest potential.

Sitting around the Berman family table, whether at breakfast eating granola and yogurt, enjoying some tea in the afternoon, or eating a dinner of homemade soup and chicken curry, I leaned just as much, if not more, than from many of the other things I did. Dinner conversations would range from how each of our days were, to the frustration with one of the several job titles Kim holds; full-time lecturer at the University of Johannesburg in printmaking, executive director of Artist Proof, and acting director of Phumani Paper, an organization that promotes change through income-generation projects for women making paper across the countryside. Frustrations would vary from the annoyance of someone not showing up for a meeting on time when Kim's day was completely full with no extra time, to people resigning from positions and not giving enough time to find replacements for them.

And when it was just Kim and I sitting around the table, our conversations were about art and change. Working with one of her graduate student's thesis, Kim would vent on how the review board did not understand how he was going to measure the "change." "I can't get it through their heads, they just don't get it" was the extent of her frustration. A lot of what we discussed had to do with the mechanics of the various ways that art was making change, meaning talking about the specific projects Kim and I were working on. There was a period where several of the students at Artist Proof were not showing up for classes, which are free for the students, although they have to be accepted into the program. Kim would say: "I don't think some of these kids understand the opportunity they have here. ... We are giving them an education and some of these kids are not taking advantage of it," in between bites of her dinner.

Kim dedicates herself to her students, and although is very hard on them, she wants each and every one to succeed. In her paper, Kim writes: "Many of our students [at Artist Proof] find their way through learning on the street. We are giving tools for youth to make different choices. ... How does teaching art provide the tools for an alternative choice? How far can these tools recover ubuntu?"(15).

Ubuntu is the South African notion of the interconnectedness that exists between all people. Kim quotes Archbishop Desmond Tutu in describing this concept: "We believe that ... my humanity is caught up ... inextricably, with yours. ... The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms and therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in belonging"(6). This is an overarching ideal throughout South Africa, and a principle that the studio tries to encompass. Through providing students with alternative ways of learning, they are helping to empower the next generation. In Kim's article, she asks the question, "How does giving the tools of art get these students to make different decisions?" She does not offer an answer to this question, but through conversations I had with her, and frustration with several of the students lack of initiative at the studio, I understand why she asks the question. The majority of the students have drive and initiative, and learning the skill of printmaking does in fact help them make better decisions, but there are always a few people who take longer to catch on.

We talked about the studio, everything from the constant financial problems, to excitement or frustration in some of the student's work. The studio is the combination of everything else that Kim is doing, and is a vessel for truly empowering the South African people through art.

Beyond just giving me a seat at her family table, Kim introduced me to her full and extended family, who welcomed me to join their table as well. Her mother, Mona, set a place for me at their Shabbat dinner on several of the Friday nights, greeting me with open arms to her table. During my time in Johannesburg, I got to know Mona very well, taking walks with her and her dog Dee Dee, or going to her house to watch movies. She made me feel welcome, opening her home and making me feel like family. Mona is an author, and while I was there, had a launch party for her latest book, *E-mails from a Jewish Grandmother*. Kim, Robyn and I went over early, to help her set up. As guest arrived, Mona would look to me as if I were another member of the family, saying "Go see if there are any more wine glasses." As people filed in, I did not feel out of place, but at home.

### **Art Therapy - The Personal Side of Art**

A large part of the transformative aspect of art has to do with the physical act of creating it. When I am painting, I personally get into what I call "the zone." In this state of mind, I am removed from the rest of the world and have the ability to concentrate on myself. It is in this way that art is very personal, for it is a reflection of self. This is the idea of art therapy.

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A majority of the work I did while interning at Artist Proof involved coordinating volunteer efforts at refugee camps around the greater Johannesburg area. The camps were set up as a response to the xenophobic attacks that were happening all over the country. Immigrants from other African nations were being killed – their homes destroyed, and lives torn apart by black South Africans out of a feeling of resentment. Immigrants from other parts of Africa are coming into the country mainly because their homes have been destroyed by genocide or political unrest. South Africa is seen as a land of opportunity, not unlike the US. Because of the emphasis on trying to rebuild the society post-apartheid, an influx of immigrants entered the country. Those committing the violence act out of resentment. They view the foreigners as illegals, many whom are here without paperwork, stealing their jobs and lowering pay scales. Regardless of the reasons behind the attacks, it is the children that are being affected, and yet they have no say in the matter.

The first time I entered one of the camps, I was struck by how different the picture was from what the American media had painted. I envisioned a village of huts or tents separated from the rest of society, in a barren land of constant dust, with lots of unrest and tension at every turn. This image may exist in other parts of Africa, but not in Johannesburg. During that first visit, I was shocked by how connected it was to the rest of the community. The camp sits an hour outside of Johannesburg in a town called Boxburg, only a few miles from the main international airport. It looks very much like a strip mall town with a few main roads littered with big businesses from car dealerships to chain stores. The land is flat, and the roads seem to go on in every direction, the only end in sight being the very distant hills surrounding the area.

The camp is only slightly removed from the rush of traffic through a barrier of open space and a few brick buildings that appear to be abandoned. There is a small pond that looks as if it could be a waste dump because of the murky brown color of the water. On Saturdays when we would go to this camp, there was a distinct calmness, as if its residents accepted their place here and go on with everyday life. Within the camp, there are many wide-open spaces and wide corridors between the dozens of rows of tents. The camp appears to be a crop field of semicircle shaped white UNHCR<sup>4</sup> tents acting as the crops. Since I first stepped foot in the fields, the crops have grown laundry lines accessorizing the small tents, establishing a home in a place of impermanence. We walk along a row of homes to our workplace, the ominous big, olive green tent that lay in the background.

Art therapy was something that I had only heard in passing before this summer. There may be several methods in which it is performed, but my knowledge is limited to what I have

observed by watching the counselors. We try to create a safe space where the children from the camp feel comfortable to create, and then, as a group, unwrap the package that lies within their artwork. On this Saturday, we brought paper, paint and strips of scrap leather, and asked the kids to paint what it was that they missed most about their home. Once they were finished, the group came together in a circle and the counselor from the Art Therapy Center, a group that we worked with in executing this project, helped facilitate the kids sharing their stories. Each of the counselors had their own group, separated by gender and each occupying a different tent. Here, there were no tables to work on or meet around, but the floor became the gathering point where this group came together.

One child explained the story of what led her family to end up at the camp. Sitting in the circle, she appeared to be slightly arrogant when others were describing their pictures, but when it was her turn, she broke into tears and the superior front disappeared. Her family was loading their truck with their belongings in hopes of leaving just before the mobs came. This girl who could not have been more than 11 years old, and her family were chased down by the mob who beat them, burning their home and taking the truck with all of their belongings. They never did finish packing and were lucky to leave alive. If you look at this girl's picture, you would have never gotten this story. It looked like a beautiful house with some flowers outside on the lawn.

In general, the children depict beautiful images, but they have such sad and awful meanings. As one of the counselors said, "We take the pain away." We ask the children to give us their artwork, for although on the surface they may seem to be just beautiful hearts and flowers, they are full of a hidden pain. Art therapy in this context is about getting that emotional pain out, even if it's depicted in a beautiful flower, and then learning how to deal with it. Under these circumstances, we try and take the pain away with us, physically removing the picture that represents this awful day in this girl's life so if even for a day, we relieve some of her pain.

Observing this, I am amazed by how this girl still has the ability to stand and tell her story. I have lived almost twice as long as her, yet this young girl has already experienced more in her life than I probably ever will. Although I can try and connect with these young girls, there are many barriers, language being one, which makes it difficult. When we were finished going around in a circle, the girls solemnly got up and scattered, joining the other group outside and disappeared into the rows of tents. All the counselors regroup at the end of the sessions to debrief, acting as a support system for one another to talk about the day. Everyone was moved and those working in my group were all extremely

touched by this one girl's story. When it was my turn to share, I started to choke up, by the end a few tears dripping from my eyes. Although the process of art is wonderful in providing a space for people to express how they feel, in a situation like this, there needs to be another step. Before we got into the taxi to return to Artist Proof, the last words from one of the counselors was: "OK, now let us all promise that we are going to leave all of this emotion and feeling here." For most of my experiences at the camp, I was able to leave my emotional attachment at its gates, for it would have been too much for me to handle if I always carried it with me. This day, however, I was not able to keep this promise. I continue to carry her story with me.

### Trying to Harness the Potential of Art

My final week at Artist Proof was the only time that I actually was able to make a print. Despite spending eight weeks at a printmaking studio, life was always too busy for me to sit back and try to make my own art. Kim was on my case about it, joking that she was not sure if I was a real artist because she had not seen any of my work, and convinced me to make a print in my final days. Rhoda, a friend of Kim's who works at the Museum School in Boston, came to run a three-week book-making workshop. As all of the first years were congregated around their table talking about the project, Rhoda said: "Not all art is happy. It's OK to make art that not everyone can understand. Public and private have two different meanings and it's OK."

Art functions in these two spheres: art for oneself and art for others, and they do, as Rhoda said, have very different meanings. Her words continue to play over in my head now that I returned to the United States and to Brandeis. Upon my arrival at school, I was most excited about going back to our art studio and getting to work with paint again; it is my language of communicating and processing. The studio here has virtually no large-scale tables or main congregating area, only large rooms full of easels and small tables barely large enough to fit my paint pallet on. The physical environment in the studio is very different from Artist Proof; it lacks the communal gathering place where artists come together to share their failures, challenges, and accomplishments. Despite this, there is still a clear sense of community within the walls of this studio, and as all studios should, it acts as my safe space where I am freely able to express myself.

As my intermediate painting class began and we had to start thinking of concepts and ideas to paint for our first piece, the only images that came to my mind were from the camps in South Africa. I thought they most adequately described the poverty and discrimination that I saw. I began work on

an image of a child alone on a hill with a woman walking by holding twigs on top of her head, set in a refugee camp with rows upon rows of tents. I got very caught up in what it was I was painting. I wanted it to speak to everyone who viewed it and have the viewer understand instantly what I experienced this summer. This is an unreasonable expectation for any image, yet I pushed. I wanted my canvas to scream something, but in trying too hard, in many ways I muted it.

When my class was asked to move on and start a second painting, images of the camp were still all that I could see. My second attempt was for me. Although I wanted others to see meaning in my work, I am still processing the experience I had this summer, and probably will for several years, but this painting was my real attempt to try and start that process.

In a piece entitled *Hung up to dry* (48in x60in), a cloth line is suspended between two tents with clothing on it, a pair of jeans, and red and yellow shirts. Tents line the background with other clothes drying in the far distance. In conceptualizing this piece, I did not want to depict any figures, but try and depict the way that society has treated this group of people through the clothes just hanging there. Regardless of whether anyone who views it makes that conclusion I made it for myself. My professor in commenting on the work said, "Well this piece is a lot more interesting than your last. You are not as concerned with the actual subject matter;" I was able to put more of myself in it. As he said: "No one can look at this painting and not be intrigued by it." In realizing that the personal and public meaning of a piece can be different, I was able to release myself from the need to scream, and now I feel like my piece does, in fact, say something to others.

### How to Measure Change

For a long time, when thinking about the role I wanted art to play in my life, I had a difficult time justifying to myself that it would make a large enough impact. How can you tell? My paintings may speak to me, and my professor may be able to see something in them, but what type of impact or change is that creating?

How can someone measure change? Specifically how can one measure the power that something like art can have? Most people need some kind of metric to understand change. Death rates in this country have dropped to this percent, and crime or unemployment rates have decreased this much are just a few common examples of ways our culture views and measures change. With art, how can you do this? It is not measurable by statistics so how could I devote my life to this type of immeasurable work?

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This summer I witnessed it. I saw the way that a child was able to use paint to convey a message that words could not. I saw individuals who, without art, would have little or no shot of making a name for themselves. I saw artists committed to the power that their images have and who live in a culture

where others also value it. I needed to see it so that I can now proudly say that I am going spend the rest of my life devoted to the quest of using art to create social change, of answering the questions that are still unanswered and putting into practice everything that I have learned.

What makes the South African community in which I worked so dynamic is its ability to overcome the barriers put in place by apartheid and to use art in order to rebuild society. Now I ask myself whether

this art community can exist outside of South Africa. Many communities around the world have experienced hard times and vast social injustices are not confined to any continent. Can this idea of community be recreated outside of Johannesburg? War-torn areas like Iraq are full of violence. Although art alone cannot solve everything, what if institutions existed that promoted the use of art to cope with the trauma that they have experienced both as a way of life as well as well as therapy. The process of creating art cannot hurt a society, especially when the alternative is war and violence.

My time in South Africa provided me a glimpse into what a new society that uses art to promote change can look like. The last two days I was in Johannesburg, I was constantly on the verge of tears, like a pipe that could burst at any moment. I was leaving my new family and the environment where my eyes were widened to the role art will play in my life. Now and forevermore, I have a permanent seat at the Artist Proof family table. In time, overcoming the barriers that separated me from the table was a process of getting to know the institution and the people and culture of South Africa, and them getting to know me. I now, as has been said to me several times during my final weeks there, was not an American in their eyes, but a South African, officially proving that I have gained my place in their family. Once you get a seat at this family table, it never goes away. It only sits in the background waiting for the moment when you can return and join in again.

## Notes

1. <http://www.un.org/av/photo/subjects/apartheid.htm>
2. <http://www.artprintsa.com/kim-berman.html>
3. Lithography is a type of printmaking that concentrates on oil and water resisting each other. A plate or limestone is prepared so that specific areas are ink receptive, while others are water receptive. A different plate is required for additional colors, meaning that an eleven color litho would require eleven separate plates
4. United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, the branch of the UN devoted to addressing the issues of displaced persons

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# Being Part of the Change

AVRAM MLOTEK '09

“You are father of many,” the Ethiopian Airline employee said to me behind his Customs booth at Addis Ababa airport, in the Ethiopian capital. With a bit of a bewildered look I explained that I did not, in fact, have any children. He laughed at me. “No, no, no,” he went on. “Your Hebrew name means father of many, yes?” I smiled and nodded slightly; it was the first time I was able to sigh and feel a bit of comfort in what would be one of the most unfamiliar and foreign places I have ever been. It would also be the first of many interactions I’d have with Ethiopians regarding my *kippah*<sup>1</sup>, my Biblical name and anything having to do with my faith.



This past summer as an Ethics Center Student Fellow, I interned in two foreign countries: Ethiopia and Israel. I presumed the latter would be more familiar than the former. I had visited Israel numerous times and had spent half a semester during high school in Jerusalem. I had never been to Ethiopia and had never been exposed to the kind of poverty that I would come to face. As a traditional open-Orthodox<sup>2</sup> Jew, my travels this summer were anything but orthodox, and I was worried how I’d be able to serve as a helpful volunteer while adhering to my traditional practices and customs. I quickly realized I was thrusting myself into a plethora of unknowns: what would I eat and how would I prepare meals? How would I incorporate time for prayer in my work schedule and what would my work schedule actually be? I embraced this as best I could before leaving the States. My overall intention was clear going in: to work with Ethiopian children, teaching English and music. My plan was also simple: be flexible. The rest I figured I would learn along the way.

While in Mekelle, Ethiopia, I interned for Hope Community Services (HCS), an organization that runs an orphanage on the outskirts of the city, funds a girls’ home for the blind in the heart of Mekelle and helps organize a nearby public school, which serves over 1,000 students. I was involved in each of these centers, teaching children English and teaching Jewish melodies. In Israel, I interned at the Yemin Orde Youth Village (YOYV) on Mt. Carmel, just below the city

of Haifa in northern Israel. There I worked in the kitchens with other volunteers and workers from the Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt and Yemen, and I taught English and Hebrew in the afternoons to individual Ethiopian high school students, as well as leading sessions on music and poetry. The common thread in these communities is more clear to me now than it was when I first arrived: the commitment to their respective faith, albeit practiced and portrayed in a multitude of different ways, was apparent in each lesson I taught, each conversation I had, and in each person I met.

The people and leaders behind each of these institutions keep the communities vibrant and functioning. A huge aspect of the positive impact that these two communities have is due, I believe, to the character of their leadership. Each community is led by a dynamic, approachable and exciting leader, both of whom were very much alike although often times very dissimilar: Gebre Beyenne, executive director of HCS, and Chaim Peri, the former village director of YOYV. These two directors and their organizations exemplify the power of community and the success of local impact.

With my voice and my *siddur*<sup>3</sup> as my tools, my music and my faith served as commanders of my experience. They were the basis for my connection with others and also a means of centering myself. These tools came in handy whether in an overcrowded classroom in Mekelle or in a synagogue in Israel. I used them at the airport in Addis Ababa, walking

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around restaurants and gift shops, at an Israeli beach near Haifa, and even while hitchhiking up Mt. Carmel to get to Yemin Orde. It was precisely my music and my faith that helped me navigate and understand my new environments, helping me adjust, reflect, remain present and take an occasional heartfelt sigh.

### In Ethiopia

“In Ethiopia, the only problem we have is being poor – that’s it,” Geb says holding a piece of *injara*<sup>4</sup> in his right hand, the other hand kept under the table as is customary in Ethiopia. He continues, “So God blesses and one day He’ll bless Ethiopia and Africa with wealth.” With that Geb takes a bite of the bread with some leftover bean dip. He chews quietly and I wait till he’s finished eating for him to show me to the orphanage’s dairy farm. This must have happened the first or second night in Mekelle and I quickly learned that Geb was as interested and passionate in talking about his work as he was in actually doing the work. We would come to have nightly discussions on the front steps of the orphanage about faith, service and the role of religion in our lives.

Gebremadin, Gabe or Geb for short, is in his fifties but looks like a thirty-year-old man. He is thin and keeps in shape. When he leaves the orphanage, he wears a pair of dark dress pants and a button-down white shirt, always with pens and papers in his breast pocket. But when he stays home at the orphanage and works with the cows, or plays with the children, he wears shorts, a torn T-shirt and old sandals. Comfortable, relaxed, Geb greets everyone with a smile. He says that the children used to play with his mustache when they were younger and drum on his balding head. It’s almost always difficult to tell when he’s being sarcastic or serious. He has scars by his eyes, leftover marks from when he was a child. Geb was raised in a town in northern Ethiopia in a traditional Coptic Christian family<sup>5</sup>. Since Geb had poor eyesight, the family kept to their faith’s practice and scraped some flesh off his face, near his eye, in order to cast away the demons that cause this poor vision. He still wears eyeglasses.

“The Coptics distort the word,” Geb says while driving through Mekelle. “They say they worship God and revere the saints.” But he scoffs as he honks a cow and its boy shepherd out of his way. “Worship, revere? How can a simple person, any person differentiate between the two especially when he doesn’t know what the text itself says?” Geb believes there is importance in having the Bible in the Tigrinya<sup>6</sup> vernacular. Geb’s main office is in Mekelle, at the city’s Bible Center. He works with other Coptic priests and leaders of the community translating the Bible into their common language, a project he’s been working on for a couple of years.

The Bible Center can be found on a corner of a typical street in Mekelle; there’s a hairdresser, a grocery shop and a store selling outdated and used electronics. When you first enter the Center, you pass a stand, which sells all kinds of books and pamphlets of Christian content. Even though the texts aren’t my own, there is something comforting about this space, being surrounded by literature of faith. Usually when I travel anywhere in Mekelle, I’m greeted with the sounds of “you, money, or *faranji*”<sup>7</sup> but here I am almost always greeted with *Salaam*<sup>8</sup>. The titles are divisive and alienating, to say the least, but I introduce myself to the children who shout at me. As it turns out, many of them would become my students at the nearby public school.

Inside the Bible Center there are bookshelves, which compose the organization’s library, and a few desks for students from the nearby universities. There is a large blind community in Mekelle and many students come here to learn. The library has the Bible in Braille along with other religious books, like *How to Prove Moslems Wrong*. I don’t feel especially surprised. I’ve come to understand that the notion of coexistence is not promoted here, and I feel a bit more uneasy than when I first entered. Geb shares an office in the back of the Center with the other priests. They sit around a conference table and you can hear their hard laughter from afar.

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Geb's words stood out to me after my first visit to the Bible Center. We had just left the building, about to enter his car, and he had introduced me to a few of his coworkers, the various priests of the city. "You don't need to tell them I'm a minister," he said while getting into his car. Geb explained that if the other priests and men involved in the Bible Center knew that he was a practicing evangelical Christian, they would excommunicate him and would not allow him to be a part of all the projects he runs and helps fund.

"Or that I can read Hebrew," he added. Geb was referring to an earlier talk we had, where he shared pieces of his life story. After spending some time in India and attending university there, Geb eventually arrived in America and studied at a divinity school in New York where he was ordained as a minister. It was in divinity school where he learned Hebrew. He and his wife are Baptist and evangelical Christians, much like the many white missionaries who can be found volunteering in Mekelle.

"I won't mention anything," I said to him, hoping that I did not reveal my surprise at his request.

I asked if he finds it difficult having to conceal his particular faith. He said it's not ideal but he does it so that he can serve others. As long as one person learns or grows, he said, then it's worth it. Geb felt comfortable talking about these kinds of matters with me. I'm not sure why; maybe because I was a foreigner, maybe because I was transient and only present for about five weeks or maybe he identified with me on some level as a religious person. No matter the reason, Geb would often share his frustrations over his Coptic coworkers. I was always grateful for his candor even when he voiced opinions and beliefs that were contrary to my own, regarding Moslems and Israel. Despite his borderline fundamentalism, it led me to think about times I, myself, or my family had to conceal a religious identity.

After a long day's work at the Bible Center, Geb comes home and almost always heads directly to the dairy farm where he cares for the cows. He expresses his affinity for all of "God's creations" and it brings him much peace to help something that can't ever say "thank you." He told me how one of his cows gave birth to a stillborn and how he stayed up with the mother animal all night, along with the veterinarian, helping her through the birth. One day he joined me in my daily chores, cutting the tall and prickly leaves of elephant grass for the cows, feeding them, and later cleaning their stalls.

As we hacked away at the plants, I asked Geb about his day. He had a hard day, he said. Apparently, a recently widowed young mother met him at his office at the Bible Center with her two young daughters, ages five and three. She implored

him to take her children from her. She was HIV positive and did not know if the kids were too. She explained that she couldn't keep a job and simultaneously be there to take care of her kids. She pleaded with him, "I can't feed my own children and that's why I come to you." Geb said this to me as he cut away at the grass. This is not the first kind of meeting he has had with needy families. He listened to her plea and listened to her cry, and played with her two girls who immediately took a liking to him. He said it was probably because of the absence of a father figure. And finally he explained that he wouldn't take the girls and said so to the young mother. He said that he just couldn't deprive these children of a mother's love.

He continued to cut the tall bushels of grass, sweating profusely as he was telling over the story in great detail. He saw that my pile of grass was large and that I was listening intently and working at the same time and so he continued with the story. "I gave her whatever money I had on me for groceries and took pictures of the girls," he said. This is something Geb does quite often with children he can't take into the orphanage. When any of his board members or friends from the States come to visit and are eager to help, he shows them pictures of these neighborhood children and he tells their stories. He introduces everyone and by the end of their first meet these visitors would be sponsoring a family. He didn't have a match at that point to offer this young mother. He further explained to me that he wouldn't take the girls while the mother was still living. It is his policy.

We continue cutting grass and he told me more about his stressful day. I'd ask him questions throughout our talk, about his work, the role faith has in it, even about his coping mechanisms. He later thanked me for asking him about his day and letting him vent. He usually goes to the cows right when he returns home and they, he said, are pretty unresponsive and inarticulate.

As I listened to Geb and watched him cut the hard elephant grass, I felt humbled to a part of his work. I was grateful to have the opportunity to learn from him. After working with the cows, we'd usually sit by the entrance of the orphanage, around sunset, when there was a refreshing breeze passing by. Geb would let out the two dogs and they'd roam around, having their howling matches with the hyenas. By the front steps, Geb would ask me why some people feel the call to work more than others and would insist that people were greedy wherever you go. I shared with him a verse from Ethics of our Fathers, from the *Mishnah*<sup>2</sup>: "You are not required to finish the task but you are not free to desist from it either." And I remember how his eyes lit up. When we had a bonfire welcoming some American guests, we sat around eating fresh corn and sang Christian spiritual songs, a few in Tigrinya.

Geb would also sing songs in English, a verse from Psalms: “I raise my eyes to the mountains; where will my strength come from? My strength comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.” I shared the same verse but in Hebrew, in a different melody. We went on like this throughout the night, him trying to think of English melodies from Psalms and me finding the Hebrew equivalent. We laughed.

I recall once having come home from the nearby public school after teaching in the afternoon. Geb asked me how my day was and I told him. As I started my English lesson, students would kneel by the entrance of the door, in the threshold, waiting for me to acknowledge their presence and welcome them in. This went on for about fifteen minutes and I invited literally dozens of students into the classroom. Geb laughed. He explained a traditional Ethiopian custom of waiting for your host to allow you in to his home. When listening to a recording of that lesson I can be heard saying, “Please, come in,” “yes,” “there’s plenty of room” dozens of times, interrupting my lessons on grammar and sentence structure. Geb said smiling that it sounded like I did a fairly good job.

My last memories of Mekelle are being with Geb. As we sat in the Mekelle airport, having already gone through the light security, he thanked me for coming. “There is a difference between giving money and giving yourself. Not everyone who gives money can give himself and not everyone who gives himself can be helpful. You were.” I thanked him and kept on thanking him, before he even thanked me, and I felt like I was repeating myself: I needed him to know that I was sincere. I left a letter by his desk at the orphanage, knowing he’d find it when he returned.

After we went through the initial security of the airport, Geb said to the security guard, “You forgot to check him. Avram, go through that machine.” The lightheartedness and joking at an airport was so foreign, so bizarre to me. When we checked my baggage, he told the clerk that I wanted “super first class.” When asked what that meant, Geb explained that it meant I needed to sit “on the wing of the plane, for the best view.” Here the clerk played along and said, “Well, of course, that will cost extra.” I knew there would be absolutely no joking whatsoever with regards to airport security once I arrived at my next destination.

As I checked my last bag, Geb explained that he had to run and apologized for leaving me. He was sponsoring cataract surgery for a blind student in the community and the child’s parents did not support the use of medicine. Geb was asked to serve as a guardian. We hugged and said so long. The airport was full of windows and I stood by the glass and watched him drive off. I imagined where he’d stop next, probably the hospital. When we drove once to the girls’ home

for the blind, Geb pulled the vehicle to a quick and jarring halt. He put the car in park, took out his digital camera that he keeps hidden under the chair of his jeep, and ran out to the nearby stream. When he returned a moment or so later, he showed me what he called a “crime against humanity.” An oil spill from a nearby construction zone was contaminating a stream that feeds this entire village; hundreds of families use this water.

I asked him what he’ll do next and he said, “At least I will report it.” He knew the former mayor of the town. “Maybe he can help me,” he said and with that he put the car back into gear and drove off to town. Fully aware that I had entered someone else’s living space, working environment and world for a short period of four and a half weeks, I was grateful to have the relationship I had with Geb. I now ask myself the question he once asked me regarding the call to work, “How is it that one man can feel the call so vigorously and intensely?”

### A Transition

My journey hadn’t finished. I had only started. And yet I was as overwhelmed, tired and homesick as I would ever be throughout my trip as I was when traveling to Israel. When I landed I felt a sudden jolt throughout my body. It might have been seeing the Hebrew lettering surrounding me, being able to understand the language people spoke. It might have been the fact that I was no longer the only person wearing a *kippah*. It might have been simply the notion that, “I’ve been here before.” Whatever it was, I felt home upon arriving in Israel.

I went to a supermarket my first night in Israel with a friend of mine. We walked through the aisles of the *kosher*<sup>10</sup> market. Fruits, vegetables, wines, cheeses, meats, crackers, cookies, tomato sauces. Pickles, pita, chocolate – and about fifty kinds of each. Not to mention orange juice, mango juice, apple juice. Did I mention it was watermelon season? Suddenly, the checkout line at the exit of the market grew intense. The smell of the food was unbearable and part of me wanted to sit down and eat everything I could afford and another part of me was so nauseous, I could vomit. My meals in Ethiopia had consisted of peanut butter and bread for lunch and noodles and maybe tuna for dinner, with little variation. The abundance and diversity in food was overwhelming, to say the least, and it sunk in hard and deep: I was back in the West.

**As I started my English lesson, students would kneel by the entrance of the door, in the threshold, waiting for me to acknowledge their presence and welcome them in.**

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## In Israel

The Yemin Orde Youth Village can be found on top of a small mountain, amidst the lush and green mountains of the Carmel. It is home to 500 immigrant high school students from Ethiopia, Sudan, Brazil, Russia, France, Georgia and other countries around the globe, 20 percent of whom are orphans. It was founded in 1953 by the British Friends of Youth Aliyah who originally intended “to accommodate Holocaust orphans and immigrant children.”<sup>11</sup> Its literal name means “In the memory of Orde,” referring to the British Major General Orde Charles Windgate. Windgate was a strong supporter of the Jewish cause in the Land of Israel. He helped train Haganah<sup>12</sup> fighters and ultimately liberate Ethiopia from the Italian occupation in World War II.

Open 365 days a year, Yemin Orde hasn't been closed since the day it started and is considered the gold standard of youth villages in Israel, a community where children and adolescents live and go to school. I arrived on the day of the senior graduation along with countless guests who were coming to celebrate. I had hitchhiked up the mountain where the village stands with one heavy bag. Along the way, I cut myself along the suitcase's metal handle. Sweaty, tired and overwhelmed from my travels (and now bleeding slightly), I spotted the electric gate at the barred entrance of the village, equipped with cameras and a security guard who sits in a booth with a T.V. and radio. From a distance I noticed the flags and plaques at the decorated entrance and I began to realize what adequate funding can actually do for an organization.

The youth village currently receives 70 percent of its ten million dollar yearly budget from the Israeli Education Ministry and the other 30 percent comes from American donors. The village employs a diverse staff of “50 full-time teachers, 42 part-time teachers, 22 full-time professional counselors, 6 social workers, 5 part-time psychologists, 12 housemothers, 10 full-time and 2 part-time administrative staff and 9 full-time and 1 part-time maintenance staff.” I am taken in by everything: the location, an elaborate campus, trees and a garden of red flowers, a large wooden map of the village, soccer and basketball courts, a swimming pool, and as a musician sensitized to sound, the familiarity and comforting sound of Hebrew being spoken. But it is the mountains that remind me of Ethiopia. On top of the orphanage building in Mekelle, I could look out and see the brown mountains, dusty and bare. Here the mountains of the Carmel are a lush green and I'm constantly reminded of where I am and where I came from.

It's hilly here as I drag my suitcase to the dining hall. Despite the amount of workers at the village, no one from the staff can meet me just yet because everyone is preparing for tonight's celebration. I'm told I'll meet another volunteer later but for now I'm on my own as I introduce myself to a group of young men and women engaged in conversation. I come to realize that they are graduates of Yemin Orde and had just arrived for today's celebration.

Yemin Orde graduates, in general, have gone on to become such notables as the first Ethiopian Israeli lawyer, a mayor, chief of police, army personnel, commanders and paratroopers, medical professors, governmental staff, businessmen, engineers and responsible parents and citizens of Israeli society. I learn much of this from a group of graduates conversing and from my own research of the organization. These young Israelis are a group of mostly Ethiopian and Russian graduates who have stayed in touch with Yemin Orde after their commencement. The village's success with the Ethiopian community is especially noteworthy. “Compared to the national rate of 28 percent of Ethiopian 12<sup>th</sup> graders passing their university matriculation examinations in 2004, 50 percent of Ethiopian 12<sup>th</sup> graders at Yemin Orde passed.” These young graduates are eager to explain their stories to me. One tells me that he lived in the graduate dorms for many years, through the army, until he could raise enough money to afford his own apartment. Yemin Orde keeps special dormitories open for their graduates, many of whom have no place to move after they finish high school. Israeli high school graduates attend the army and not college right after graduation and Yemin Orde has dormitories open year-round for these young adults as well. I later find out that I'll be living in these dormitories.

I finally place my things down in another volunteer's room and I go for a tour of the village. In the library, I see a book by Chaim Peri, the visionary director of the youth village. Peri recently stepped down after serving the community for over twenty-five years. His successor, Ofer Yerushalmi, moved in to Peri's house in the village the week I arrived on campus. There is an aura around Chaim Peri on this campus and as I read through the first pages of his writings, I can see why. I am immediately enamored with his philosophy on education and children.

As I flip through the Hebrew book, I begin to get a feel of the environment and the village's personal philosophy. The village owns seventy acres even though the actual village takes up about an acre's space, if that. The dormitories, dining hall, synagogue and village library are on a completely different side of campus than where the school buildings and classrooms can be found. This distinction is important in the philosophy of Yemin Orde. A student

can get punished at school, get into a fight with a teacher or principal but ultimately always has a home to return to. Even though the physical distance is so small, the students certainly feel this distinction and it's evident in how they talk about where school is or where home is, as in two separate places.

The village itself is religious and has a kosher dining hall along with a synagogue where daily services are held. Electricity is not used on the Sabbath. Most of the student body do not come from religious homes and the village educators say the purpose of keeping traditions is not to make students more religious by the time they leave; rather, it is to raise students in a traditional Jewish environment and ultimately instill in them a sense of self and purpose. The sooner the students "get it," they believe, the sooner they will work on themselves. "Getting it" means understanding that this is a community that will nurture and support them throughout their endeavors. Thus, the sooner the students understand that the community and staff will "be there for them," the sooner they will develop their own aspirations, academic interests and dreams.

"It works," says Peri. I'm deeply intrigued by Chaim Peri and I feel as if I'm getting a better sense of the village and the environment than when I first arrived. With so many guests for the graduation and so much excitement in the air, the village is very crowded and I was grateful to find space in the library and read. Eager to meet Peri or simply observe him from afar, I continued reading his writings.

The *kfar*<sup>13</sup>, as it likes to be called, is not a boarding school or orphanage; it is a village and strives to be a home for these young immigrants. It's often said by staff that the most important word in the village is "yet." This student hasn't conquered his drinking problem *yet*; this student hasn't stopped cursing, stopped being physically aggressive – *yet*. And so it is this use of positive reinforcement, sometimes subtle and sometimes loud and clear that surrounds the students. I read in Peri's book the village's idea of the "garden of late bloomers." He explained that there are students who come in and cause trouble until, in one case, a week before graduation. But the village insists, their hugs are wide, wider than most people's, and they tolerate more. Peri and his administrative staff constantly ask themselves, "And how would I respond if my own child acted accordingly?" They offer sincere answers.

Perhaps, though, the unique part of the village is the African hut that stands in the middle of campus, right by the dining hall, near the computer lab and amphitheater. The book says that the adolescents who live at Yemin Orde are often separated from family and are far from home and familiar

culture. The *kfar* believes strongly in affirming one's cultural background. To this end, there is a traditional Ethiopian hut in the center of campus, a typical home of the Ethiopian students who lived in Gondar and other communities before arriving in Israel. Inside the hut, one can find pictures of Ethiopia, stories, clothes and furniture similar to those one might find in a traditional Ethiopian home. The main difference is that there is electric light, and there are cement floors. The hut is there for the students as much as it is for the tourist groups who often come visiting Israel. It is there to remind the students of their past. Yemin Orde encourages their students to continue speaking Amharic or Russian, and provides staff that speaks their languages. To this end, they go one step further. They say to their students: "It's not enough that you appreciate your heritage; you have to make me appreciate it as well, and be open to sharing it." There are cross-cultural activities around the village on a nightly basis.

My first night at the *kfar* I witnessed the high school's graduation ceremony. Aside from the traditional lineup of guest and class speakers, the students performed an original play that they composed for the special night. It was a story of a young Russian immigrant struggling to fit in and come to terms with her new Israeli identity. There was thunderous applause and cheers when the Ethiopian students danced a traditional Russian dance and when the Russian students danced a traditional Ethiopian dance. I remember feeling that I was part of a unique community. I remember listening to a teenager named Adam speak, a young Darfurian, who traveled to Israel illegally and was held in prison with dozens of other Sudanese refugees. Chaim Peri was one of the first people to go to the Israeli prisons and offered to take in the Sudanese children and bring them to Yemin Orde. The way Adam and Chaim told the story this night was that the judge was a Yemin Orde graduate himself and so, how could he say no? Adam now runs an Israeli youth equivalent of *Save Darfur*<sup>14</sup>. The *kfar* asks their students to invite family and friends to the graduation ceremony: who does Adam invite? Dozens of Sudanese Israelis whom Chaim Peri helped release. I remember Chaim speaking in Hebrew that night and watching the crowd listen to his every word, even the cynical students who congregated around the back of the field. It was at these moments that I recall my feelings shifting from feeling overwhelmed to feeling motivated and suddenly eager to work.

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The very next day I went to morning prayers at the village's synagogue. The sound of prayer with a *minyan*<sup>15</sup> was empowering. There are certain prayers and verses that are only said with a minyan and hearing and saying their words was refreshing. It was only after prayers that I realized I was in a couple of rows behind Chaim Peri. As I finished putting away my *tefillin*<sup>16</sup>, Chaim came up to me and introduced himself. I smiled, explaining that I knew who he was. He asked me a bit about myself and mentioned his friendship with Jehuda Reinhartz, the president of Brandeis University. As we left the synagogue, he told me he had an assignment for me.

He explained that there was a group of Arab mothers from Haifa who run a playgroup for their kindergarten students and were looking for a cheap place to have an end-of-the-year party. He had found out about the group from Ahmed, one of the head workers in the kitchen staff, a father of four and an Arab who has been working at the village since he was eighteen years old. Peri immediately opened up the village to them at no cost. He also offered to bring in a clown, music and set up refreshments. He asked if I would help prepare the room for the party, organize the food and stay there in case anyone needed help. And so I did. The two-dozen young mothers wearing their *hijab*<sup>17</sup> danced with their kids and I would float back and forth from setting up the food to watching the kids dance with the clown. Afterwards, I helped clean up and helped the D.J. pack up his equipment. He spoke to me

in Hebrew, thinking I was Israeli, and I would answer in the little Arabic I knew and he'd laugh.

Over my time in Israel, I had flashes of interactions with Peri. Along the pathway to the swimming pool, or outside the library, or maybe after prayer services. It was always short, polite and to a point. I knew him more than he would ever know me but I didn't mind. He wasn't on campus as much nowadays, now that he'd officially moved off-site. I continued to read his work and I spoke with other staff and with volunteers about him. I listened to tour guides describe Peri's work as they walked around the village, with groups from New York or Philadelphia. I would listen to him address a group from AIPAC<sup>18</sup> or address the village on a Friday night before Sabbath services. He would talk about the power of storytelling, how it's important to look

at the leaders of our world and think of what it was like for many of them growing up. Learn about their foolishness. He would ask his students, "Do you know that Albert Einstein was a terrible math student?" He talked about the Torah being the storybook of the Jewish people and encouraged his students to be in touch with their roots – constantly. When Chaim spoke, the students looked at him and most listened. He captured their attention and it seemed as if he was always able to tell a story so that it meant something to each person present.

When I think of my first day in Israel, my first day in the village meeting their graduates and watching the commencement ceremony and even my first assignment with the birthday party in particular, I realize the uniqueness of YOYV. Their work is an active testimony to their mission: building a sustainable community of children from divergent cultures and countries, helping their students grow and ultimately coexist. Led by Peri for over twenty years, the *kfar* is not just a youth village; it is home.

## Unpacking

My journal entries from this past summer remain unedited, raw, and my suitcase is now empty in the basement of my family's suburban home in Teaneck, N.J. I am blessed to be in university and to write this paper. I feel slightly more attuned to what I learned this summer and I must confess: I feel slightly self-indulgent, even comical, asking myself to conclude. Aware that my experiences in Ethiopia and Israel are stints compared to those who live there daily, believing in the interconnectedness of all things, and that lessons of any particular experience can seep past airport comings and goings, the question of what and how to include are therefore challenging.

Nonetheless, my weeks abroad provided me with an opportunity to peek into and even take part in some of the tremendous work that people in Ethiopia and Israel are – through their local community efforts – doing in repairing the world.

An idea that's prominent in Yemin Orde literature is a notion of *Tikkun HaLev*, fixing of the heart; taking time to do a thorough introspection and focus on the self and attempt to fix some of the brokenness in one's own life. The idea is concurrent with *Tikkun Olam*, fixing of the world. *Tikun Olam* is a fundamental pillar of Judaism, calling on each person to give of one's self in whatever way to help others. These two "fixings" need to take place simultaneously and both, ultimately, are reciprocal. The philosophy and ideology of this special Israeli youth village makes its way into every building on campus, every event, almost every conversation. When

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I would sit by myself watching a sunset or look towards the Mediterranean Sea, I would think of Hope Orphanage in Mekelle and realize just how similar these communities were in their essence: work towards your utmost potential, give back to your community.

The village directors, Gebre Beyenne in Mekelle and Chaim Peri in Yemin Orde, outwardly couldn't be more different from one another. Dr. Chaim Peri, the son of Holocaust survivors, born in Israel, is a traditional Jew and has won numerous awards in Israel for his work with both the *kfar* and children. Gebre Byenne is a Christian minister, a devout Baptist, born in Ethiopia and returned from America to work with the Ethiopian orphan community. As one might deduce, their religious affiliations alone set them apart. Yet there are countless similarities. Their passion for helping others is tremendous and stems from, among many places, a connection with their faith and relationship to God. As individuals, they are tireless, determined and caring, committed to their work. Personally, they serve as ultimate role models, as a young person interested in working with children in a religious context.

In hindsight, I think of these communities and I am grateful to have lived among them. I look at their websites and I wait for updates. Proper funding is crucial and I know that Yemin Orde will be around as long as the State of Israel exists; it is a well-funded governmental institution with all the necessary components, including a highly influential and wealthy board. Hope Services will be around as long as Geb and Connie are; they too have an active board, with members from the U.S. who frequently visit, bringing books and medical supplies. Once, I asked Geb if he's thought about successors; he told me, "It's on the to-do list." But this stark contrast in wealth doesn't faze me entirely. Yemin Orde started with nothing and grew, and Geb and Connie also are building castles out of bricks, literally.

I think of what my flash abroad has left me with and I think of Chaim and Geb. It is the simple understanding of the power one person may bring to one's own community. As a traditional and practicing Jew, my personal religious beliefs have not prevented me from working in communities outside my own, rather have inspired me to do just that. My time abroad reaffirmed the possibilities of interfaith and intercommunity building, of helping others while being true to my own beliefs. It is possible to stay open but still remain rooted, to share myself with others and let others share themselves with me, to work on myself and never stop working on the world. And I still sing of the Psalmist's idea, "Where is the dwelling place of the Lord?" and now answer quietly with greater awareness, "Everywhere."

## Notes

1. *Kippah* or *yarmulkeh* is a skullcap traditionally worn by Jewish men. Most agree that it symbolizes an acknowledgement and belief in God and an identification with the Jewish people
2. Observance to *Halacha*, Jewish Law, with a concurrent commitment to modern society and culture
3. Jewish prayer book
4. A traditional Ethiopian sponge-like bread
5. Coptic Church based mostly on teachings of the saints; observe certain sacraments such as baptism, confession
6. A Semitic language spoken by northern Ethiopians in the Tigray region. It is also one of the two official languages of neighboring Eritrea
7. *White devil* in Amharic
8. *Peace* in Arabic, Amharic
9. Fundamental work of Rabbinic Judaism, called the Oral Law. Debated during 70-200 C.E. by rabbinic sages and was redacted by Judah the Prince
10. Food that is in accordance with Jewish dietary laws
11. All quoted information on Yemin Orde is from the Friends of Yemin Orde Website, which can be found at: <http://www.yeminorde.org/village/index.html>.
12. Jewish paramilitary organization during the British Mandate, later became a core unit of the Israeli Defense Forces
13. Hebrew word for village
14. An alliance of over 150 faith-based and human rights organization dedicated to ending the genocide in Darfur
15. Minimum number of men required for certain religious obligations
16. *Tefillin* or phylacteries are a pair of black boxes, which contain scrolls of parchment that have Biblical verses inscribed in them
17. Modest dress for women, sometimes a head or entire body covering
18. America Israel Public Affairs Committee, America's pro-Israel lobby



# Live and Become

JUDITH SIMONS '10

## Scarred Idealism

**K**neeling down, she slowly puts her tongue to the child's cheek. The impassioned adoptive mother kisses and then licks her new child's face in front school faculty, parents, and students. Her bold statement is an attempt to prove that her adopted Ethiopian son is not a health hazard to the other students, that he is not a carrier of fatal African diseases like so many parents have claimed.



The movie ends and I walk out of the theater. Some of my faith in Israel lingers behind as I walk out of the theater. As a college first year, my world is rapidly being opened up to new ideas, perspectives and realities, and this film is no exception. "Live and Become" is a story about an Ethiopian boy who comes to Israel on the massive airlift of Ethiopian Jews, Operation Moses in 1984. His new life in Israel is not necessarily the ideal life that he had hoped for. Although he has access to a modern society, he is outcast because of the color of his skin. Parents of his fellow classmates accuse him of harboring African diseases, making him a health threat to their children. The family of his white Israeli girlfriend does not accept him because they question his Judaism, as they question the Judaism of all Ethiopian Jews. Although the main character is fiction, the harsh treatment he experienced from the rest of Israeli society is not.

My childhood understanding of Israel was that of a rescuer of the Ethiopian Jews. In just third grade, my Hebrew School teacher enthusiastically described how Israel sent massive jet planes, with all of the seats removed, to Addis Ababa and to refugee camps in Sudan in the dead of night without being detected by radar. The planes were loaded up with thousands of Ethiopian Jews, flying them to Israel, away from the persecution of the Ethiopian government. Israel carried out this top-secret operation not once, but twice, in 1984 and 1991. Therefore, I thought of Israel as a safe haven for the Ethiopian Jews, *for all Jews*, an image that became overshadowed by the movie's portrayal of the difficult lives of Ethiopian immigrants. It now seems that the government in

Israel is friendly to only Russian, the English, the American immigrants – the white faces that washed ashore. The reality of discrimination toward Jews in Israel is not one I want to face, though I know, as a Jew, it is one I need to help change. I cannot allow the Jewish state, founded upon values of the Torah, the moral rubric of the Jewish people, to mistreat some of her fellow Jews.

I internalize the harsh reality that not every Jew is openly accepted by Israel. My despair grows into idealism. I begin thinking that by interning at a legal rights organization for Ethiopian Israelis in Tel Aviv called Tebeka, I will help rip through Israeli discriminatory mentalities. I hope that the Ethiopians at Tebeka will accept my passion, however different their lives are compared to my own privileged white background.

Before my internship begins this past summer, Tebeka sent me a newspaper article about an elementary school that was accused of segregating six Ethiopian first-grade students from the rest of the class. For me, this article relays that the Israelis in this school view Ethiopians as inferior – a thought that further enrages me. When I arrive at Tebeka I am – more than ever – impassioned about the cause I believe in, my idealism at its height. I am especially excited to be working with the Ethiopian community from a legal perspective since my father's and grandfather's careers as lawyers and judges have made me an ardent supporter of positive change through law.

As I begin to meet Ethiopian Israelis and listen to clients' stories from Tebeka's lawyers, my image of the Ethiopian situation begins to gradually change. My idealism shifts, wanes, though it never completely fades. The tardiness of a client at her own court case illustrates Ethiopians' difficulty with the concept of time, a novelty for them in an industrialized, modern country. At another court case, I notice how the entire older generation of Ethiopians are dressed in traditional garb and require an Amharic translator, even though they have been in Israel for over ten years. I am told by Tebeka's lawyers, both native Israeli and Ethiopian, how easy it is to take advantage of Ethiopians in the workforce and in the housing market because they are not aware of their own civil rights since they were never privileged with such things in their country of origin.

Throughout the summer, I begin to realize that the racism of Israelis portrayed in "Live and Become" that I had intended to dismantle was not the core of the Ethiopians' struggles. The struggles the Ethiopians face are not rooted in the color of their skin. Rather, other monstrous hurdles stand formidably in front the Ethiopians as they enter the modern land of Israel. Language. Electricity. An egalitarian society. Holding a job. All of these issues and concepts are completely novel to the Ethiopians. I slowly understand how shocking a move from a rural African village to a modern country like Israel must be. The fact that Ethiopians live mainly in isolated low-income neighborhoods within different Israeli cities is not due to their black skin nor due to the racist mentalities of real estate agents or housing authorities. Instead, many Ethiopians cannot afford homes outside of the low-income ghettos since many Ethiopians in the adult generation work in low-paying jobs. The adult Ethiopians occupy low-paying jobs because of a language barrier, lack of education, or difficulty in adapting to a society where holding a job is essential for survival. It is this immense culture shock of immigration, along with the fact that the Israeli government has not done enough to alleviate their transition, that holds back Ethiopians – putting many in positions of poverty leading to stereotypes that envelop the community.

However, instead of striking down stereotypes, it is my idealism that is pierced. It is easy to look at a stereotyped group from a removed standpoint of a different color and resolve to erase the misjudgments bounding that group. In a turn of events that I never could have imagined, I witnessed an ugly truth in the depths of stereotype. An Ethiopian friend of mine became a mournful portrait of how life in the cycle of poverty can in fact perpetuate prejudgments.

Although scarred, my idealism is not entirely destroyed. Ethiopian Israelis have made progress since their arrival in Israel and will continue to do so. I now realize, however, that the daunting task of acclimating to a new country and language with an entirely new set of societal and cultural norms actually is not a black or white task, but rather a gray one.

### **Tel Aviv Beyond the Surface**

"*Boker tov!*" I smile and flash my bus pass at the bus driver as I step onto the bus across the street from my beautiful concrete-walled suburban apartment. The street is similar to my white neighborhood back home. At this point, the bus is quiet and peaceful as we hum along a sleepy-eyed road with an island of green grass reflecting the morning sun. In contrast, the next stop, a few meters down the road, stood across a posh version of an American strip mall. The bus stop bustles with early morning risers: loud school children, newspaper-reading professionals, iPod-listening beauty queens, migrant worker Filipinos, people of all shapes, sizes, and colors. As we speed through the wide, open streets of Ramat Aviv, past Tel Aviv University and past the Ramat Aviv Mall, people continue to fill the bus. Not a word is spoken to the driver except a shouting chorus of "*Nahag* (driver)!" in case he closes the back door before someone successfully exits the bus.

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As the bus makes its way across the bridge over the Yarkon River and into Tel Aviv, the streets narrow and number of cars increase. Drivers of tiny cars and long buses impatiently honk at red lights, agile motorcycles weave in and out of lanes, and hordes of people briskly cross the street with the permission of the neon-white walking-man. The bus fills up faster than it navigates through the streets of Tel Aviv, held up by traffic thicker than tar.

Bus riders are representative of Tel Aviv's diverse population: pregnant women, women showing more skin than clothes, religious women with no skin showing, men with tattoos, men with yarmulkes and religious fringes, soldiers clutching their guns looking still somewhat sleepy. People squeeze together, neglecting the notion of personal space. The soundtrack of the bus is a combination of a radio station of the driver's choice, a few loud phone conversations, and the murmur of the motor. Those sitting enjoy the most comfort and are the quickest to fall asleep, though if an elderly person struggles to climb up onto the bus, someone immediately makes a seat available. The elderly have a deserved monopoly on the first row of seats underneath a sign that reads "*mipnei seivah takum*," or "before the elderly stand," a verse from Leviticus.

The bus crawls through north Tel Aviv with its average-looking apartments that boast above-average prices for their more than desirable locations next to the Mediterranean, a cerulean sea. The bus continues to inch past the train station, packed with people waiting among the thicket of bus stops. Finally after about forty minutes, the bus bumbles along under a gorgeous glass and stainless steel overpass of modern design announcing our arrival at Azrieli, a series of three of the tallest buildings in the Middle East. At this bus stop, the bus begins to empty out as all of the soldiers exit and prepare for another day of duty at headquarters across the street from Azrieli.

The bus leaves Azrieli behind. High-class Tel Aviv washes away in the distance and an industrial, overcast Tel Aviv looms into sight. It is here that I hop off the bus, next to an expansive yet decrepit building. I usually have to stifle a cough from the intense smell of cigarette smoke and auto exhaust and tip toe around the dirty drops from the ancient air conditioners that speckle the windows of the building. One lonely *makolet*, a half-inside-half-outside mini market, occupies the dingy side of the street. It is ironic that the area in which I will work to alleviate gray problems is gray itself.

Had I stayed on the bus, I would have traveled a couple more miles to the south tip of Tel Aviv. I would have driven by more abandoned buildings, a large park filled with scores of African refugees, many dingy looking *makolets* displaying countless Filipinos, and a few sex shops. I would have ended up at the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station, a seven-floor complex, seedy hubbub of shops and food stands, and hangout for Tel Aviv's Ethiopian population.

But I don't venture to that last stop. Instead, from my bus stop, I make my way over to a parallel street, the street on which I work. *Rechov* Hamasger, is a noisy, busy street with more cars than pedestrians. Tall office buildings are intermingled with a bank, a gas station, an outdoor parking lot, a car service center, a falafel stand, and of course *makolets*, essential to every Israeli street. Surprisingly, the street boasts multiple kosher eateries, a seeming paradox in Tel Aviv, one of Israel's most secular cities. With the majority of the population secular, it is much more difficult to find a kosher restaurant in which to eat in Tel Aviv than it is in Jerusalem.

After a walk up the street, I come to my destination: number fifty-three, a tall unassuming, gray cement building. I squeeze through the motorcycles parked in untidy formations outside of my building and walk through an open door to what could be defined as a lobby, but is more or less a gray open space with dirty floors, a dusty mirror, and two elevators. Sometimes, for exercise, I choose to make the trek up the stairs to the third floor, though the gray smoke my lungs receive counteracts the workout for my legs. The staircase is home to the smokers, construction workers, and office workers on break.

Once at the third floor, I walk through a glass door, through an entryway, and buzz myself into the office of Tebeka: Advocacy and Equality for Ethiopian Israelis. I make sure to close the door behind me, for a locked-door policy was emphasized at all times by the Tebeka staff. Previous thieveries were the impetus for this policy. The office is an oasis of color in gray south Tel Aviv. Small and simple, the office contains five small office rooms encircling an open common space, which is home to the receptionist and a copy machine. The wooden floors and wall hangings give the office a homey feel, though the out-of-date computers detract somewhat from the aesthetic. The air conditioning keeps the office at a chilly temperature, enough to evoke goose pimples, and the closed windows overlook an unsatisfactory view of Hamasger Street.

The most beautiful part of the Tebeka office is the staff themselves and their radiant, smiling faces of white, tan, and black hues. A microcosm of Tel Aviv's population, the Tebeka staff, of all different ethnic descents, welcome me with open arms.

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## A Family of Justice Seekers

On my first day at Tebeka, Sophia, the secretary, throws her arms around me and plants a kiss on each of my cheeks.

Each smile comforts me more than the previous one. I feel excited, heartened, loved! How wonderful it is just to be hugged, after feeling quite alone for a few days in a place across the ocean from my own home.

I quickly notice that the Tebeka staff is like a family. Cakes and cards honor birthdays. More cakes and cards welcome back staff members from vacation. Everyone constantly asks me if I am OK, if I need help sorting out problems with my apartment, or whether I need a place to stay. I soon learn to answer to “*motek*” (sweetie), “*boobah*” (doll) and even “*dah-ling*” (darling).

The strength of the family at Tebeka is rooted in their shared passion and commitment for justice and equality for all Ethiopian Israelis. Staff meetings are typically heated: loud, firm voices that each interrupt one another with the fervor of their beliefs. They indignantly lash the Israeli government for not allocating the 870 million shekels, approximately \$228.6 million, to the Ethiopian-Israeli community like it promised this past January. They share frustration over the seemingly purposeful absence of Rava Dana, an Ethiopian rabbi, an integral part of the case they are trying in the rabbinical court. They celebrate together over successes in court. They brainstorm and pool all of their resources together in order to send an Ethiopian-Israeli law student to American University in Washington, D.C., for a program in legal English. The staff even constantly engages in enthralling and incessant debates over the possibility of integrating Ethiopian-Israeli students into Israeli schools. Some staff members favor integration while others favor allocating more funding to Ethiopian-Israeli neighborhood schools in order to improve their quality.

Though I am astounded by the intense debate and the constant interruptions, I am most impressed by the level of respect each staff member holds for the others. While each is quick to shout above the other person, s/he just as quickly acknowledges the worthiness of other perspectives. No one shouts in order to hear his own voice, and no one interrupts in order to control the conversation. Everyone speaks with the mission of Tebeka in mind and at heart: to bring justice and equality to Ethiopian Israelis. This genuineness refreshes my mind and soul and reinvigorates my belief in the cause.

The founder, and director and father of the Tebeka family, is Itzik Dessie. Upon his law school graduation, the first Ethiopian Israeli to do so, Itzik was offered a position in a

high-powered firm in Israel. He was quickly flooded with Ethiopian clients in need of legal services they could not afford. This reality inspired Itzik to found Tebeka, a legal nonprofit. With the immense financial support of countless Jewish-American philanthropic foundations, Tebeka has soared to now include branches in three separate cities and office hours in two more. Itzik has become an inspiration for the Ethiopian-Israeli community.

One day would not pass without at least three mentions of Itzik’s name. “Itzik e-mailed this,” “Itzik said that,” “You should ask Itzik.” Although currently in Washington, D.C., for a master’s program, Itzik was still heavily involved in Tebeka’s daily activities. I quickly learn that Mr. Itzik Dessie is a firecracker of a man. His visions see no bounds and his perseverance sees no obstacle. Without ever meeting Itzik, I am immensely impressed and moved by this man’s commitment to his community and his steadfast belief in his organization’s mission.

How blessed I am to be part of such a team, such a family. Who would have thought that the bell of justice ringing throughout Israel was based in the lowly southern side of Tel Aviv?

## A (Not-so) Black Story

These justice seekers seem focused on other international advocates of equality, mainly Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Barack Obama. This is apparent in the office of Tebeka.

“Do you like Barack Obama?” I was asked for the seventeenth time on my fifth day in Israel. My response usually instigated harsh criticisms and comments, most of which were baseless and inaccurate.

Barack Obama is Muslim.

Barack Obama is bad for the Jews.

Barack Obama does not like Israel.

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This time, the question came from a young, sophisticated-looking Ethiopian-Israeli lawyer. Her eyes pierce me from behind her slight glasses. The other lawyer in the room, a young Ethiopian-Israeli male, classy with his briefcase and gelled curls, looks up from his computer. I hesitate, anxious and nervous for the debate I was about to spark.

“Yes...” I trail off trying not to wince before the whiplash began.

Another pause.

“Welcome to the club,” the young Ethiopian-Israeli woman smiles.

I force a laugh. Could it be, I ask myself, that I have met an Israeli in support of Barack Obama?

“He will be good for the blacks. Give the kids goals. It will be good to have a black man in the White House!” the ebony-skinned lawyer laughed at her own joke.

I am stunned. But then I begin to understand that the Ethiopian Israelis connected to Barack Obama based on their shared color of skin. I am not certain if Barack Obama’s black skin and the black skin of Ethiopian Israelis are representative of the same story. Although not his personal story, Barack Obama’s black skin represents the story of black America, a story saturated with baseless hatred, cruelty, and injustice. A black man as candidate for a major party in American politics, whether born to a white woman and Kenyan man or born to the descendants of slaves, symbolizes a new era in American history. His candidacy indicates that America has begun to swim away from the turbulent waters of racism and inequality, of which black skin in America is reminiscent. Discrimination, racism, and inequality are still sadly prevalent throughout America’s neighborhoods and streets. Barack Obama’s candidacy as a black-skinned man, however, proves that these disturbing realities are beginning to subside.

Contrarily, in Israel, black skin means Africa. It means small villages, one-room huts, and floors of soil. It means fathers in the field and mothers in the home. It means that that person walked to Israel by foot, or came over on an El Al plane, packed with hundreds of other Ethiopian Jews on an overnight undercover rescue mission.

An Ethiopian-Israeli child may struggle in the tenth grade just like a black student in America may struggle in the tenth grade. The Ethiopian-Israeli student may receive poorer grades and may be more likely to drop out of school than

his native Israeli classmates. Similarly, the black American student may be more likely than his white classmates to receive lower grades and opt to drop out of school rather than graduate. This is where the commonalities end. The Nubian Mountains are a different backyard than the streets of Harlem. African-Americans and Ethiopian Israelis may suffer from poor school performances and high dropout rates, but they do so for different reasons. In America, the history of slavery, segregation, and racism has made it difficult for many African-Americans to break the cycle of poverty. In Israel, the mandated education system itself is a new concept for Ethiopian Israelis. This area of assimilation, along with others, has made it difficult for many Ethiopian Israelis to climb the ladder of success.

Just like the Ethiopian lawyers who identify themselves with black America, I too enter Tebeka with the assumption that Ethiopian Israelis experienced discrimination solely because of their black skin. This assumption is fostered by the fact that as an American, the black history with which I am familiar is a story of discrimination based on race. Once I arrive at Tebeka, I hear stories of assimilation struggles that the Ethiopian lawyers faced and that clients continue to face. It become clear to me that my assumption is nonsensical: the foundation of the difficulties of the African-Americans and Ethiopian Israelis is not the same.

### **A Lesson in Time and Formalities**

After I begin to learn that the struggles of the Ethiopian Israelis lie beneath the color of their skin, I discover deeper issues with regards to their assimilation that serve to keep them in a lower socioeconomic class. I make one of these discoveries as I accompany one of Tebeka’s Ethiopian lawyers, Batya, to court one day.

As the daughter and granddaughter of judges and as someone who had been in a courtroom more times than most law-abiding citizens, I am intrigued and excited to witness a trial in an Israeli courtroom.

I choose my most professional looking outfit and make sure to wake up early, with ample amounts of time to spare. I am never one to be late, but I am especially not about to be tardy on a day as important as court day. After three bus rides, I stepped onto a street busy with morning traffic in south Tel Aviv. Half an hour before the trial was to begin, I call Batya.

“Hi Judith,” she says in her accent, “I in the Aroma. You find it?”

“OK, I’ll be right there,” I answer.

I walk down to the Aroma, the Israeli version of Starbucks, expecting to find Batya and her client, whom she is supposed to meet at 8:30. Instead, I just find Batya, wearing a plain black skirt and white button-down shirt, sipping her cappuccino, and looking over her paperwork. I am surprised to see Batya look so relaxed without her client.

After the encouragement of Batya, I purchase a cappuccino for myself and sit down with her. At this point it is 8:35.

“Where is she?” I ask.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she glances at her watch. “I don’t have the number so I can’t call her.”

“Maybe you can call Yaffa?” I suggest. Yaffa is the director of the legal department at Tebeka.

“It is early, I don’t bother her,” Batya said.

“Maybe you can call Tebeka!” I desperately want to be helpful, but also try not to overstep my bounds.

“No, Tebeka don’t have the number.”

Batya appears nonchalant about her client being missing less than half an hour before the trial and without a number to reach her.

I inquire about the trial. Batya explains to me in haphazard English that her client had been fired from her job at the time that she was pregnant. Her client claimed that the pregnancy was the reason she was fired and was suing the employer for compensation.

8:45.

“Are you sure you don’t want to call Tebeka?”

“OK,” Batya acquiesces. She took out her hot pink phone to place the call.

Was I, the intern, really giving the lawyer instructions in the form of suggestions? Why was I more concerned about the situation than the lawyer herself? My calm voice and pacified facial expression hid the cacophonous drum session of my heart. Where was this client? It was fifteen minutes before her trial!

Sure enough, Batya reaches Tebeka’s secretary and receives the number of her client. She places the next call.

I listen to Batya speak rapidly in Hebrew, raising her voice in a reprimanding way. Hardy saying goodbye, she hangs up the phone and returns to her calm, almost aloof manner.

“She is driving. There is traffic,” Batya relays.

At 8:55 Batya suggests we go to the court. We pass through security and step into the elevator.

“There is no time in Ethiopia,” Batya states bluntly.

“There is no what?” I ask.

“Time.”

“What?”

“Time. In Ethiopia, you work in the fields or in the house. Everyone lives together. You do what you want. You don’t have to be anywhere. Ethiopians don’t know how to be ‘on time.’ They don’t know what it means.” Batya, Ethiopian herself, smiles.

Suddenly, my cultural relativism kicks into gear. Not only am I on time for appointments, but I am early. “To be early is to be on time, to be on time is to be late, and to be late is totally unacceptable.” This is the motto, imprinted onto me by my American society obsessed with formality, etiquette, and politeness. What must it be like not to know the meaning of time? To not feel the pressure of the clock ticking in your mind? I am no longer incredulous at the client for her impolite disregard of her meeting with Batya. Instead, I begin to understand how not being aware of the concept of time could be an extreme detriment to one attempting to land a job. The absence of time in Ethiopia is a striking insight into instances of assimilation that act as colossal obstacles to Ethiopians furthering themselves in their new country. This insight forces me to realize that my idealistic notion of working to shatter the discrimination and stereotypes surrounding the Ethiopian community is not the answer to the root of the Ethiopians’ struggles. Rather, the Ethiopian immigrant community

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needs government and social service support of their cultural adaptation so that they can more easily become contributing members of Israeli society.

### Her Smile

Her smile is truly striking. It consumes her entire face – her eyes glint, her nose scrunches, and her large lips reveal shining white teeth, perfectly aligned. The light that emanates from her face offsets her darker-than-midnight skin. Her tight-knit curls dance in the air, even as she turns her head slightly. Gaudy gold bangles clang on her wrist and flashy hoop earrings swoop down from her ears. The colorful lightweight skirt that she pulls up over her skin-tight pants every day before she walks into the office marks her as a *Bat-sherut*.

A *bat-sherut* is an Israeli girl completing her *Sherut Leumi*, or national service. *Sherut Leumi* is an alternative to army service for religious girls. Instead of joining the army upon high school graduation as most Israelis are mandated, religious girls can spend a year volunteering at an organization or in a community helping to create a better Israel. Since *Sherut Leumi* is supposed to represent religious girls, any *bat sherut* is required to wear skirts to work every day.

Therefore, she put on a skirt. She dreads it, clearly. It is put on and taken off in the elevator. Perhaps she does not want the outside world to perceive her as religious, for religious people are highly stereotyped in Israeli society. But the skirt gets her out of army service, and for that, it is worth it.

We walk next door to the falafel stand to get lunch on my first day of work. The grease of the falafel and *schwarma* permeate the air and the owner greets us with a huge smile, a few jokes, and extra chips.

Our conversation is stifled by a language barrier as great as the cultural barrier Ethiopians faced after moving to Israel. Yet, despite the heavy accents, the stuttering, the incorrect grammar, and the misused words, a non-verbal bond draws us together. We are each able to communicate how happy we are to have another person our own age working in the office.

Back in the office, we sit behind closed doors eating our lunch.

“Why you here?”

My Hebrew is not sufficient to answer that loaded question. With a great deal of word fumbling and gesticulation, I manage to get a few sentences out. I talk about my personal struggle with my feelings for Israel and my passion for racial equality. My white skin sears from its own whiteness.

Do I sound like an imperialistic American marching into a foreign country hoping to change the world? Do I look like a naive white girl who knows nothing about racism and discrimination?

“Is that OK?” I ask, “What do you think?” I don’t know what makes me feel the need to hear a black girl justify my reasons for volunteering at Tebeka this summer.

“Yes,” she smiles that radiant smile. “Even better because you white.”

That was it. I am accepted. We are on the same team. We are friends.

That afternoon, I ask how to get to the central bus station from work so I can pick up a monthly bus pass.

“I take you,” my new friend offers readily.

She whips off her skirt and we are out the door onto a smoggy street crowded with pedestrians and buses. We jump onto a bus and after only a ten-minute ride push our way out and stand in the security line.

The Tel Aviv Central Bus Station is a dingy seven-story metropolis that houses clothing stores, electronic stores, food stands, and even a religious supermarket. We push our way through the crowds over to an ice cream stand where we get free cones from the Ethiopian girl working behind the counter.

She knows every single Ethiopian in the bus station. Laughing and smiling, we make our way from one floor to another, stopping in clothes stores, shoes stores, and the Ethiopian store where the workers greet her like family. I am amazed at how many people she knows. I am taken with her effervescent personality, the freedom of her spirit, her stunning smile. I selfishly think, she is my “in” into the Ethiopian community. With her as my friend, I cannot only be an observer, but I can also be a participant in the Ethiopian community.

Then, we stop at the ATM so that I can get cash to purchase my bus ticket. She stands close by like a good friend would.

Every day, she saunters in anywhere from one to two hours late. She also purchases a falafel and a cola for seventeen shekels every day. I often accompany her, getting a smile and free chips from the owner though I never buy anything. Instead, true to my frugal personality, I bring my own lunch, which is much healthier and less expensive.

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We chat on the way to the falafel stand.

“When you come dancing with me?” she asks as she shakes her hips.

“Soon,” I laugh. I honestly don’t know if the Tel Aviv club scene would be in my comfort zone.

One day she tells me she got in a fight with her mom. She moved out and was living with one of her fifteen siblings in a different town. Every day I ask her if she is OK. She breaks into that smile of hers and brushes the air with her hand, motioning that everything is fine. She stays with her brother for two weeks.

Then something odd happens.

One day I notice on my online banking account that there have been three unauthorized transactions on two separate bank accounts. Unsettled and frustrated, I cancel both accounts and begin to take my purse everywhere with me, even to the bathroom. All three transactions were made at the ATM on the street on which I work, at times during which I am in the office. I have never been to that ATM.

My parents question me incessantly. Has anyone ever been to the ATM with you? I lie. There is no way she could have seen my PIN as I entered it in the central bus station amidst hordes of people. I try to not think of the time she asked me what an American credit card looks like. As I enter the office every day, I pushed my suspicions aside and embraced her with my soul.

“I am in 5,000 shekel minus. I no have money for the bus. You have money?”

My mind explodes. I can no longer push my suspicions aside when she pulls me aside into the office kitchen. Was she the one who had taken money from me? No – she is too kind, I tell myself. She needs help! I reassure myself. I am not the rich American she may think I am – I am only in Israel because I received a fellowship and am living off a budget. Still, the question nags me.

I give her the twenty shekels that is in my wallet because I do not *want* to believe that she is a thief and I cannot turn down someone in need.

“I’m sorry I don’t have more,” I say in Hebrew.

During that same time period, three other people in the office report stolen money from their wallets. I calculate the withdrawals that I had made during the summer and match them to all of the expenses of which I have kept a close record. I come up 500 shekels, about \$130, short.

The following week, she comes in crying. Like always, she closes the door behind her so that we are left in the cramped conference room alone.

“I can’t do it. It’s too hard.” She uses the roll of toilet paper in her purse to wipe away her tears.

With her tears comes her story; her father is not in the picture. Her mother works as a cleaning lady but does not make enough to support the sixteen children, a slightly larger-than-typical family size in an Ethiopian home. She often has to care for her younger siblings, which makes her late to work. She doesn’t get along with her mother and wants to move out of the house, but she doesn’t have enough money to rent an apartment. She has promised a friend that they would rent an apartment together and the friend has already put down a down payment. If she didn’t come through with more money, the friend would lose the deposit. It was like an avalanche of soap opera tales.

Instinctively, I hug her. And yet, more than ever, I think it is she who had taken my credit card during the work day, walked down to the ATM, punched in my PIN, withdrawn my money, and returned my card to my purse. This thought, however, is overwhelmed by my compassion for her, the sorrow I feel for her, the disbelief at what she had been hiding behind that glowing smile.

I plead with her to tell one of the lawyers – perhaps they can help. She refuses. She does not trust them.

Instead, I report everything to one of the lawyers. Everything spills from my lips, our trip to the ATM together on my first day, her fight with her mom, her request for my money, my unauthorized transactions, and her most recent tears. I learn that Tebeka has been having problems with her. She is living at home, an hour commute from Tebeka, because she has been kicked out of the *Sherut Leumi* housing in Tel Aviv.

The pain in my stomach conquers my entire body and soul. My heart weeps, my hands shake.

Later that day, she is brought into the lawyer’s office to be questioned about my money.



“*Chas v'chalila!* (Heaven forbid!),” she exclaims. She looks at me, her tears dry by now, her mouth widening into her smile that I now know hides so much.

“You no think I take your money?” she smiles innocently.

“No.” I answer with deep guilt and shame. I cannot get myself to confront her about my suspicion. I do not want her to feel like she cannot trust me and I know she needs someone in her life who will listen to her.

I looked at her smile and felt her pain. That beautiful, beautiful smile, a peek into her beautiful soul, wrestling to break out of the ugly circumstances into which she had been born.

Confounded and in shock by the whole situation, I decide to speak about my feelings with Liat, a native Israeli who heads a program that helps place Ethiopian-Israeli law students in firms for internships upon graduation. Liat confirms my feelings of frustration and sadness by telling me how difficult it is for her to work with many Ethiopian law students who are dealing with home situations that prevent them from arriving at meetings or interviews on time or even at all. Liat commiserates by telling me, “I find it really difficult not to get mad and upset at people... and then I find out these huge stories and I don't know how to cope with them.” My conversation with Liat allows me to see that my friend is not alone. Although Liat does not relay any stories about thieveries, I see that it is common for Ethiopian Israelis to be faced with difficult home lives. These home lives, affected by difficulties in assimilation, often preclude them from achieving their greatest potential in the professional sector and furthering themselves in Israeli society.

Never before have I seen the cycle of poverty unravel in the life of someone so close to me. Realizing that I am betrayed by someone I trusted saddens me. Even more so, contemplating the future prospects for my friend disheartens me. I am not angry with her; I am just sad for her. My idealistic sentiment of working to remove the stereotypes of

the Ethiopian community has been dampened as I try to swallow that my friend, an Ethiopian girl from a poor family who feels the need to steal from others in order to survive, is living a stereotype. Of course, there is no hard evidence that it is in fact my friend who stole my money. There would need to be a thorough investigation into the situation in order to corroborate my suspicions.

**Never before have  
I seen the cycle of  
poverty unravel  
in the life of  
someone so close  
to me.**

Although dampened, my idealism is not squelched. All I need to do is to look around the office at Tebeka at the three young, successful Ethiopian-Israeli lawyers, the intelligent and engaging Ethiopian-Israeli law students who volunteer in the office, and listen to the stories about Itzik, the first Ethiopian Israeli to receive a law degree in Israel and the founder and director of Tebeka. All of these individuals inspire me and instill hope in me that it is possible to assimilate into Israeli society and further oneself economically and professionally despite the overwhelming obstacles of assimilation. Even more inspiring is the fact that they are all working to help the rest of their community do the same.

### **“Live and Become”**

It's not like racism does not exist in Israel, because it does. A dear friend, Tomer, one of the Ethiopian lawyers at Tebeka, told me a story about a time he was working in a chicken plant.

One customer went up to the manager and indignantly said, “I don't want a black man touching my meat.”

This is a pitiful comment made out of hatred and ignorance, and I was sadly expecting to hear more stories like this when coming to Israel. After my childhood pride in Israel for rescuing thousands of Ethiopian Jews in Operation Moses and Operation Solomon in 1984 and 1991 respectively was smothered by the movie “Live and Become,” I decided to come to Israel to help fight discrimination towards Ethiopian Israelis. Because the racism in my own country toward black-skinned people is baseless, I was pessimistically expecting the same situation in Israel.

What I was not expecting to hear, or what I neglected to think about, were the extraordinary difficulties Ethiopians face once having moved to Israel and the negative ramifications of these obstacles.

I did not expect to hear from Yaffa, the director of the Legal Department at Tebeka, that 25 percent of all murders of wives committed by husbands in Israel were committed by Ethiopian men, even though Ethiopians only make up 15 percent of the Israeli population. Yaffa's blonde hair tossed slightly as she shook her head in heartache. She explained to me that this was because Ethiopia was a patriarchal society where men worked in the fields and women stayed at home in the one-room hut. Other discussions I had with Ethiopian Israelis confirmed this. All of the Ethiopians to whom I spoke had mothers who stayed home back in Ethiopia. After arriving in Israel, Ethiopian men quickly formed a complex about sending their wives to work to support the family.

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This jarring statistic is poignant when understanding the types of factors that have prevented the Ethiopian community from successfully integrating into Israeli society. Gadi Ben-Ezer, psychologist and expert on the Ethiopian-Israeli community, notes that “[S]ince 95 percent came from agricultural backgrounds, few had a profession which they could immediately exercise; hence they found themselves very quickly with unskilled work, typically, in low status and underpaid jobs” (112). Clearly, if Ethiopians struggle to land well-paying jobs in Israel, they are going to be relegated to living in low-class neighborhoods. Often, there are high crime rates in these neighborhoods, like one Ethiopian “ghetto” (as referred to by my Ethiopian friend) I visited in the city of Netanya. It is known as a ghetto among the Ethiopian Israelis since only they occupy the streets. The decrepit apartment buildings and abandoned strip malls I witnessed gave me the feeling of the American “ghettos” I’ve seen in New York or Philadelphia. The director of the community center told me that it was not safe at night there. There is a lot of violence among teen boys, with many of them possessing knives.

It now seems so clear, so simple, how one drastic difference in culture can make assimilation so difficult, which can lead to a low-income life, a life with so many negative implications. As the Ethiopian-Israeli story becomes more transparent to me, I begin to think about immigrants in my own country. In today’s globalized world, people are constantly moving to more developed countries in search of a better life. As much as these new immigrants need to “work hard and improve [them]self and improve their family,” as my friend Tomer says, it is also important for these immigrants to be supported by their new country. I now understand how an unsuccessful assimilation can lead to a perpetuating cycle of regretful life circumstances. I want to learn how that can be avoided, how an immigrant can move to a new country and successfully “live and become.”

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# Through a Lens: The Insider-Outsider Conundrum that NGOs Face Working in Beijing, China

ANGELA TSE '08



## Definition of a lens: (noun)

- A glass or plastic element used in luminaires to change the direction and control the distribution of light rays.<sup>1</sup>
- A transparent optical device used to converge or diverge transmitted light and to form images.<sup>2</sup>
- (metaphor) A channel through which something can be seen or understood; “the writer is the lens through which history can be seen.”<sup>3</sup>

### Invisible Glass Boxes

On the morning of the Beijing roundtable, I spot a sun-browned, shirtless farmer idling by the reins of his donkey in front of the electronic gates of the Friendship Hotel. Through the cool glass of my taxi window, I see his rickety wooden cart loaded with pale yellow Asian pears. Mud coats the thick fur above the animal's hoof. But inside the conference room, a mere hundred yards away, I can't manage to find even a drop of dirt desecrating the gold and navy blue pattern of the carpeting despite my best efforts. No small wonder, with at least a hundred shoes worn by Chinese government officials walking the premises.

**The system is fraught with sensitive egos and a resistance to admitting missteps and mistakes, which in China is akin to losing face.**

It's been almost four full months since I started interning in China for my Ethics Center Student Fellowship with the American NGO International Bridges to Justice (IBJ). And since then, I feel as if I've smacked up in Acme cartoon style against countless invisible walls that fortify the lines between insiders and outsiders. These separations are something that people don't see, that people do not acknowledge – but somehow, everyone knows they're there.

These unseen divisions underlie class boundaries, glistening in glasslike partitions that separate the rusticated

farmer from the milieu of Nike-wearing, metropolitan pedestrians that stream by, ignoring him, talking on cell phones. In a country that claims to be socialist, the GDP per capita for cosmopolitan Shanghai is 42,800 *renminbi*/RMB (apx. \$6,266 USD) while the rural province of Guizhou has only a GDP per capita of 4,080 RMB (apx. \$597 USD).<sup>4</sup> In reality the poorest of farmers may make less than that in the rural parts of China. The existence of such unspoken barriers seems to be no wonder when put in the context of such ever-widening gap in wealth.

Such tensions also seem to underlie cultural boundaries that I brush up against every day in my work assisting IBJ trying to effect positive changes in Chinese society. Promoting discussion among local stakeholders and government officials for the promotion of rule of law in China is what International Bridges does – and it is a difficult task. The system is fraught with sensitive egos and a resistance to admitting missteps and mistakes, which in China is akin to losing face. One slight or misinterpreted word could topple months of relationship building with the right officials in the right departments. All progress on a cooperative project on legal aid for Sichuan earthquake victims or a duty lawyer pilot project could be lost. But the desire by all parties for positive change in the criminal justice system continues to help IBJ bring discussion back to the table.

Inside the conference room of the Beijing roundtable ahead, I feel as if invisible glass boxes encircle the foreign directors who are to speak at the roundtable. Their pale skin, varying

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shades of hair in a sea of black threads simultaneously isolates them and highlights their differences. It implies that they are “other” – that they are outsiders. This effect magnifies the hardship that they face in attempting to bring about change, but they persist nonetheless.

To me, behind the chilly glass of my air-conditioned taxi, the man from the countryside in his rough-spun clothing stands apart from the slick city inhabitants who surround him. He is clearly separate from them. On some level, to them, he is also “other”; he is an outsider.

He is who International Bridges to Justice seeks to help in the long view. The injustices faced by those who cannot afford adequate legal counsel are what IBJ hopes to remedy with its work. The widening disparities in social class and the “otherness” faced by outsiders are what IBJ hopes to solve by promoting equality in the face of the law. The marginalized of society are those that NGOs, outsider organizations, try to help. They do this in spite of the inherent challenges that they themselves face as a group of outsiders in a society that is alienated by foreign influence.

Mistrust and misgivings accompany any politically controversial outsiders in the tense climate before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, since both foreign reporters and foreign NGOs are infamously reputed to be rabble-rousers critical of the Chinese government.

The world’s intent gaze focuses on China through the Olympic lens, making everyone nervous. It forces everyone to be on their best behavior, particularly in front of us foreign outsiders. Because to admit to weakness, to admit to flaws is to lose face in front of the entire world. Such a thing would be akin to disappointing the Chinese nation. This is China’s chance to show the world how far it has come since Tian’anmen Square, since Communism, and since the Cultural Revolution. This sense of heightened self-consciousness only thickens the invisible barriers to action and communication. It increases the sense that we foreigners, we NGO workers, are outsiders in a place that we cannot call our own.

Because of all the barriers to action that I encounter, I wonder if such change can occur at all. The lens of my view is, of course, affected by the presence of these elusive, invisible walls. As a Chinese-American, my straight black hair and slanted eyes blend into the dominant population in China. But confused looks and bewildered expressions are my steadfast companion whenever I open my mouth. My thickly pronounced Chinese and unnerving habit of asking questions in accent-less English mark me as an outsider. Whenever I act as a member, an “agent” of IBJ, a foreign, interfering NGO, a halo of suspicion settles around me.

The world is watching China; I feel in turn that the Chinese people watch me.

Uncomfortable glances follow the heavy glass and metal lens of the digital SLR that I lug around with me to all official IBJ events. The camera erects an otherwise almost undetectable barrier between me and them. The rangefinder that I look through clearly marks me as an observer, watching those who watch me. The act of taking a picture, of documenting, strikes a nerve. My position as an observer behind the lens limits my role as a participant in trying to effect change as the outsider.

When I am introduced to Xiao Qing, one of the host students at my Inner Mongolian research trip in the middle of my summer, I am met with her plum-like lips forming a surprised O. The usual explanation of “Her family is Chinese and she’s a *huaqiao*” – which literally translates to “cultural bridge” or American-born Chinese – is met with startles throughout my summer in China. And afterwards, I am always left with an open space to define myself to whomever I am introduced as either more Chinese or more American. More insider or more outsider.

However, there is something in my combined Chinese-American heritage that prevents me from wholly accepting either of the paths I see before me. The Chinese unwillingness to break rank, lose pride and face in front of outsiders is understandable to me. The resistance to foreign interference after being subjected to 100 years of exploitation post-Opium War is doubly understandable. I can appreciate,

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through this context, the insistence of the totalitarian, opaque bureaucracy to preserve the right to make its own decisions regarding change within the legal system. However, international NGOs like International Bridges to Justice provide unique, more objective perspectives as outsiders on the endemic legal problems that the system faces. As an American, I want the Chinese to open up and accept that outsiders might just have a better solution, or something valuable to say. But with my heritage, I understand why they're hesitant.

This refusal to wholly accept either "way" leaves me feeling as if I am glassed off in an observatory, watching as the two cultures clash in International Bridge's work attempting to achieve change in the Chinese legal system.

The only thing I can think to do is raise my fingers wrapped about a camera and click the shutter, hoping that something will come out of the camera that is greater than me. That some answer will be found within them. That the documentation is enough.

There are so many definitions for a lens. As I look back on my summer spent in Beijing, China, I find that these definitions may be applied. I hope that my experience may be used as an "element" that can "change the direction" of people's understanding of social change in China. Like the prescription glass lenses that mediate my vision of the world, I hope that my words can be "used to converge" the "transmitted lights" and sounds of my experience to "form images" of the challenges that international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) face working as outsiders in Chinese society. And I hope that my description on paper, here, will be able to serve as a channel to my experience as a lens to this insider-outsider conundrum. And I am left with the question: can outsiders effect change in a society that is not their own?

### Glass Islands

Each morning in Beijing, I groan awake to the energetic sound of my cell phone alarm at 8:25 a.m., grapple around my bedside table, recover my black-framed glasses, and stumble out of bed. I hastily exit my apartment after brief morning ablutions and wait impatiently for the old, slow elevator. Blinking sleep out of my eyes and pushing my slipping glasses up, I hurry out the elevator doors as soon as they slide open.

Chinese businessmen in casual work dress, starched white shirts and creased black pants zip past me on bicycles, kicking up hot dust on sidewalks of the main street that are always in the midst of reconstruction for the Olympics. Herds

of white-collar commuters try to hail one of the glassed-off, air-conditioned taxis. They get honked at by the even wealthier commuters behind waxed windows of black and silver Hondas and Audis. Steam rises in the chilly morning air from the flat iron skillet used to make the crepe-like egg pancake *jianbing*. The tanned, wrinkled faces of the migrant workers cooking at the breakfast stands, sweating as they patiently smooth out each pancake, are the most alert of the morning crowd. Most of them have been awake since dawn, preparing for the breakfast rush.

I hustle past the elegant, tinted glass-and-metal symmetrical quad of Microsoft buildings. The Zen-like faux waterfall on the software company's grounds tinkles gently below the patter of people's feet. My sleep-filled brain focuses in and out like a seventies film camera with a manual focus, processing the bustle slowly. And I stare unabashedly through my black-rimmed frames at the occasional blonde-haired foreigner who inevitably walks out of the Microsoft's Starbucks, bleary-eyed and holding a disposable coffee cup. The glasslike divisions between the striations of Chinese wealth and society no longer faze me during my commute. To my not-yet-awake eyes, it seems almost like I am watching a panning shot of a movie's film set.

Boarding my bus to work, I slip through the crush of people to cling to a pole, as the drive knocks me into the shoulders of the packed crowd. We jerk through traffic in the technology district of Zhongguancun. Everyone standing sways with the movement of the bus, forward and back. People stare hypnotized in their morning daze at televisions installed in the front and the back of the bus. The muscled men and petite women of the Chinese Olympic gymnastics team somersault dizzily through the television screens. I watch as the same female voice recording announces which stop we are arriving at in just the same way as she does every other day.

The scene on the screen then blends to commercial after a short vignette of fade-out to the enormous, scorching flame of the Olympic torch high above the curving, arching, crisscrossing beams of the *Niaocao* Bird's Nest Stadium. The fire and the Bird's Nest are designed symbols of the phoenix fire in the spirit of China's rise once again onto the international scene. That frozen frame is what China wants desperately to show the world.

Sometimes, instead of watching the Olympics play on loop, I simply stare out of the foggy glass window of the bus, risking car sickness in the jerkiness of the movements. I compare and contrast the pink sparkly cellphone chotchkes sitting in the lap of the young, pale Chinese woman driving the BMW four by four to the burlap sack in the lap of the sun-browned construction worker sitting next to me on the bus.

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At 9:30 a.m., I arrive at the glass and steel entryway of the International Bridges to Justice China Headquarters office. Cool air blows from the vents, and large glass windows span the front of the spacious office, allowing in the bright morning light. I walk in, letting the cool air wash over me as I absentmindedly clean the lenses of my spectacles that always manage to collect dusty and grit from the commute over.

It is as if the glasses that I wear every day to help focus the blurriness of my nearsighted vision do the same for the unspoken racial and socioeconomic lines within my commute every morning. I cannot help but see the glass lens that persists to mediate between me and the people outside. Me and the Chinese commuters I pass through the streets of Beijing with. With this lens as an outsider, I feel like I can see the glass island that IBJ is located in compared to the outside Chinese world that it is trying to effect change in.

A glass door and a wall of glass windows physically separate the IBJ office from the outside, and the air is filtered and conditioned. The building is shared with dozens of Chinese companies, but the office stands out with its name printed doubly in English lettering and then Chinese characters on its glass and metal nameplate. English is the lingua de franc of the office, however, as the Chinese program officers are completely fluent in English – even legal English. Chinese is one of the hardest languages to learn fluently (the tones, the characters – you need to know ten thousand characters to read a newspaper). I feel guilty that I'm not actively trying to learn more Chinese by speaking it more at the office, but the ease of speaking English in this small haven, this small island of complete understanding, for me is irresistible. As it is, outside the office, I struggle with explaining to taxi drivers exactly which unknown destination I'd like to go. In going to conferences and meetings for IBJ, I often have to resort red-faced to exaggerated expressions, hand motions and mortifyingly calling someone who speaks fluent Chinese (and fluent English) at the office when communication finally reaches an impasse. The American directors know enough Chinese for passing conversation and Chinese is used at IBJ to interact with the outside world.

The directors are all attractive American, well-educated lawyers who used to be public defenders in the United States. There are three of them: Rob, Michael and Jennifer. Jennifer has been with IBJ the longest, over five years. Helping to start the Beijing office and the program in China, she runs the office with a gentle smile. Rob is the newest director, just arrived a few months ago after conducting trial advocacy seminars with legal academics in Japan. With silver hair and a laidback style, he has a long background in law school academics and now runs the clinical legal education program (putting clinical programs into Chinese law schools).

Michael is the joker, always with a smirking smile and a teasing remark; he runs the training and legal-development initiatives in China. Thirty-five to fifty years in age, they dress in well-heeled, tailored suits, striding in with purposeful demeanors, Starbucks coffees in hand.

The purpose of IBJ espoused by these directors is to help resolve some of the issues brought to light by widening gap of wealth in China, as well as the rest of the world. International Bridges to Justice was founded in 2000 by an American attorney working for the United Nations, named Karen Tse. Though she is not related to me, we both initially found the inequality and the poverty in Asia to be jolting. In China's case, not everyone was left with the same amount of resources after the Communists let every man race for himself in the pursuit of prosperity during the return to the free market in the 1980s. This expanding disparity in wealth means that in reality justice is not always equal in the face of criminal prosecution, as not everyone indicted of a crime can afford an attorney. With only 110,000 lawyers officially accounted for in 2002, the ratio of lawyers per person in China is markedly lower than compared to the U.S. (with approximately 1 per every 263 people [total 1.14 million active attorneys], versus China with only 1 per every 12,016 people).<sup>5</sup> Therefore a system mandating right to counsel for criminal indictment is significantly more challenging for the Chinese criminal justice system. The directors inform me that IBJ's mission is to help ensure that China and other developing countries find innovative ways to enforce laws in the criminal justice system regarding the rights to competent legal representation and the right to a fair trial.

The directors treat Chinese legal issues like they are a court case. They prepare speeches for meetings that argue that IBJ's programs on juvenile justice, pre-trial discovery and investigation, and criminal clinical legal education help to enforce the laws that the central government of the People's Republic of China has committed to. They have the passion and the rigor of public defenders who stuck with the harsh criminal system of New York City for over a decade apiece. They approach problems with a positive attitude and an objective view, set apart from the daily machinations of the system. And their attitude persists in the face of a dilemma-filled system that is achingly slow to change.

Clear glass sections off the individual offices of the International Bridges to Justice directors from the Chinese program officers and interns who sit in the open space in the middle of the office. Each clear glass sheet is approximately 4 x 5 feet in length and height, set into the whitewashed plaster wall, surrounded by wooden frame-like molding that had been stained the color of amber. It gives the impression to those who sit outside of these individual offices that each

window is an image frozen in time. Inside, there are dark-stained hard wood desks topped with expensive MacBook laptops, surrounded by large, hanging frames of traditional Chinese calligraphy. And from there, those small windowed offices up on the 21st floor of our glass building, I know that they look out over the fast-paced technology district of Beijing. I feel that they see with the objectivity of one separate from but still amidst the milieu. In the image that they see of China, they find flaws and areas for improvement within the legal system. They want change, but they also want to preserve the integrity of the whole.

However, in the face of international scrutiny prior to hosting the Summer Olympics in Beijing, the official Chinese government position seems to equate the discussion of challenges facing the legal system as another attempt in a series of efforts by foreign journalists and NGOs to embarrass China. This intense suspicion simply leads to further reinforcements to the invisible partitions that divide discussions and communications between NGOs.

It is as if there are two images of China that are at war with one another. The first image is that of the Chinese government as it tries to promote on television, heralding the Olympics as officially marking China's rapid progress into the modern age. IBJ and other human rights organizations continually attempt to remind China of the other, clearer image that they see from behind a glass that separates them. This second image is of the distinct problems that many Chinese lawyers privately admit exist within the system of substandard legal enforcements of human rights issues.

From my viewpoint, the Chinese government sees the first image as necessarily exclusive of mistakes and flaws. The pristine nature of the first photograph is crucial to the government's saving of face and protecting pride in country. Such Chinese logic doesn't jibe with the distinctly American thought in the second image that a government

admitting its own mistake is the necessary first step towards recovery. But the essential difference, I have learned in my comparative studies of governance and politics between the U.S. and China, is that the U.S. government is one whose legitimacy is based on process – the guaranteed right to due process. Whereas the government of China's legitimacy is

largely based on shown success and progress. To admit to mistakes, to lose face, is to show a crack in the façade and weaken the legitimacy of the government.

Somewhere between these two images, these two understandings, I stand transient, traveling constantly between the two worlds. A glass island in my own right, I squint into my black-framed lenses to see what I can, and relay it here.

### **A Picture of Inner Mongolia**

The sky is like a bowl. Enormous, round, endless, and towering above me. After a month and a half of living in the ubiquitous miasma of grey smog that shrouds Beijing, gazing at a perfect sky for the first time since I've left the U.S. is refreshing. The clouds in the Inner Mongolian sky are cumulus cushions of fluffy flawlessness. However, dust-flecked glass and metal separate the perfect weather from me, holed up as I am in the darkened, cramped conference room at the back of the Hohhot Legal Aid Center. Pages and pages of printed interview questions are spread in front of me, as if my blue folder full of notes had bled them out in a rippling arc.

After weeks of preparing furiously in my glass island that is the ideal-holding IBJ office, I am poised to dive into action. The Beijing University Law School students, accompanying me as partners on the IBJ field research trip, flank my sides. Their heads bend as they scribble furiously, notating in rapid Chinese the responses to the carefully worded 11-page survey the other summer intern, Zhang Wei, and I have created.

The survey asks for the number of times that a defense attorney in Hohhot can request for the turnover of evidence during pre-trial stages. It asks whether a defense attorney can visit crime scenes, investigate a client's background, speak to non-prosecution witnesses, or even retrieve school or medical records of a client. Given the fact that Chinese defense attorneys are allotted no pre-trial discovery or investigative rights, and are in fact handed cases the day of trial, most of these questions seem impractical. They mark us, the interviewers, as out of touch, as clear envoys of outsiders to these legal aid attorneys we are surveying. Methods for and rights to an in-depth, well-prepared defense that has come to be expected and presumed in the United States simply do not exist in China at this point. Chinese lawyers know that.

However, Hohhot, the capitol of Inner Mongolia, is chosen by my bosses because of the success that the IBJ "Know Your Rights" Campaign had in December 2007 on the Chinese national "Know Your Rights" holiday. They suspect that the open community acceptance of the rights awareness campaign could lead to a successful implementation of one of the pilot juvenile-justice projects. My trip is slated as an

**Methods for and rights to an in-depth, well-prepared defense that has come to be expected and presumed in the United States simply do not exist in China at this point.**

exploratory one, one to research the status of juvenile justice before any decisions are made in much later months. My theory before arriving is that the Mongolians in Hohhot, who are outnumbered 3.97 million to 18.75 million Hans, are used to welcoming outsiders amongst their midst.<sup>6</sup> However, after stepping off the 14-hour train from Beijing to Hohhot, I marvel at the sameness – the city is much like any other major Chinese urban center. Fruit carts and *xiao maibu* or closet-like convenience stores with Chinese versions of Gatorade packed in freezers lined the streets. Red posters of the Olympic gold-medal hurdler, Liu Xiang, advertising mineral water stuck to the sides of grey, stained concrete walls.

Similar to those concrete walls, questions from our survey throughout the trip are greeted with stiffness and friction, as they would have with officials in Beijing. The question of “What is the total number of criminal prosecutions for Hohhot?” is met with tense glances sent from one of the female, pony-tailed attorneys to another. They answer with edgy shrugs and “We don’t know.”

Martin Fackler, a former Associated Press correspondent for China, writes that “foreign reporters are alien observers in any country, almost by definition” (33). “Alien” is certainly the way I am perceived in this interview, agent, as I am, of a foreign NGO tagging along with the most prestigious law school in the country. The presence of Beijing University Law School students lends an air of authenticity and standing that allows these interviews to even occur. But me, I am different. I am American. I am clearly an outsider. Foreign, and “alien,” I dare to ask a multitude of clarifying questions of my colleagues in a hodge-podge of Chinese and English. The act of asking questions or “sharing information, particularly of an even remotely sensitive nature,” Fackler states, “[runs] against Chinese officials’ political survival instincts [since it] wasn’t long ago that people were verbally or physically abused during ‘struggle sessions,’ or worse, just for uttering the wrong propaganda line. ... In this environment, silence remain[s] the safest option (37).”

During this interview, I do not run up against a wall of silence but I might as well. My colleagues and I run up against a wall of “I don’t know.” This leaves me unsure as to whether I should blame these answers on my Americanness or whether the Chinese government is disorganized and disseminates this information poorly. My Americanness labels me as an outsider unfit to share information with. And the Chinese bureaucracy is infamous for its lack of organization and its lack of transparency. Fackler claims that:

One of the fundamental challenges of working in China [is] the Herculean effort required to unearth even the simplest facts, the sort that would be considered

reasonable public knowledge in a more open society: when, where, how many hurt or killed, or even just whether something happened at all. Most officials [refuse] to disclose anything. You [run] up against a wall of silence (36).

Unspoken apprehension trebles as I dip my hands underneath the table, pulling out my fancy-looking SLR digital camera. It adds earnest weight to the conversation, looking semi-professional as it does with its five-to-seven inch glass and metal lens. On a level it legitimizes my presence, I feel. A photograph is evidence. It anchors my documentation, my words, and my observations to a thing that is more fact-based. But, since a photograph is evidence, it makes Chinese people inevitably nervous. It showcases, unmistakably, people’s faces and their presence talking with a foreign NGO. The camera thickens the invisible walls that lay between them and me, and I imagine that responses will be even more vague, even more silent.

However, my NGO asks me specifically to document the interviews with photographs. Photographs are great things to send back to wealthy donors who can frame them behind even more glass and metal, watching International Bridges to Justice’s promotion of rule of law in action from afar. Naturally, these things are better when the NGO volunteers are blonde haired and blue eyed, and prominently displayed in the picture. This foreignness visibly contrasts them against a sea of Chinese, leading them onto the “better” American way.

In reality, I feel that stereotypical image just makes it harder for such conversations to actually effect change. Everyone is aware that the image looks great – it looks like cooperation across national lines. However, the picture fails to show the invisible, glass-like partitions that loomed between the “American” way and the “Chinese” way.

The director of the Hohhot Legal Aid Office shoots a look askance at me through his sunglasses. Jerking into the conversation, he interrupts the flow of tense “I don’t know” to ask the question sitting on everyone’s mind: “*Wait, who is International Bridges of Justice? What do they do – and why are they asking for this interview?*” The underlying tone asks me, Are you legitimate? Should we even be talking to you – will that just get us into trouble?

The bent heads of the Beijing University Law School students look up and glance nervously at one another. Chen Xi, a female student with intelligent eyes, smiles and – looking to me for assistance – attempts an awkward explanation. The precariousness of our outsider status is threatening to ostracize us. To associate with politically controversial outsiders, or pariahs of the regime, is still unwise, particularly



in the hyper-sensitive pre-Olympic climate. Pushing back my chair, I hurry to explain.

Taking out shiny, photographed brochures that introduce IBJ, I reply in rushed tongue-tied Chinese, “International Bridges is a non-governmental organization, concentrating on promoting rule of law in Chinese criminal justice particularly with juvenile delinquency. They’d like to know more about the current state of criminal defense, here in Hohhot, to find out what areas they could help to improve and how.”

I pass the white brochures embossed with IBJ’s blue scales logo to the Legal Aid officers. Their eyes alight on the shots of American directors speaking at All-China Lawyer’s Association conferences. Pictures of IBJ directors shaking hands with the Procuratorate, the highest agency responsible for prosecution at the national level, legitimize beyond a doubt the NGO’s ability to exist within a lawful framework.

Rigid stances relax as the eyes of the four attorneys from Hohhot Legal Aid move over the brochure, carefully. Heads nod, and the faint lines of smile muscles in the attorneys’ faces begin to appear. The director of the legal aid office pushes up his shades and starts to speak rapidly on recent legal reform’s changes to the job of a defense attorney, gesticulating fluidly with his hands.

I could feel my Beijing University colleagues release a collective breath of relief, before their heads bend back to scribbling notes. I let out a sigh that echoes theirs, raising my camera once again to adjust the aperture settings for a shot. And out of the viewfinder of my glass lens, I could see the still uneasy glance of one of the women Hohhot legal aid lawyers aimed my way as I click the shutter.

### **The Beijing Roundtable: A Banner and a Lens**

Weeks later, returned to Beijing, I cup my camera in my palms as I stare at the handiwork of Zhang Wei, the IBJ office manager. Poppy anemone red, the traditional Chinese banner stands out against the richly stained grain patterns of the conference room’s wood panels. It manages to stretch across the entire length of the wall, declaring in bright white English and Chinese lettering: “*Roundtable Regarding the Implementation of the Newly Amended Law on Lawyers 2008, Hosted by International Bridges to Justice (IBJ) and The Criminal Law Research Center of China University of Political Science and Law (Zhengfa University).*” The banners are always important at roundtables in China.

The red-and-white color block of the sign contrasts against the plush money-green felt that covers the tables. With its spotless marble floors and halls and its extensive garden

compound grounds, the opulent atmosphere of the room matches the affluent front that the Friendship Hotel presents. It even contains its own grocery store with infamously expensive imported foods for the comfort of its foreign guests. During the days when Communism kept the gates of China’s Great Wall shut to the outside world, it was well known as the only hotel in which foreigners could reside and it still retains an untouchable polish that belies the primitive state of rural conditions outside of urban areas. The walls of the Friendship Hotel had once been akin to a glass divider between foreigners and China, forcing visitors to peer through a black peephole aperture to see only what the government would have them see. As if the tiny measure of the hole would convince viewers that all that was left out of focus or out of the picture simply did not or could not exist.

Inside of the hotel’s impressive conference room, I survey the participants of the IBJ Beijing roundtable. Thickset Chinese men with ironed cotton polos or starched, tie-less dress shirts and wrinkles on their pale, middle-aged faces mingle in that room with a smattering of younger business-like Chinese women in knee-length skirts and soft frilled shirts. They greet one another casually, making introductions, and wear relaxed smiles. The academic roundtables that I’ve attended are similar with professors smiling and joking jovially with one another before the talks begin. The attitude here is the same, but more subdued. The elegant settings in the expensive hotel obligate a more business-focused manner, and underline the importance of the guests: prestigious professors of the university hosting the event, judges of the Supreme People’s Court, members of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) Ministry of Justice, All China’s Lawyer Association, the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, the Beijing Bar Association, the Langfang Legal Aid Society, the Langfang Detention Center, and the Langfang Justice Bureau.

These are the insiders. The movers, the shakers, the deciders. These government officials and local stakeholders are in control of the change that International Bridges wants to create with the Duty Lawyer Project.

The roundtable is being held to convince these insiders to officially climb onboard the project. It is being held after signing a memorandum of understanding with Zhengfa University regarding the duty lawyer project that International Bridges to Justice launched in 2006. It is a joint project slated to improve earlier access to counsel in the criminal justice procedure in China. Research with Zhengfa University’s Law School showed that in most of China legal aid does not, in fact, receive assigned cases during this time frame. More typically, legal aid lawyers may be assigned a case on the day of trial, thereby potentially having a negative effect on the hearing of a defendant.

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IBJ thus developed a project idea that would allow legal aid lawyers to be on “duty” and gain direct access to clients in detention centers at the beginning of a criminal investigation. This would significantly improve the equality in the judicial hearings and the right to counsel that is central to IBJ’s mission. Ultimately, if the project succeeds, many of the poorest and most vulnerable in society would be protected. It is one of the most prominent changes that IBJ is attempting to implement in China. It is also extremely complex as it involves gaining coordination with, cooperation from, and ultimately a stamp of approval from practically all of the departments and ministries in attendance of the roundtable.

The project already went through one delay and a change of locale, due to a change of local management in the original pilot location of Shijiazhuang (a city located in the farthest northeastern province of China). It was moved to Langfang in Hebei province (the province directly south of Beijing). The roundtable is being held now to solidify relationships in Langfang, persuade partners to institute the duty lawyer program, and hopefully clarify any issues that individuals from the various related agencies might be having with setting a fixed date for the beginning of the project. The success of the project will be a huge step towards creating the change that IBJ is committed to in Chinese society.

Jennifer Smith, whose official title is director of IBJ’s China Operations and Programs, sits at the head of the table. She is at the center of the tuning fork-shaped arrangement that the conference’s long green rectangular tables have been set up in. It is only right that she be at the speaker’s seat, since she is hosting (and her organization is footing the considerable bill for) the roundtable. Sitting with her at the table is her co-host, the honorable, white-haired, and renowned professor emeritus of Zhengfa University Law School, Chen Guangzhong. He had the connections to invite the more prestigious participants, and it is his academic research that backs the program’s premise. Occasionally, he pushes back his thick, wiry glasses, bends his head and whispers gently into Jennifer’s ear, as she nods empathetically to whatever it is he has said. Her skin, the pristine color of a pear’s flesh, only pales in contrast to the whiteness of Professor Chen’s hair.

The other two IBJ directors are scattered about the room, amongst the Chinese officials. Each stand out with their white, Caucasian skin and their starched black suits. From a distance, it would have seemed that the foreign NGO directors are the important government officials while the casually dressed officials are simply spectators. However, as soon as Professor Chen leans over to speak into a microphone set in front of him, calling the roundtable to order, it becomes clear that the foreigners are the spectators leaning in to listen intently to the IBJ Chinese office workers translating for them.

The effervescent senior program officer, Tu Lijuan, moves her willowy frame across the room, carrying a mike and waving cheerfully to me. Shifting a chair to sit just behind Jennifer, Tu finds no extra room at the head table. She pulls out a cluster of notes from her bag and sets them on her lap, placing the microphone gently atop them. She’ll be translating for Jennifer, as two of the other Chinese workers in the office (Jia Hao, and my fellow intern, Zhang Wei) will be translating for Rob and Michael respectively.

This is a Chinese discussion, and ultimately a Chinese decision. Rob, Michael and Jennifer have IBJ translators who seem to me to be the physical manifestation of the invisible boundaries that exist between our NGO’s work here and the change with the duty lawyer program that we are trying to implement. At this point, it feels to me that IBJ has been relegated to the sidelines, to the margins. True, the directors will get a chance to speak, to make their case, to argue for acceptance of the program, but it is up to the Chinese stakeholders and officials present to decide.

The rest of the crowd drifts quickly to their seats, and from my corner of the room in front of the red roundtable banner, I click a quick picture from behind my long, heavy lens. Two silent men from the hotel, smartly dressed in electric blue blazers, gold-colored buttons and black bowties, move through the dispersing crowd with silver teapots to fill the identical white porcelain cups perfectly spaced in front of each participant. It is a seamless movement, plucking off the scallop-edged ceramic cover with one hand and tilting the pot to fill the cup in the same motion with the other, before replacing the top. Professor Chen begins to speak in Chinese about the achievements made towards justice and the protection of human rights through the advancement of lawyers’ rights with the recent amendments on the Lawyers’ Law.<sup>7</sup>

Moving silently through the seated officials, I sit off to the side and set down the heavy camera bag I’ve brought with me. Through the long zoom lens, I focus in on the participants, snapping their expressions: attentiveness, interest, distraction. Two men in front of me shift uncomfortably, staring at the speaker and then their respective watches. Nodding to one another, they begin to gather up their belongings. One of them shoots a piercing glance and then a stare at me. I’ve been fumbling with changing my seven-inch lens, and I’m sure the camera is making him nervous. Turning to Zhang Yun, the sparky office manager who’d organized the roundtable, I gesture quietly to the two men as they are leaving.

Shaking her head, she whispers to me in her thickly accented English, “They are the Langfang police.” I frown.

Police participation and allowance of duty lawyers' presence within public security bureaus or detention centers is key to the program getting off the ground. Their presence here at the roundtable is significant, and I wonder if it means that they have already decided to either reject or accept the proposal. I wonder if it means that they are to delay the decision, and delay the implementation of the program until far after the Olympics, when prying eyes and lenses like mine have disappeared. Their exit doesn't seem to affect the lively speeches being made and the talks being held.

"But they left their IBJ materials..." I whisper back, nodding towards the fresh and forlorn white and blue paper bags that had been knocked down halfway under the green felt of the tablecloth. I could still see the decal with the IBJ logo of the justice scale on their fronts from my purview.

Zhang Yun purses her lips in a familiar frown and shrugs wordlessly. Her eyes shift to the front wall, and she smiles at the banner. To her, I think, the banner is beautiful. It represents the culmination of the event and all that the event promises. The roundtable is well organized by her, and the dialogue is as scheduled. Jennifer, the IBJ China program director, will speak soon – after both the vice director of National Legal Aid Centers in the Ministry of Justice and the vice director of the Politics Bureau of the Langfang

Commission of Politics and Law deliver their opening words. The departure of two tetchy police officers from a conference room full of fifty important government officials is almost immaterial. To her, I can see that the structured flow of discourse and discussion between Legal Aid and the Justice Bureau is what is important to this meeting. The fact that the police even showed up – that all of these important parties and important officials have been brought together to the table by an outsider organization like IBJ – is significant. These are important ingredients needed for change.

Impatient as I am, I wish that I could see these officials agree immediately to change their system of governance, their laws, and their criminal justice

system. But fearing the chaos that could result, they insist on slow and tedious dialogue. I understand – upheaval has been present in the lifetimes of many of these officials. My own parents fear sudden change as their families were forced to flee from their homes in mainland China because

of the swift, violent takeover of the Communists more than fifty years ago. Change, they tell me, if it is to be peaceful and nonviolent, needs to be incremental. It needs to be slow and tedious. And on some level, I can see through Zhang Yun's eyes the words in the air wear away slowly at the thick glass between the participants and IBJ, like drips of water continuously corroding.

"Can you take a picture of the entire banner? It does not fit on my camera." I look back at Zhang Yun, her gaze still settles satisfied on the banner of the meeting. I nod, lifting the weight of my camera automatically to settle in front of my eyes and manually adjust the focus of my lens.

The edges of the banner are blurry, and overly round, with the fisheye distortion. Without it, though, I won't be able to see the whole thing all at once. The harsh poppy red of the banner will be faded with the high speed setting, as adjusted for the inside lighting, but it will do.

And I click.

### A Glass Lens

My words are like a glass lens set upon paper. My voice magnifies my questions and my doubts. I ask if change can be made in China, a culture uneasy with foreign influence. Can outside organizations like International Bridges to Justice have an impact in this context?

In the larger context, social problems are beginning to crack the façade of the "harmonious society" that the Chinese government repeatedly calls for. The vast fissures of inequality that have sprung up in China since market reform in the 1980s have created class tensions that did not exist in socialist society before. The gap between haves and have-nots has widened as the Chinese economy sprints to catch up with the world. This imbalance has created instability in society, a potential rumbling for change that could topple the Communist government. Crime has skyrocketed from an approximate 500,000 cases in 1987 to over 4.5 million cases in 2003.<sup>8</sup> Academics state that the slow degradation of cohesive social values are forcing Chinese officials to move towards "perfect[ing] the socialist democratic legal system," as a 2006 plenary session statement says, where "the rule of law is to be carried out completely, and people's interests and rights are to be respected and guaranteed."<sup>9</sup> The matter of how this change is implemented is being fought out now.

Stepping back to look through my own experience as a lens, I see that this battle of method is fraught with the insider-outsider friction. Two frames, two images, two ways are in tension when international NGOs, like International

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Bridges to Justice, try to effect social or structural change within the Chinese system. I see from both sides and understand both points of views as both Chinese and American. And with my words, here, I try to provide some

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descriptions of the problems on both sides to help bridge the cultural divide.

During my internship with IBJ, I find that in China glasslike partitions exist in international NGOs facilitating conversations and attempting to participate in the instigation of change within the institution of government. Foreign NGOs face enormous challenges in crossing these unspoken barriers, in having the government even admit that there are problems to outsiders. These barriers create an isolation for outsider organizations. The outsider role tends to limit active participation of foreign organizations if they attempt to maintain the whole integrity of an organization's mission.

Creating change in any system is a slow, complex process. It is impossible to quantify. NGOs like International Bridges to Justice set the stage for change, bringing discussion to the table and creating channels of communication between different groups. These outsider organizations lay roots for large-scale social change.

However, whether the efforts of these outside groups will ultimately lead to the change they seek remains unknown. I find significant challenges and barriers to action for such organizations in China. The question of whether outsiders can effect change in a society not their own remains unanswered.

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# Searching for Peace through the Chaos: Peace and Development in Nepal

AARON VOLDMAN '09



When Kamal Pun was 13 years old, he gazed through the Nepali night at the Maoist soldiers crawling through the alleys of his city. Kamal's home is directly across from the Royal Nepal Army Base in the Dang district headquarter of Gohrai. Five minutes after he first saw the soldiers, he heard an explosion. Kamal's parents instructed him to hide in his room. He hid under his bed, but then curiously snuck upstairs to "see everything." Amidst the bullets and explosions, Kamal heard the wails of his neighbor. Rebel mothers fought with children on their backs. He reflects:

"The women carried a gun in one hand and their baby on their back." Youth his age fought alongside the women. The fighting continued until early morning. He did not sleep. At dawn, Kamal saw the Maoist soldiers carry away their dead and wounded. After the Maoists departed in nearly thirty trucks full of captured Royal Nepal Army weapons, Kamal left his home to find twelve dead bodies strewn about his neighborhood. He could not sleep for days. The soldiers fought over ideologies distant to a thirteen-year-old boy. He was not partial to either side. As he tells his story six years after the attack, a fire burns in his distant eyes.

When I arrive in Nepal in July 2008, it has been twelve years since the People's War of Nepal began and only two years since it has ended. Monarchy ruled Nepal since the unification of the country centuries ago. The Maoists claimed to fight to remove all forms of oppression, and they built a fighting coalition of laborers, women, and alienated minority groups. The conflict began in the most rural regions of the country, areas of the greatest poverty and despair. The Maoists advanced from the destitute rural regions towards district headquarters and eventually towards cities such as Nepalganj and Kathmandu. In 2006 the Maoists negotiated with the Seven Party Alliance and signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Elections took place in April of 2008. The Maoists won more than twice as many seats as their rival the Nepali Congress, establishing them as a clear voice in the newly revamped government. However, the Maoists did not win enough seats to claim a majority in the Constituent Assembly (CA).

I am acutely aware of the ramifications of violent conflict. The first funeral I ever attended was for Mark Evnin, an American soldier killed in Iraq. In the dark early morning hours prior to the funeral, in accordance with the Jewish tradition, I sat solemnly alone with my mother in front of the casket covered by the American flag. After the funeral, a massive line of cars slowly followed Mark through the streets of Burlington and then South Burlington, Vermont. A few miles from the graveyard, we passed hundreds of students and teachers who lined both sides of Dorset Street, just outside of South Burlington High School. As we drove through the students, the air molecules froze in a shocked silence. Tearful students clung to each other next to their sober teachers.

When I was seventeen, I volunteered in a Liberian refugee camp in Ghana. When guns fired for local Ghanaian rituals, I saw my traumatized Liberian friends regress back into the shock of war. As I walked through the camp, the stench of poverty and need filled my nostrils. I thought of my grandfather, Carl, a holocaust survivor orphaned as a young teenager after the war. I saw the soul of my grandfather in the camps, searching for escape and freedom. He lost more than forty family members. Today he is retired and has more time to himself than ever before. As he looks out his Rochester, New York, window, he sees soldiers taking away his parents. And as he sits alone on the porch, he recalls the faces of his younger sisters killed in the war.

As I look into Kamal's eyes, they grow even more distant as he goes into the depths of his story. I think of how my own eyes drift as I remember the Holocaust, the refugee camp, and the car driving through the suspended disbelief of my classmates and teachers on the day of Mark's funeral. From Iraq to America, Ghana to Europe in the 1940s, violence has touched my life. It is part of my DNA. It is part of my bones. Recognizing that my life has been so deeply affected by violence, I see peace advocacy as a responsibility. It was with this in mind that I traveled to Nepal to learn how to build peace.

### Namaste

As soon as I walk out of the Kathmandu Airport, a massive smile above a sign with my name on it greets me. The sign and the smile belong to Ghanshyam, a schoolteacher and one of my hosts. I soon learn that, for the Nepalese, peace is a way of life. "Nepal is a peace country. Peace is our identity," said Kedar Gandhari, a friend and translator. The Nepali word "shanti," or "peace," is a sacred statement of the Nepali language and culture. At the school in which I stayed, meditating youth would exhale the words "om shanty" to conclude their meditations each morning. Nepalese greet each other with "namaste," which means "the God in me sees the God in you." In essence, they celebrate the divinity within each other every time they meet. Despite the fact that peace is part of the Nepali cultural identity, a brutal war engulfed Nepal. The fighting killed 13,000 brothers, mothers, daughters, fathers, neighbors, students, religious leaders, political activists, and those unaffiliated with any political party or ideology. I ask myself, how did such a peaceful country come to experience such a violent tragedy? And what can I learn from this context about peacebuilding?

### Kathmandu

As I leave the school in which I live, I exit onto the Kathmandu streets, paved to suit the needs of the nation's capital, but dusted by years of neglect and poor upkeep. A single row of corn grows on both sides of the path. Dogs move about menacingly, slowly lifting their heads to stare at a

passer-by. Next to the roadside stores, just beyond the residential area, a condom stands out, imprinted into the mud. Men sit in front of empty stores, as hens and chickens peck around the rotten and decomposing garbage heaps that lay between the stores and the street. The street buzzes with loud and rapid traffic. As I wait for a taxi, I can make out the image of a poster across the street. A metal hand shakes a hand made of green clay. The poster is an inadvertent monument to the collusion of the virgin environment and modernity.

Taxis painted with the face of Che Guevara, *tuk tuks* made of tin, bicycles rotting from years of use, and large passenger busses all push in unison.

Students with neatly cropped hair stick their heads out of the *tuk tuks*. Motorcycles driven by bandana-clad young men rev their engines as they breathe in the dark fumes escaping from their tail pipes. Vendors next to the barbed-wire fence sell bright colored vegetables soaked in exhaust. The motor vehicles mix with an assembly of vendors and pedestrians to create the mishmash that is the Kathmandu traffic jam just outside of the Nepal Parliament complex.

Usually, I experience these traffic jams from the inside of Nepal's taxis and *tuk tuks*. The *tuk tuks* are tiny tin trucks that you enter from the back. Passengers sit on one of two wooden benches that face each other. They are reliably crammed. And so are the larger buses. Shoving is required to enter and exit. Women and men holding sacks of potatoes and leafy vegetables squeeze among passengers of all ages. If you are over about five and a half feet you have to sit hunched over in your seat so that you do not smack your head against the tin roof. As a five foot, ten-inch American, my ride is marked by an aching back and the interested stares of my travel partners.

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The *tuk tuk* exhaust mixes with emissions from trucks, taxis, and mopeds. When I sit along the road drinking tea, I worry that the particles from the tale-pipe-less trucks will enter my respiratory system as I sip. Cows sit contentedly in the middle of the road as medians that the traffic swerves around on each side. Sometimes the cows will move from the roads to the sidewalks. As a pedestrian I learn to monitor my steps in order to slalom the smeared cow pies.

As I stand at Pashupati corner, I see a woman dressed in a red and yellow traditional Sari with a red dot on her forehead. Before the Hindu woman, atop a sheet, lie vegetables. The leaves of a long lemongrass-like vegetable hang on to the curb. By my feet sits a broken (potentially eaten?) three-inch section of a cucumber, two scattered small tomatoes, and a juice box with a straw. As I stare at the piece of cucumber and lemongrass resting on the cement next to the colorfully dressed woman, I stand in suspension. The dichotomy is striking. The woman of earthy nature – the woman of culture and spirit, the eternal source mixes with modernization – honking horns, cement, dirt, and grime. It grips me to my core.

After my camera is pick-pocketed, I venture to New Road, the center of technology in Kathmandu. New Road attracts throngs of youth, many of whom are clad in their college uniforms. Electronics shops full of digital cameras, computers, and cell phones line the street. Security guards stand on corners as a mass of people cross. Close to Thamel lies King's Way, one of the classiest sections of the city. Trendy shops and expensive restaurants stand out from both sides of the road just down the way from the now vacant King's palace.

I rarely see foreigners in most parts of Kathmandu. But in Thamel, they are everywhere. As I enter the tourist district, street children walk up to me, and hold on to my hand with one of their hands as they outstretch their palms. "Money, money, money, money, money, we hungry, money" they cry. As I drop rupees into their hands, I cross the street. On the other side, I see an older boy of eleven or twelve years dropping glue into the bags of the youth. One of the boys holding a bag looks with his graying eyes into mine. "I'm sorry," he whimpers as he grabs my hand.

One late night a young man approaches me in Thamel. He asks me if I smoke marijuana. I shake my head, and he dejectedly moves back into the shadows, away from the light of the Thamel streets. I join him next to a wall and ask him how much he makes per month. He responds that he brings in an income of 19,000 rupees. I later learn that his revenue is three times the salary of many of the city's teachers. Towards the end of the night, I am stopped before my hotel by a boy with a young but sharp face. "Want a lady?" he asks as he grins mischievously. "How old are you?" I reply. He is a 13-year-old pimp.

Students from across Nepal leave their families for a chance to enter into one of Kathmandu's elite colleges and universities. A student I met at a conference, Danish, invites me into his home. He lives in a ten-by-fifteen-foot apartment along with two other roommates. The three sleep in two small beds. They cook their meals on the floor, right below where they sleep. Danish is from a far-away district. He has come to the city for a new life and a new opportunity. After I leave the thriving center of Kathmandu and head towards the school in which I live, I transfer buses near the Kathmandu airport. Amid the dark night, I approach a group of youth sitting just beyond the airport fence. A young man I befriend tells me that each night he crawls under the airport fence and sleeps in the grass. He is too embarrassed to tell me what he does for work. But he says he makes less than two dollars a day and works shifts of over fourteen hours. Airplanes scream as they approach and depart.

I drive an hour outside Kathmandu city and hike the quiet hills of the valley. Villagers greet me as I walk. They are dressed in old cloth. A young man chops wood as his siblings look onwards. A mother stands next to a boy of only two or three years wearing no pants. Only a few miles away from the city, quiet sets in. Amidst the silence, I look back towards the city from atop the hills. I see a city torn between a rural past and an urban future. Elements of the countryside roam the city streets. Cows meander. Vegetables are strewn about the intersections. But the noise screams of urbanization. The throngs of students cry out for a cosmopolitan way of life. Grime-ridden workers in search of a sustainable pay do not let me forget that for Nepalis, however chaotic, Kathmandu is an opportunity.

### Ganesman

Ganesman Pun sits quietly and assuredly on the third floor of the central office of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M). He is the commander of the Young Communist League, the youth organization of the CPN-M. When I ask him why he joined the Maoist Party, Ganesman responds: "In our society, there is a dispute between the elite and the proletariat. That is why I want ... youth to develop. I want to help them to fight against the [evil of the society]." When Ganesman was fifteen years old, he recognized social discrimination. The injustice inspired him to act. As he speaks he does so factually and proudly. He told me that in 1996 he led an attack on a police station. The attack was part of a countrywide effort that sparked the start of the war. The government forces captured Ganesman and held him in prison. Four years later he escaped and returned to the battlefield as a senior military leader. Ganesman reflects: "In Nepal, people here had a good ideology. People see the progress of the world, but [they do not see progress here]."

That is why people feel depressed, that is why people are going towards violence in Nepal.” Ganesman claimed that inequality and poverty fueled the conflict. To see for myself, I traveled from the paved streets of Kathmandu to the dirt roads of the countryside, where economic development is foreign and distant.

## Rural Nepal

As I leave Khatmandu, I am joined by translator Kedar Gandari. We travel to Gorkha, Dang, Rolpa, and Sarlahi. My few days at Kedar’s home illustrate what it is like to live in the countryside of Nepal. On a microbus the size of a large van in the US, we drive over and out of the valley. We exit the microbus after five hours of driving and walk past wooden shack stores. A four-foot-wide suspension bridge overhangs the river of brown and white rapids. We carefully cross the bridge. Kedar points towards the top of a distant 8,000-foot “hill.” “I live there,” he says pointing to Gorkha. As we walk up the hill, we pass men and women harvesting hay with sickles. One woman wearing a rainbow-colored small umbrella hat turns to me in the hot sun. She smiles and joy radiates from the laboring woman. Transportation to Kedar’s house is a large all-wheel-drive truck. The white truck, caked in mud, carries both supplies and as many passengers as can fit. I start the journey on the top of the hot white vehicle’s roof, but midway, my hands and feet grow tired, and I move to the back of the truck. As we climb the 8,000-foot hill, the marvelous lush valleys fascinate me. Near the top, the snowy Himalayan Mountains appear above the clouds in the distance. I am in awe as I stare at the magnificent peaks.

Suddenly the truck jolts and we sink into a caked groove. The wheel has come off. We move to the truck that we have been following. I climb up to the hatch and hold onto the railing. A few minutes into the journey, I notice a smell that makes me cringe. Three feet in front of me a low iron cage is strapped to the top of the truck. It is filled with white chickens. Chickens on the side of the cage wiggle their heads outwards in a futile attempt to escape. One chicken lies motionlessly with its head outside of the cage cocked to its side. White, yellow, and green excrement lies on its head. Another chicken’s butt sits atop the motionless chicken. As the bumps continue and the chicken still lies motionlessly, I wonder whether it is dead or alive. As we go over another bump, my question is answered. The chicken’s head snaps off; the chicken was dead. After the bus ride, we hike towards Kedar’s house. We walk for ten minutes along a path of stones. Kedar’s father greets us. Over an open fire pit, his father roasts an entire chicken, holding it by its leg.

Kedar’s home is made of clay. Kedar’s mother warmly greets us. She sits with one of the six family goats underneath the husks of maize that hang from the ceiling. At 56 years old, she goes to work the field at 5 in the morning during the harvest time. Besides the harvest time, work in the countryside is extremely scarce. The family grows their own maize but they rent the land and must share the limited produce with the owner. Despite the Gandharis’ efforts, they can only grow enough maize for two months’ worth of food.

The Gandharis are part of the Gandharba caste, the only musician caste in Nepal. The Gandharba are an “untouchable” Dalit caste and particularly struggle to find employment. Their numbers have dwindled in recent years. For centuries the Nepalese have lived under the ancient caste system. And the Dalit face a difficult life. They are not allowed to enter many of the rural temples. When some Dalit have tried to enter, they have been beaten. At some of the rural schools, Dalit children must sit separate from their non-Dalit peers. One Dalit, Anupkamal B.K., had to flee his village after he married a non-Dalit girl. His family followed in order to escape persecution. Dalit discrimination in the countryside is particularly harsh.

**For centuries the Nepalese have lived under the ancient caste system.**

Kedar’s home sits atop a hill of majestic wonder. Within a couple hundred yards of Kedar’s home stands the castle ruins of the Gorkha King who united the nation of Nepal nearly two and a half centuries ago. Valleys of great depth plunge from the royal hills. Beyond the valleys, more hills rise with miraculous height in front of the Himalayan peaks that loom majestically afar. When Kedar’s 56-year-old mother goes to the field at 5 a.m., her deeply wrinkled face is highlighted by the rising sun. Sickle in hand, she smiles beautifully and proudly. She is at peace with her life. But many in the village are not. Two of the youths joined the People’s Liberation Army, the revolutionary Army of the CPN-M. The people of Gorkha and those in many other rural districts refer to their homes as “backward,” a term so politically incorrect that it is jarring for my American ears to hear. It is understandable how despite the beauty of their lives atop the Gorkha hill, the youth joined the Army. They want to survive. And many desperately want change.

Rolpa is even less developed than Gorkha. Its dirt roads and difficult access belie the poverty of the area – poverty that served as fertile ground for the birth of the Maoist insurgency. A ride in one of the few buses that dares to enter



the district is like riding a mechanical bull along the edges of steep mountains. It is excruciatingly bumpy and even the local policeman described the ride as difficult. In route to Rolpa I get out of the bus. As I stand in the cornfield, I notice an electricity pole with a small hole in it a few feet from the base. On the back side of the pole is a circle of jagged metal that is torn outward. It is a bullet hole. After I get back on the bus, we ride along the zigzag road from the tops of large hills to the valley of Libang. Libang, the headquarters of Rolpa, is wedged among looming hills on all sides. We stay in the headquarters' "best hotel." It costs four dollars a night, a low price even in Nepal for a "best hotel." The Internet cafes that are so abundant in Kathmandu cannot be found along the mud roads of Rolpa. The lack of access to communication leaves me longing for Kathmandu – a city whose dirt and density would never have spoken to me as an economic center or a developed city before I left for Nepal. But now I see that to which it stands in contrast.

The last destination of our trip is Sarlahi. Sarlahi is located in the Terai, which is the strip that stretches across the Nepali-Indian border, just under the hill section of Nepal. The sun is much more intense in the Terai and the heat is as well. The land is flat, its vast stretches sliced by thin streams of water. The roads mirror the streams, haphazardly cutting across the land, doing little to interrupt the cracked ground. Thatched roofs rest atop the small houses we pass. I count five children openly excrete along the side of the road.

As we travel back from Sarlahi to Kathmandu, a young man walks by wearing slick-backed hair and a stylish jacket. His dress is a sharp contrast to the tattered clothes of the inhabitants of rural Nepal. Cement houses line smooth cement roads, free of the persistent bumps of the countryside. Large cigarette advertisements cover the tops of doorways and stores. Our bus enters a marketplace. There are taxis, but no rickshaw drivers. Purple onions, tomatoes, and plastic bags bob in the muddy water below the bustling marketplace. The noise of the city rocks me. After two weeks in rural Nepal, I see the development of Kathmandu from a new perspective.

### Contrasts

In both Rolpa and Sarlahi, great poverty swept the region. And violent actors were able to mobilize despair. Maoism is a part of life in Rolpa. Bold blue writing that proclaims "Drinking is injurious to health" stands out from the center of the hotel bar. On each side of the writing, liquor is placed behind glass. The large writing is clearly visible to the anti-alcohol communist leaders, communist cadre, and community members that see the bar each day as they walk

to work. The Maoist Rolpa District deputy secretary described the Maoist party as "the guardians of Rolpa." The party won every Constituent Assembly seat in the district during the April 2008 election. In Rolpa, even schoolchildren dress in red.

The people of the Terai are the "Madhesi" and they vigorously push for change. When I meet with the Sarlahi leaders of the Madhesi People's Rights Forum, nearly fifty people crowd the small space used for the interview. Two adult leaders of the Sarlahi organization sit across from me as the crowd gathers around us. They claim that their civil rights have not been granted, and they cite the lack of development in Sarlahi. A charismatic and powerful young student leader sits to the right. The leadership and attendees are angry, and they want change. They interrupt each other to tell me of their plight. The Madhesi struggle with the government of Nepal has waged for many years, their struggle turning violent at times. One man's angered wide eyes stick out from the crowd of men. He seems off kilter, ready to pop at any moment. As he speaks, his eyes grow wider and scarier. As the leaders and Madhesi attendees at the meeting count off human rights violations, their anger boils. While the efforts of the Madhesi have been generally peaceful, and they stress that their movement is a nonviolent one, I can understand, given the anger in the room, how the movement could turn violent. The scene is a window into tensions prior to the outbreak of armed conflict. If violent political entrepreneurs gain leadership, if the political context worsens, then it is understandable how the anger of the attendees could possibly be transformed into violence.

Rolpa and Sarlahi face great poverty and underdevelopment. Rolpa was fertile ground for the creation of the Maoist insurgency. And Sarlahi is fertile ground for future revolt as well. Conflict management expert Lisa Schirch writes:

Preventing Terrorism requires an understanding of the places where extremism thrives. Extremists are a tiny minority in any society, but they are more likely to find a sympathetic audience when the majority shares some of their anger, resentment and fatalism. They exploit frustration and indignity, no matter what the cause—be it chronic poverty, political oppression, or systematic exclusion from the benefits, privileges and respect that other societies enjoy.<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2008 Chronic Poverty Report, Nepal is a Chronically Deprived Country.<sup>2</sup> Poverty hampers all of Nepal. But the extreme poverty is concentrated in rural regions and among certain castes. The disparity between the lifestyles of people in most districts of Nepal and the people of Rolpa

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is great. Similarly the standard of living in the Terai is less than that of the hill regions. During the civil war, the Maoists mobilized those angered by the lack of development. And due to the economic condition of people in the Sarlahi, it is understandable how they could be mobilized to act violently in the future if their grievances are not sufficiently addressed. The lack of peace in Nepal can be attributed to two predominant factors: concentrated chronic poverty and the decision to seek change through violence.

The mantra of the Nepalese today is that “peace-building and development must go hand in hand.” To achieve a sustainable peace in Nepal, it is necessary for all people, independent of caste or gender, to secure economic resources. And people must be inspired and supported to choose peace. Whether it is peacebuilders at International Alert, organizers at the Asia Foundation, or members of the Dalit Welfare Association, humanitarians in Nepal understand the dual need for peacebuilding and development. When I asked Preeti Thapa, a program officer at the Asia Foundation, about the interconnection between peace-building and development, she noted: “People now realize because of the conflict in Nepal that you need to join peacebuilding and development together.”

As Preeti speaks, she comes alive with a loving, compassionate energy. Although she is a mother she retains a youthful energy and presence. It is clear she is in tune with the needs of the villages throughout Nepal and understands the resources needed to transform the various conflicts that the Nepalese face. Preeti states that the grassroots of Nepal are challenged by the need for both peacebuilding training and development support:

They can learn this [peacebuilding] training, they can learn this skill of conflict resolution, but they cannot “eat peace.” That is what they say: We cannot “eat peace.” ... Only [peacebuilding] training will not help them because their needs are there, and they are unmet. If you know how to deal with your problem, and you try to be nice ... you [still] do not have anything to eat. That is not a way of life. That does not solve the other part of the problem.

Preeti illustrates her point through a story of a woman whose husband was killed in front of her children. The traumatized woman did not know how to deal with her own pain. Her traumatized children did not attend school.

She got support from the government, and the Red Cross gave her [a] shop. But that did not help her ... She did not know how to deal with her own trauma.

She did not know how to deal with the trauma of her children, because they saw the Maoists kill their own father ... And with this training, she said that she met people like her, other victims of conflict. And they shared their feelings, and she realized, “Oh, I am not the only one who has gone through this problem,” ... and she realized that to be a widow is not a curse, and that it is OK to cry, it is OK to feel like that, it’s normal and that there is such things called trauma ... and healing. And then she knew how to address her own conflict with other people and build relationships. She knew how to go ask for help. And after this training she went to school, and asks the teacher to take the children to school, and then they got [a] scholarship ... So this type of training helped to build relationships and to help [victims] deal with their own problems, and to slowly help them in reconciliation and breaking the cycle of the enemy.

Preeti emphasizes the need for development activities. But she notes that “[Victims] won’t know how to address their own traumas. When they go back home, they are still dealing with this cycle of violence, this cycle of conflict. And from the inner side they won’t have peace.” In the “interdependent” and “inter-linked” Nepali community, Preeti makes the case that “we need each other to survive in a community.” Development supports the body, helping it function, to have its basic needs met, while peacebuilding supports the spirit. Together development and peacebuilding provide hope to build sustainable ways of life throughout a new Nepal.

In a training on “Building a Sustainable Peace,” trainers emphasize the need for both civil society and government to play a role in building peace. Civil society includes Nepali and international non-governmental organizations. Examples of civil society peacebuilding efforts include the training Preeti references, the efforts of the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), and the Children’s Peace Home. During the People’s War, INSEC mediators in Rolpa would visit Maoists if the Maoists abducted residents and work with them to seek the release of the abductees. And if the government detained anyone, INSEC mediators would work to ensure the protection of the detainees’ rights. Since the cessation of fighting, INSEC organizers have worked with local government to assist communities to heal and reintegrate displaced persons. The Children’s Peace Home of Dang hosts youth orphaned by the conflict. The children sleep, eat, pray, and dance together among the rice paddies that stretch far into the horizon. In Dang, I stay at the home and witness the children’s joy. In the morning, we walk for ten minutes amid the rising sun, and then sing while riding on the top of a school bus.

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## The Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction

The government of Nepal formed the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction (MOPR) in order to build peace after the People's War. Although it was only created last year, this ministry is one of the most powerful sections of Nepal's government. From interviews, as well as discussions with citizens, peacebuilders, government officials, and political party leaders, it is very clear that the vast majority of Nepalese believe that the MOPR should exist. However, many Nepalese are also deeply disappointed with its performance.

The Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction lies in the Singha Darbur government complex. On the back of a moped driven by Manish Thapa, I arrive at Singha Darbur after rounding the parliament and driving along a road lined with less-politicized ministries, local businesses and restaurants. Manish is the executive director of the Asian Study Center for Political & Conflict Transformation (ASPECT), where I am an intern. My assignment is to study and report on the efforts of the MOPR, with Manish supervising me. A dynamic young man in his mid-twenties, Manish is a peace studies professor. He is well known in the Nepal peacebuilding community and in larger Nepal political circles. Manish led the civil society campaign to establish the MOPR in 2007.

As we get close to the ministry, I grow excited. I currently serve as the executive director of the Student Peace Alliance, the national youth movement to establish a U.S. Department of Peace. Since 2005 I have organized youth throughout the United States to ensure that peace has a strong voice in our federal cabinet. Soon I would step into the halls of a government agency in Nepal like the one I have advocated for in my own country. A massive rectangle surrounded by a brick wall topped with barbed wire, Singha Darbur is the home to many of the government ministries and parliamentary offices. Graying buildings of four or five stories rise above the brick wall. Manish points to the closest building just beyond the wall: "That's the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction."

At the east entrance of Singha Darbur, police guards in blue and black stand armed outside the gate. Soldiers wearing green and black stand at attention inside the gate. Along the wall, a line of people extends from a guard station. The line of predominantly men all wear pants despite the great humidity. The palace of an ancient Nepali king sits beyond the east entrance. Ritzy cafes and trendy shops are interspersed throughout the palace grounds. Between the old palace grounds and the entrance, a handful of vendors line the streets. They sell sliced fruit on paper plates to the snacking government employees. A large black bull stands along the sidewalk. A section of the brick wall sags inwardly. I wonder if the sagging section of the brick wall is from an attack, poor construction, or old age.

We wait on our moped for someone from the ministry to greet us and guide us through security. A man of about five feet approaches us quietly. He looks tired and worn. But he smiles as he shakes our hands. As our escort from the MOPR brings us to a building, I am confused. "Law Commission" is written on the side of an overhang at the building's entrance. Underneath the overhang, new or relatively new SUVs and sedans are parked. Small Nepali flags extend upward from some of the cars. On most of the cars the flags are covered. Many of the cars display a blue sticker with a white cut out that looks like both a Nepali flag and a peace dove. The ministry occupies three floors of the law commission building and is made of about 80 staff members. At the front of each office, a white sheet hangs down from the door frame. Next to the door white writing on a wooden sign displays the name and title of each office inhabitant.

Madhu Regmi is a joint secretary at the MOPR. According to Madhu, the Peace Secretariat provided advice and support during the end of the 10-year Nepal armed conflict and the early stages of the peace process between the government of Nepal and the CPN-M. When I ask why the MOPR was formed, Madhu explains that the preceding Peace Secretariat did not have a direct channel to the cabinet. The officer overseeing the Peace Secretariat did not prioritize the issues of importance to the secretariat. So the members of the Peace Secretariat wanted, as Madhu describes, a "political boss." And with the creation of the MOPR, the Minister of Peace received the authority to speak within the cabinet on behalf of peace.

The responsibilities of the MOPR are solely aimed at implementing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the government of Nepal and the Maoists and overseeing the peace process. The cantonment division of the Ministry oversees the barracking of the Nepal Army and the placement of Maoist forces into interim holding camps. The human-rights section of the ministry oversees the controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. Those working in the section are currently writing the fourth draft of the TRC legislation. Other efforts of the MOPR include peace-promotion initiatives to raise awareness of peace in media throughout the country. A division oversees the Local Peace Committees, committees designed to bring the peace process to the grassroots level of Nepal. And the Relief and Rehabilitation unit administers compensation to war victims and oversees the reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed during the war.

Many in the ministry are proud of the work that they do. When I interview the ministry civil servants, many of them

beam with pride as they discuss their work. However, the ministry faces great challenges. Though the ministry focuses on peace promotion, so much of the country remains unaware of the peace process. Though the Local Peace Committee is supposed to bring the peace process to the local level, many of the districts have not organized local Peace Committees. In the few districts that have organized the local Peace Committees, meetings are typically held at the district headquarters, detached from the villages.

Those within the ministry typically tend to deflect blame onto the uncertain political climate. However, they do admit that they lack capacity, and the fact that few staffers are trained in peacebuilding is a “weakness.” Madhu explains that the civil servant system in Nepal is a “generalist practice.” Civil servants within the ministries typically only stay in one ministry for two to three years and are then transferred to another ministry. Madhu, for instance, previously worked at an anti-corruption agency. When he was promoted to the rank of “joint secretary,” Madhu moved to the Peace Secretariat, the predecessor to the MOPR. Only a handful of the 80 staff members are actually trained in the field of peacebuilding and conflict management in which they are working. Due to an incredibly insufficient budget, the government of Nepal does not currently have the capacity to fully train their staff in peacebuilding. And the international community is hesitant to train the workers because foreign governments and international NGOs believe that the training is not a good investment as within a couple years the trained civil servants will be transferred to another ministry.

In my last visit to the MOPR, an elderly woman dressed in brightly colored traditional robes stops me on the stairway. She begins to rapidly speak in Nepali as she leans on her cane. When I smile and tell her that I do not speak Nepali, she continues speaking to me anyway. Maybe she is crazy, or maybe she is deaf. But standing in her Nepal Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction, I get the sense she is deeply dissatisfied, and she just needed to speak to someone, even if I cannot understand what she is saying.

### **A Void Left Unfilled**

Many of those on the ground, people who continue to struggle day to day, have yet to see the fruits of the civil society and government efforts. After a fourteen-hour overnight bus ride to Dang, we come to a halt in the early morning dawn a mere 15 minutes away from our destination. We get out of the bus and find water running over the road for the next 150 meters. We are told that off

into the dark the water is raging. As I walk over to verify, indeed a fast-paced river covers the top of the road 100 meters from the bus. A man next to me matter-of-factly explains that there are three sections of the road that the water covers.

Although bridges had been planned, the bridges were never built due to the political instability of the armed conflict period and the instability of the current transition process. Vehicles can still cross over the rivers but they must wait until the pace is slow enough that the river will not wipe away the tractors and trucks. We wait a half hour for the water to recede, and then we cross.

Kamal is now nineteen years old and a muscular young man with strong features. He is quietly intense.

His eyes, yellow and black, are tiger-like. During the war, Kamal felt continually afraid. “Even we could not breathe fresh air,” he reflects. As we arrive in Gohrai, the headquarters of Dang, soldiers of the Nepal Army march in front of a massive red gate at the center of the city. The gate honors the Maoist martyrs who died fighting the same army that daily marches past the gate. Kamal leads me around the “affected area” of his city. We walk along the main road and veer into a neighborhood. Blackened mangled trees stretch pleadingly towards the blue sky. Next to the charred trees, iron construction poles extend from brick homes. Through the pain, the city struggles to rebuild.

Lack of development fueled the war, yet two years after the fighting stopped the bridges of Dang are still not built. Many of the destroyed houses in Dang have not been rebuilt. The roads of Rolpa remain unpaved. Despite negotiations with the government of Nepal, the people of Sarlahi remain deeply dissatisfied that their grievances have not yet been met. Many of those injured during the war have not received reparations. Although both government and civil society have sought to develop and reconstruct Nepal, much work remains to be done.

As Kamal speaks, his vulnerability comes through his quiet intensity. He still sees the dead bodies. He feels frustrated that the government does not do more to help. But he does not prescribe policy. I ask Kamal for permission to print his story and name. Quickly he agrees. He wants the world to know.

**Though the ministry focuses on peace promotion, so much of the country remains unaware of the peace process.**

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## Conclusion

The conflagration that is the People's War in Nepal raged for many reasons. A lack of economic resources provided the timber, social discrimination the kindling. Despair and anger were the fuel. The Maoists merely lit the match and then maintained the blaze. In 2006, the fire was ostensibly extinguished. However, its embers remain hot. The peace that was left when violence ceased is built on shifting sands, its foundation unstable. If the embers are not sufficiently attended to, then the fire could start up anew. Now the

government of Nepal needs to fully build a sustainable peace.

**The country is slowly transitioning to democratic governance and a life free of war, but many in Nepal are growing frustrated with government corruption and impotence.**

Two years after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Nepal still heals and seeks to transform the conflict. A foreign minister of the United Marxist-Leninist party concludes: "A baby is not baptized on the first day." A monarch ruled Nepal for hundreds of years. The country is just starting to experiment with democracy. The country is slowly transitioning to democratic governance and a life free of war, but many in Nepal are growing frustrated with government corruption and impotence.

A comprehensive solution to the conflict is necessary. As the fighting has ended, space must be granted to understand what happened, identify the challenges, and move forward. Development is necessary to rebuild after the war as well as to provide for the grievances that sparked the war. Human rights must be granted for each to be respected and included in community life. But without peacebuilding (mechanisms to resolve conflicts locally and nationally), neither human rights nor development can be sustained.

The Nepal MOPR brought together conflicting parties, inspired members of government to learn about peace and conflict management, and provided central contacts for all those in support of peace both inside and outside of Nepal. Yet the MOPR has struggled with implementation. Despite the capacity of the MOPR to generate policy, the ministry has struggled to effectively advocate for the needs of conflict victims. Furthermore the ministry is hindered by partisanship in leadership. The Nepali Congress-led MOPR provided reparations to those killed or injured

by the Maoists, but not to those killed or injured by the government forces. This sparked great anger among the Maoists, and their complaints to the Nepali Congress led MOPR to change its ways.

Many of the MOPR's challenges are due to timing and implementation. April 2008 elections that sent a Maoist plurality to the Constituent Assembly did not lend to the formation of a Maoist-lead government until the end of my stay in Nepal. Throughout interviews and meetings, people on the street, NGO workers, and government officials repeated the same refrain: "wait and see." Political implementation necessitates political consent. But political consent is difficult to cultivate in times of crisis. And in order to generate political consent, implementation of past agreements is necessary. The game goes round and round. Peace processes take time and patience is mandatory. The MOPR must be evaluated in this light. Additionally, leadership of the MOPR must be held accountable and given the educational and training resources to do the work that must be done. Maoists criticized the Nepali Congress-ruled MOPR for its partisanship. As I left Nepal, leadership of the MOPR shifted to the Maoists. As the Maoists now rule the MOPR, they have a unique opportunity to make change that moves beyond party lines. Future research is needed to study and monitor the MOPR. Research should focus upon the policy shifts instituted after the Maoists took leadership and how the MOPR is able to engage with frustrated parties such as the Madhesi.

After traveling from Nepal, to Bahrain, to London, and then to Boston, I lift my traveler's pack and enter the Boston T. I board the T from the Airport station and head towards Park Street on the blue line. I have traveled for thirty hours and I look like I have traveled for thirty hours. My Jewfro is disheveled. My stubble is becoming beard-like. And I smell. I smell badly. As I enter the T, the lights brightly illuminate the passengers. The passengers sit calmly. They are well dressed, and they wear shoes that look new. If the riders want to stand, they stand. If they want to sit, they sit. I am shocked by how spacious the T is. A blonde boy whines to his mother about the difficulty of the ride. I smile.

According to the 2008-2009 Chronic Poverty Report: "In all, 19 of the 32 countries classed as CDCs have experienced major conflicts since 1970 (a higher proportion than for other categories of country)."<sup>3</sup> As I return to my Internet access that is ten times faster than the Internet cafes of Kathmandu, and to grocery stores with shampoo aisles the size of some Kathmandu markets, I question how the affluence of my America impacts the violence of Nepal.

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And I see the violence of Nepal in our American way of life. The revolution of the Nepali countryside is the underground revolt of American urbanites. In America the cities that face the greatest poverty and despair also typically face the greatest violence. It is no coincidence that some of America's poorest cities (such as St. Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland) are also some of America's most violent cities. But even in our wealthiest communities, violence is a part of American life. In the wealthiest of American households, the silent oppression of domestic violence shatters the thin windows of suburban progress. The bullets of Columbine and Virginia Tech remind us that the soul of our nation still lives on in despair.

When there is no opportunity, when there is no hope, people want change. And if they grow sufficiently desperate they are willing to accept that change even if it is by violent means. Whether it is desperation over stress at work, alienation at school, or the inability to provide for one's family, this principle holds true no matter if the setting is Nepal or America. Like Nepal, America also needs a comprehensive approach to building peace. To uproot the scourge of violence in our country, we need to address conflict with strategies of development that raise up the economic condition of all Americans. And we need a peacebuilding strategy to inspire those across the economic spectrum to lead lives of peace. After two months searching for peace through the Nepal chaos, I return to America even more committed to making a vision of peace into reality.

## Notes

1. "A New Vision for U.S. and Global Global Security" The 3D Security Initiative, 4.
2. 2008 Chronic Poverty Report, 15.
3. Chronic Poverty Report, 88.