

# 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.

---

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.

---

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