Nichols Humanitarian Fund

2014

Contents

About the Nichols Humanitarian Fund

Nichols Humanitarian Fund Statistics

The Students

Lauren Barnett

Annie Carforo

Mackenzie Michael Clair

Mary Carlisle Crehore

Melissa De La Torre

Chelsea Derer

Wesley Dozier

Malak Elmousallamy

Adriana Galindo

DeLesslin (Roo) George-Warren

Kaila Gilbert

Madeline Gootman

Caleb Hayes

Caroline He

Lauren Hogg

Natalie Honkala

Shelby House

Erica Johnson

Nisha Khorasi

Rachel King

Deya Maldas

Melissa Marts

Lauren Paige McMillen

Alisha Newton

Oluwasijibomi Oluwadara

Lauren Pak

Susana Pilny

Marie Ramos

Devon Calla Reese

Adeline Reiser

Else Sharp

Laura Silliman

Logan Stroburg

Trominisha D. West

Shailoah Wilson

Farishtay Yamin

Paige Yelvington

Adria Zern

Renee Zhu

Law Student Recipients

Chelsea Fitzgerald

Katherine Dutcher

Jimmy Balser

Office of Active Citizenship & Service

About the Nichols Humanitarian Fund

The Nichols Humanitarian Fund was established in 2006 by the E.C. and Lucile Hamby Nichols Trust, and by Edward C. Nichols, Jr (JD '70) and his wife, Janice Nichols. The Fund encourages Vanderbilt students to become better citizens of the world and to broaden their thinking by volunteering for humanitarian efforts. The Fund enables students to volunteer for local, domestic, or international humanitarian service opportunities by making support available for educational, travel, and living expenses during their time of service.

All currently enrolled Vanderbilt students are eligible to receive assistance from the Fund, provided that they are citizens or permanent residents of the United States. Preference will be given to undergraduate students who have not yet completed their baccalaureate degrees.

Students are encouraged to develop their own service opportunities in communities where they can work to address an area of need. In past years, students have served in communities all over the world, including Australia, Costa Rica, New Orleans and India. Funding can also be used to participate in established Vanderbilt offerings, including:

- The Office of Active Citizenship and Service (OACS) summer programs in: Ecuador, London, South Africa and Morocco
- The Vanderbilt Initiative for Scholarship and Global Engagement (VISAGE)
- Summer Public Health in the Dominican Republic

Nichols Humanitarian Fund Statistics

MAP OF THE WORLD: NICHOLS FUND RECIPIENT SERVICE LOCATIONS

The Students

This year the Nichols Humanitarian Fund enabled over 30 Vanderbilt students to experience service-learning in countries all over the world.

The flags on this page represent the twelve countries where Vanderbilt students have traveled this year due to funding received by the Nichols.

These countries include; Kenya, India, Ecuador, South Africa, Guatemala, United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, Syria, Nepal, Ghana, Morocco and Russia.

The preceeding pages are the reflection reports from each student that recieved an award in 2014.

Lauren Barnett

Rabat, Morocco and Port Elizabeth, South Africa

I would first like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me the opportunity to partake in what has truly been one of the most transformative experiences in my life thus far. With your gracious gift, I was able to spend a month volunteering in Morocco this summer followed by another month volunteering in South Africa. Travel and service are two of my greatest passions, so the opportunity to combine them was incredible. I learned so much from my experience in these two vastly different countries. I was pushed beyond my comfort zone and as a result grew as a person, for which I will be forever grateful. I would love to now take this opportunity to tell you a little bit more about each of the trips, my major takeaways, and how this experience will guide me into the future.

In a whirlwind of moving out of my Vanderbilt dorm and packing my suitcase to leave the country, it finally hit me that I was about to begin one of the most exciting, eventful summers of my life. I spent the month of May living in Rabat, Morocco, with a Moroccan family in the medina, which is the old section of the city. I spent my weekdays volunteering at Le Feminin Pluriel, which is an NGO seeking to empower Moroccans of all ages through education, cultural awareness, and language learning. I spent each day teaching multiple English classes to students of all ages and levels, though I was mainly with college-aged students and older who had a strong understanding of English. Not having an education background, I was very unprepared when it came to creating my own lesson plans and accurately assessing exactly what level the students were at, but they were all so kind and eager to learn that I looked forward to spending time talking with them each day. I loved being able to learn from students about life in Morocco while also telling them about what life in America is like.

Towards the end of the trip especially it felt like time had flown by and right when I had finally hit my groove adapting to Moroccan life, it was already time to pack up and leave, which just goes to show how special and necessary it is to spend an extended period of time somewhere in order to really learn about and appreciate the place.

Though sad that my time in Morocco had come to an end, I was thrilled to embark on my next adventure: South Africa. I spent the month of June living in a shared house with the other Vanderbilt volunteers in Port Elizabeth. The majority of my days were spent volunteering at Missionvale Care Center, which is a community care center located in the Missionvale township. This nonprofit has various components: a school, a clinic, a clothing warehouse, a nutrition unit, a Father Christmas workshop, and an agriculture unit. I rotated between these units but spent most of my time in nutrition putting together food parcels and handing out bread to members of the community.

Though Missionvale's approach is not a sustainable solution to eliminating poverty, they do make a small impact on people's day-to-day lives and I was glad to be a part of that. Some of my favorite memories of working at Missionvale have to do with the staff there who are some of the sweetest, most joyful people I have ever met.

Lauren Barnett

Rabat, Morocco and Port Elizabeth, South Africa

For the few short weeks we were there, they welcomed us into their lives with bright smiles and warm hugs. Being in South Africa taught me how to love others and accept them for who they are because everyone has a light that shines from within and has the power to change or influence someone's life. People are capable of accomplishing amazing things and sometimes all it takes is for one person to have a little faith.

As a result of this trip, I have a few major takeaways that transcend countries. While I did see some gorgeous sights, it was my interactions with people that I will carry with me in my heart for the long run.I truly believe that I have changed for the better after experiencing these two cultures and meeting some incredible people. I have a much greater appreciation from where I am from and also for the fact that I have the opportunity to travel to such far away places. I have also learned to find joy in small things, celebrate each day, and to be grateful for everything that I have, especially my education. My patience and compassion have increased as well as my thirst for knowledge about other counties, peoples, and cultures. I was reminded how powerful love is and how great of an impact you can have on someone by simply listening to their story and making them see they are as important as anyone else. My time spent serving in Morocco and South Africa has given me a new outlook on what service is and what service means, especially in an international context. Through pre-site discussions as well as on-site hands on involvement, my definition of service was continuously evolving and morphing into something that could better reflect my experience. I struggled with the ideas of direct service versus indirect service and which could have a bigger lasting impact on the community being served.

In Morocco, most of us had administrative positions and so it was more indirect service. In South Africa, we were all directly interacting with the people, who all made it clear that just being there made a huge difference. I learned that no matter what your role may be, simply showing you care can have a tremendous impact on people's lives.

This two-month long international service experience without a doubt cemented my conviction that I must follow a career path guided by the purpose of helping others.

However large or small the impact, I aspire to make a difference in the world through bettering the lives of other people, which is my primary source of finding joy and fulfillment. In addition, I am extremely interested in engaging as a global citizen, which I will continue forever. My travel opportunities have shone light on parts of the world that I otherwise would never have learned so in depth about the culture and have exposed me to numerous issues occurring everyday throughout the world. I desire to continue increasing my awareness and knowledge about the what is going on in the world as a whole because at the end of the day, we share one key commonality: we are all people who deserve equality and to be treated with love.

Annie Carforo

Quito, Ecuador

Ecuador is a breathtaking country. Quito, in particular, is cushioned between mountains, and dotted with candy colored houses that make for an unbelievable view. The country has a plethora of biodiversity, the highest in the world. If you want beaches, there is the coast for that. If you want rainforest, there is the amazon for that. And if you want mountains, there are the Andes for that. It is almost a fact that visitors will fall in love with the adventurous, inviting, welcoming atmosphere. Most people, including myself, are not used to the expansive stretches of beauty, and the natural scenery, barely touched by mankind. It is a picture that has been photographed in magazines or aired on television brought to life. Ecuador is a place that every person hears of, and when they actually see it, they are mesmerized.

Vacations for many are an opportunity to escape reality and do things they would not normally have the chance to do. It is a time to be adventurous, relaxed or exploratory. A large numbers of travelers that pass through Ecuador get absorbed in the beauty of the country and excitement of a new culture. Trust me, in my four weeks at Ecuador, there were hundreds of times I was completely awestruck by the excitement of novel sights and actions. I still recall the adrenaline rush of zip lining over tree canopies, swimming in waterfalls and dancing with natives at block parties. The smells of homemade chocolate, fried plantains and freshly squeezed fruit juices remain intact, and the sights of rolling hills sprinkled with cows and llamas, bumping into dark mountains and blue skies are still ingrained in my memory. I would hear members of my group commenting on the simplistic and beautiful lifestyle of native Ecuadorians, living in humble homes, paying with quarters and nickels and riding buses to commute.

The farmers we saw in the mountains lived on endless expanses of lush land. Their kids ran around without shoes, jumping in waterfalls and playing pick up soccer matches with their neighbors. Many of us were envious of this life. One that seemed easy, and natural. Compared to modern American society, filled with technology, bustling cities and busy agendas, Ecuador seemed like an ode to a past, simpler life.

Something about this desire to live like these people bothered me, and I could not pinpoint what it was that got under my skin. It was only until I returned to my bed in New York, soaking up the air conditioning, playing on my iPhone that the realization started to sink it. People from our culture have the privilege of choosing their lifestyle and location. We have the ability to decide if we want to move to Ecuador and live the simple life of a farmer, or stay in the United States, constantly in touch with our online communities, massive malls, movie theaters and concerts We have become so accustomed to this life that we fail to recognize the high quality of our expectations.

Annie Carforo

Quito, Ecuador

Yes, the lifestyle in Ecuador seems like an escape from modern responsibilities, but we only experience the surface of what these people have to go through on a day-to-day basis. We selectively choose to see the beauty of how they live and the aspects that are desirable to us. What we fail to realize is that they face struggles, different from ours, but stressful nonetheless.

Looking back on my month in Ecuador, I realize the beauty and novelty of this experience. When I think what was earned out of this trip, by both myseld and the organization I worked for, I think selfishly, that this trip helped tremendously with my personal self-growth. It was a chance to live and work outside of my comfort zone, in an environment that produced an entirely different quality of life and expectation than what I was used to. While I was immersed in the stress and excitement of the volunteer project, I found myself reflecting in ways that really helped me delve deeply into the truthful reasons and beliefs for my involvement in the project, as well as my honest achievements. Volunteering abroad is a difficult task to do successfully. Often times, people go in with good intentions, yet lack the skills necessary for the situation. It is sometimes easier to assume you are being helpful than face reality after spending thousands of dollars on flights, housing arrangements and programs. Going into a volunteer program often does not leave the intended mark on the organization. Thinking back on my project, leaving a long lasting effect on the school I was working at would require resources and skills far beyond what I was capable of. Instead of getting discouraged, I learned that I have the ability to be flexible and adaptable. Even if I wasn't making a life changing difference on the children, I was helping in any way I knew how, and absorbing everything I could from them.

I learned that I do have a desire to become a global citizen, and that is not a title that anyone can claim by simply traveling abroad. It is a skill that requires practice as well as humility and patience. My trip to Ecuador instilled my desire to help, and fueled my courage to travel and explore outside of my comfort zone.

Ecuador was an experience that opened my eyes to my good fortune, and the complexity of status, struggles and modernization in the developing world. I am so lucky to have been provided opportunities to live in a new culture for an extended period of time and learn about a place thousands of miles from home. I appreciate the methods Ecuadorians have developed to modernize their culture, while maintaining age-old traditions. Ecuador is an exotic country, filled with promising adventures and wonderful people, who teach others to love life and live in the moment to the fullest extent.

Mackenzie Michael Clair

Vladimir, Russia

Having only studied Russian for two semesters before embarking on my trip to Vladimir, I wasn't sure what I could expect upon arrival or what I should hope to gain from the experience. However, largely thanks to the work put forth by the faculty chaperone (David Johnson) and the host program (The American Home in Vladimir), my month in Russia was a formative experience for me. I gained incredible perspective on what life is like in Russia by spending time with my host family and had measurable impacts on the organizations I worked with while in Vladimir. The VISAGE trip to Russia expanded my horizons by allowing me to spend a month of my summer halfway around the world, and I am so grateful to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for providing me the means to explore Russia in the way I did.

My first weekend in Russia, even though it was largely spent recovering from my seventeen hours of travel, was an incredible experience of cultural immersion. My host family brought me to their dacha outside of the city and treated me to an amazing weekend filled with delicious home-cooked meals and the experience of an authentic Russian *banya*, or bathhouse. I was welcomed into their home and got my first real taste of Russian life. My host family opened up their lives to me, and much of my feeling of cultural immersion was due to the remarkable job they did of making me feel welcome and comfortable in such a foreign place.

Our small group did a variety of service work within the Vladimir community. Our main projects included work with the Association of Parents with Handicapped Children, several days spent at a local dog shelter building fences and helping to care for the animals, and work at a kindergarten painting murals and beautifying the lawns. Despite the language barrier that existed between us students and the residents of the city, we still made valuable contributions and were able to feel the gratitude expressed by the Russians for all the assistance we provided.

We also made meaningful connections with the Russian university students we spent time with while there. Alexei, one of the directors of The American Home, also teaches classes at Vladimir State University. We had several meals and participated in cultural discussions with a few of his students and, as a result, gained valuable cultural perspective and made friendships. Additionally, some of them even spent time working with us at the animal shelter. It was a great feeling to come together for a good cause even though communication between us and the Russian students could be so difficult at times.

The experiences I had in Vladimir would have been impossible without a program like the VISAGE trip and the fantastic instructors at The American Home. We provided aid to organizations in the city doing wonderful work, and I am so grateful to the Nichols family for the help their fund provided me in going to Russia. It is an experience I will never forget.

Mary Carlisle Crehore

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

I am forever indebted to the Nichols for providing me with the means to participate in the OACS Global Mission Project to South Africa, which impressed upon my heart crucial lessons about myself, others and service. In addition to facing a variety of challenges, puzzling questions and immersion in a new culture, I came away from the trip with a new family, those with whom I lived and served for a month.

Our journey, of course, started in January with our pre-service reflections and seminars. We pondered about how ethics engaged with service, the difference between charity and service, how to contextualize our service, and the overall value and meaning of our service. In the midst of the philosophical quagmire we somewhat broke the ice and I personally left each session feeling a little wiser about how to truly serve a population.

Although it was essential that we pontificate about the aforementioned issues related to service, the result was that the first week we were in Port Elizabeth I felt downright cynical and hopeless. I was convinced that my trip halfway across the world was futile and I seriously doubted if the work I did would be sustainable. As an assistant to a daycare teacher, all I could see about the time ahead of me was the day I would have to leave and thus leave a gaping hole in the routine we would establish. According to my preconceived notions about service, if my work was not sustainable it was automatically ineffective and potentially even detrimental to the community I was trying to help. Luckily, I was not defeated and disappointed for long! Mama Gladys, our first guest speaker, instilled unthinkable affirmation, hope and courage in me to do the work I was meant to do; the work I am good at. As a mother to over 75 children, whom she adopted and raised in a home for orphans, Mama Gladys is quite familiar with being overwhelmed by the profound need of others and feeling helpless to anything significant. Thankfully, she freed me from cynicism about my service, or as I dreaded the trip would become, voluntourism. In conjunction with this encouragement from a gentle South African elder, my friend Blair shared a revelation with me: instead of thinking all the time, "just be".

"Just be" became my motto, my inspiration to play with the children like I had no inhibitions, to give my whole heart to those I was with everyday, without having to over-analyze every word, action or intention.

For a week (and for my trip as a whole), "just be" was my mental ticket to freedom. However, by the second week I realized I did not have much time left at Ilitha Daycare and I felt a pang of anxiety: how do I justify this month overseas? What do I have to show for this service? Once again, our guest speaker-this time an experienced social worker in a colored township, named Peter-transformed the way I see service. His message was that our time in Port Elizabeth was like a gardener planting a seed: we would start the growth process and nurture its potential to bear fruit, but three weeks was not enough to see if it would one day be strong and productive. Basically, there was a possibility that I could have planted many seeds in South Africa without even knowing it, and I would simply need to have faith that someday one of those seeds could bear fruit. In addition, he compelled us to nurture the seed that the trip planted inside *us*. One of the ways to do that, he taught us, was to share their story. Scream it from the mountaintop, post it on social media, tell anyone who will listen: there are people in South Africa, just like you and me, who need help. People with children so hungry they can't live anymore, parents so desperate to feed their kids that they go insane. Peter's words live on in my head and in my heart; each time I think about planting a seed I think about spreading the awareness so that people in South Africa can experience the dignity of being heard.

Mary Carlisle Crehore

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Lastly, the lesson that has impacted me the most is about our choices. I was continually flabbergasted by the resilience of some of the people I met. Thelma, Junayne, Lusi, Prof, Mama Gladys, they all had been in the depths of poverty, isolation, addiction, tribulation, but they made choices which led them to a different place. I witnessed more examples of the importance of making choices even when I did not know the background stories of people I met and observed. They were grateful for what they had at that moment, that day, and would joyfully give everything they had to glorify God for their blessings, even if that meant giving something away to one's neighbor. In Cape Town we had a discussion with some adults in their late 60s who had lived through the apartheid era. Despite being torn apart from their wonderful community in District 12 and displaced to an all colored community, they chose to forgive the people who had hurt them. They chose to maintain the community they still had by supporting their friends. Before the end of the discussion, one of the fieriest women in the group looked us sternly in the eyes and said, "Always remember, you are in control of your life." Again, Peter's words echo in my head: "What do you choose to see?" If I had to put in two words what this trip taught me, it would be, "choose wisely." If I had another chance to put in to words what my experience in South Africa taught me, I would say, "There is only one race: the Human race". The people who shared their stories with me while I was in South Africa have inspired me to make choices that benefit the human race, especially those who are forgotten.

Melissa De La Torre

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

From the first instance I had a chance to breathe the South African air of Port Elizabeth, I knew SA had a lot in store for me. Not only would I end up leaving with tons of new friends and experiences but also with knowledge about what it is to do service abroad and how much communities like the Walmer Township appreciate people who want to help them grow and become better.

The house that we lived in for three weeks was located in a neighborhood called Summerstrand rather close to the beautiful Kings beach of Port Elizabeth. Chalmers 10 became a place of rest, reflection, laughter and endless amounts of memories. It is one of my favorite houses because of its comfy couches but also because very volunteer that had passed through cared about the communities that they were working in and about each other.

I particularly worked in a crèche called Sinethemba in the Walmer Township. The first day there was like nothing I've ever experienced before. The kids were so happy to see us and immediately ran up to us and hugged us and were cheering for us. I had never felt so much human energy before in my life. The challenge for myself was to communicate with the children. Unfortunately, all the kids spoke Xhosa but not all of them understood English. I didn't want to rely on the teacher to translate all the time, so I learned some words myself.

The kids were like sponges, everything I taught them they remembered and when I came back the next day, they would show me what they remembered so that I could see how smart and capable they were. They always made me so proud, they knew the days of the week, the months, the body parts, how to count, animals and many more things, all in ENGLISH! I also taught them the macarena for fun, and I can assure you that they still remember, they don't forget anything.

The crèche, which is like a day care center and kindergarten was run by mama gladys and her family. Everyday, before we arrived, the kids would be dropped off around 7am and their parents would pick them up after 3pm.

I was fortunate enough to volunteer with another girl named Florence who was from Switzerland. She was about to become a teacher, and in Switzerland if you want to be a teacher you have to go abroad for three months to an English speaking country and work in education. "Flo" as we called her, told me that the majority of her friends went to America but she who is an adventurer and explorer decided that she would come to SA. I remember once when we were in the classroom helping the teachers keep control of the kids, Flo received a phone call from her mother telling her that she had passed the national teaching exam and it was guaranteed that she could become a teacher! Tears flowed down her face, she was so happy and proud of herself. I praised her for her accomplishment, that day was memorable.

On Fridays, after a whole week of learning for the kids and the small struggle to understand the kids. We would bring the speaker from the house and play musical chair with the kids.

Melissa De La Torre

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Trust me, it was chaotic but it was worth it. People understand each other through music, specially people in SA. They have a song for everything, and they love to sing. Once when we were volunteering at Walmer's soup kitchen, after everyone had gotten some soup and bread, the whole room lit up because everyone was singing and I joined in. Music for the kids was a time of freedom where they could sing their lungs out to the most popular South African "Jika" by MiCasa.

Another memorable day was the field trip to the petting zoo. Mama Gladys had rented some Toyota Quantums for all of the kids, Flo, the two teachers and I to go to the petting zoo. She explained that during the winter, they take a trip to the zoo and during the summertime, they go to the beach. This time was winter in SA and boy it was cold, during really windy days we all felt the cold in the classroom but we stuck it out. During the trip, the kids learned about animals and about what they eat. Many of them who were 3-4 years old were scared but there were some courageous ones.

My kids taught me so much about what I don't know about myself and how I could improve my future service.
I didn't realize how patient I could be. Although sometimes, I became overwhelmed by the chaos of the large classroom I was in, I took a step back and realized that they were kids and that all that they want to do is play with each other and go crazy all the time. Something that I wish I could have helped the teachers with more was controlling the kids in times when they seemed to be uncontrollable. I didn't know what to do in these situations. However, something that I learned overall was how much the kids, the staff and every person that I met in SA appreciated everything that I did. They never failed to thank me, either with a smile, a hug, or a simple thank you. My babies who spoke more Xhosa than English somehow understood me and although we spent only three weeks they managed to learn my name and to win over my heart.

They were so curious and had so much love for their country. I wish everyone could experience what it feels like to see these little ones sing the South African anthem; they are so little yet emit so much energy and love when they sing the anthem.
One thing that I will never forget is their morning thank you to God and their song thanking him for lunch . Every morning they would sing thanking god for the new day and when they were served lunch they would sing to him again "Thank you father, thank you father, for our food, for our food, many many blessings, many many blessings, amen, amen."

Besides learning about the meaning of service on an individual level, I was given the opportunity to meet people that have changed the way I see myself and have inspired me to become a better human being. JUNAYNE, was one of the Khaya leaders that lived in a small house next to ours. He truly embodies an exceptional human being who is not only charismatic, caring and entertaining but also very humble and patient.

Melissa De La Torre

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

I will never forget him and I know that one day I will see him again because I know we will bump into each other someday somehow. June, Junebug, taught the whole group the idea of African time, during which all the fantastic happenings of our lives in Africa happened, everything was subject to the pace of African time. Like the one time when we crossed an ocean mouth with our sneakers on top of our heads so that we could climb a trail and see the deepness of the ocean. One of the best days of my life happened because of the human spirit of this individual and his love for exploring. Besides, June, our hosts families in Cape Town showed us a different angle of South African culture when they shared with us their delicious food and their stories about the times of apartheid. For example, my host mom, Aunty Patricia spoke during the Braii (South African term for BBQ) about her childhood and how her father got into trouble for letting her play in a playground for whites only. All the hosts parents told us that they aren't bitter about what happened to them but they have decided to forgive and not blame specific groups for the bad things that happened in the past. They want to move on in peace by spreading progress and looking forward. All the people I met in South Africa showed what it means to embody the triumph of the human spirit. All I will always be is thankful.

Chelsea Derer

Rabat, Morocco

When I found out that I would be traveling to Morocco with the Office of Active Citizenship and Service (OACS) for a global service project, I couldn't contain my excitement for what was to come. In the spring semester before departing, I attended the events hosted by OACS and soaked up as much information as I could about Moroccan history, the culture, service learning, and what I should expect upon arrival. When I got off the plane in Rabat, Morocco, I realized for the first time how little I knew. It was a trip that books, discussions and facts couldn't prepare me for, it was meant to be experienced fully, and this is exactly what I did.

I thought I knew a lot about Moroccan culture before I arrived, but I really didn't, and I was surprised in the best possible ways. To sum up the culture in a few words, it was a culture of sharing. Whether it was time, physical space, food, language, religion, or the culture, all things were shared. After arriving, I was immediately welcomed and invited into this culture. For example, on our first day of work, my service partner Adria Zern and I were instructed to ride the "Big White Taxi" to Marche Yusufia. In reality, a "Big White Taxi" was a small white Mercedes that somehow managed to squeeze seven passengers inside. Two people shared the front passenger seat and four people shared the back seat. These trips were crammed and hot and sometimes the driving was a little scary, but these rides were one of my favorite parts of the trip because they allowed me to participate in the daily life activities of a Moroccan and share space with these amazing people. Fellow passengers would occasionally speak English to us and one of my favorite memories was sitting next to an elderly woman who invited Adria and I to have coffee with her.

We were stunned by her kindness and care for us and we later found out that she went out of her way to meet young women because her daughter had recently died of cancer at a young age and she loved meeting people who had similar qualities as her daughter. This woman really touched us and everyday after meeting her we would look for her at the taxi stop, hoping we would have a chance to talk to her again. This is just one simple story of many that demonstrate the welcoming and kind nature of the people in Morocco.

Another great way to show the kindness and welcoming nature of the people is through how they communicated with us. Moroccans are extremely intelligent and very impressive in that they typically speak two languages at a minimum, and usually many more. In communicating with foreigner visitors, they would speak in as many languages they knew until you could understand and communicate back to them. If this didn't work, they would typically start a humorous game of charades in an effort to understand each other. America has so many wonderful qualities, but being open and inviting to individuals speaking languages other than English is not one of them. This experience has made me so much more aware of how difficult it would be to come to America as an immigrant and this awareness of social issues I had never considered before has empowered me to make a stand for a change welcome people into the United States like the Moroccans so graciously did for me in Morocco.

While in Morocco, each of the global service cohort members was assigned in pairs to work at a non-profit organization for the month. Adria and I were assigned to work at Organisation Pan Africaine De Lutte Contre Le Sida (OPALS), which is an HIV/AIDS education and free testing organization.

Chelsea Derer

Rabat, Morocco

After arriving, we were joyfully greeted by Ilham, our hilarious and bubbly supervisor. Ilham helped to guide us in our time there and served as a translator when needed. I don't think there could have been a better non-profit organization to spend the month at.The people were incredibly kind, caring, and clearly passionate about the work they were doing and the organization had the impact and accomplishments to show for it. The non-profit sector in Morocco is still growing and gaining credibility with the people, but I have no doubt that with more dedicated people like those working at OPALS, this sector will grow tremendously and continue to make a positive impact on the Moroccan people and it was so wonderful to witness this change and growth happening.

Since I've returned to the United States, I think back to my time in Morocco all the time. I remember the incredible kindness and hospitality of my home stay family, the Center for Cross Cultural Learning, the staff at OPALS, and all of the deep friendships I was able to form with the other members of my cohort. This experience impacted me in profound ways. The biggest way this experience will impact me in the future is through my socially guided decision-making. Maybe I won't work in the non-profit sector or in HIV/AIDS activism, but serving internationally has radically changed how I look at the world. I want to pursue a career in business and with the massive global corporations that exist today, I know I will look back on my experiences in Morocco and urge socially minded decisions and for positive impact in the corporations that I am a part of.

I cannot speak highly enough about my experiences in Morocco and how they have transformed my time at Vanderbilt and how they will transform my life beyond Vanderbilt. I also cannot minimize how I got there. I was able to take this trip because of the Nichols family and I am eternally grateful to them for believing in me and supporting me on this journey. I cannot thank the Nichols family enough for this opportunity and making this trip possible.

Wesley Dozier

Quito, Ecuador

When people ask me about my service trip to Ecuador, I often respond with "It was a great experience that I would not like to have again. Usually, they then respond with a giggle and stray away from the topic for fears that I meant dive into some deep, emotional story or maybe a furious rant. However, I have neither to provide. For my trip to Ecuador was indeed a great experience. One in which I would have never dreamed of actually participated it had it not been for the generous offerings of The Nichol's Family. I was able to learn so much about the world, its people, and myself from that great trip and I wouldn't take any of that knowledge back.

On my first full day in Ecuador, my host mother rushed me and my roommate out the door and instructed us to follow her. Where we were going, we had no clue. In retrospect, I realize that I hardly even knew who I was following since I had only briefly met her the night before. However, we did follow her. After all, what more could we have done? We were two Americans in a foreign, non-English-speaking continent. As we briskly walked behind her, I began to take in all that surrounded me. It was amazing. A bustling city full of people who did not look like me, did not speak like me, did not even where the same culture as me. Slowly, the realization of the greatness of the world we live in began to sink in. Often times, we as humans can get so caught up in our own lives that we don't necessarily forget that there is more of the world than just us, but we definitely don't think about it. My time in Ecuador truly made me feel the great expansiveness of our world: so many different cultures, so many different places, so many different languages, etc… This is something that I always try to keep in mind now that I am back in my life here in the States.

After such a description of what a great world we live in, you might be wondering why I tell people that Ecuador was a great experience that I would not like to have again. This is because of the adversity I faced there as a black person. Ecuadoreans as well as many other countries of the world often look at people with darker skin complexion as less than, usually due to the history of colonialism. So, often when I would walk down street I would receive stares, figure pointing, and giggling. Even at the school that I volunteered in, I was called derogatory names.

However, what I gained from these situations was not negative. Along with the greatness of the present world we live in, we have to take into account what this world used to be and how that makes it what it is today. For me, this further emphasized the greatness of the world we live in. This world is exponentially great and beautiful, but it's also extraordinarily complex and filled with problems. The fact that these two natures of the world coincide and work, grow, and move together keeps me in awe.

The service aspect of the trip taught me so much about humans and gave me a renewed compassion for people of all places. Ironically, the way I was taught this lesson was through the event of my departure. However, to make the story chronological, I will tell it this way. My volunteering site was an Ecuadorean public school in the suburbs of Quito named Conocoto Public School. My job there was to help the students learn English by aiding the three English teachers that were at the school. This took the form of teaching "the itsy bitsy spider" to the younger students to discussing music and our favorite genres with some of the older students and eventually culminated with my partner and me creating and teaching a lesson ourselves.

This all sounded great on paper, but operationally I thought it was a disaster or at least futile. Because our trip only lasted a month, we did not have sufficient time to help the children learn any lasting English lessons. Moreover, we did not have the teaching experience to teach English as effectively as possible. To make a long story short, although the students greatly enjoyed our presence at the school, I was not enjoying it one bit to say the least. I honestly just wanted to do more for them and because I could offer my measly month of half-teaching, I felt that me being there was even worse than if I had not come at all. At least if I had not come, they would not have had bonded with some students who planned to jump out of their lives as quickly as they had jumped in.

When the week finally came for us to leave, I was so excited. I no longer had to continue putting myself and those children through this terrible process. However, something strange was happening. The kids and the teachers were beginning to give us gifts.

Wesley Dozier

Quito, Ecuador

They actually appeared sad that we were leaving. They were asking when we would return to them. That's when I realized that they were never looking at my performance as a teacher. They were never looking at me and asking "what more do you have to give?" Instead, they looked at me as someone who they shared their life with for a month. And sure, that person may not have been the best at doing his job, but he was good at being present. It was clear that the students and the faculty at the school truly saw and appreciated my intent in coming. For, I did not come because I wanted to teach English, but I came because I cared. -- They clearly saw that better than me.

In conclusion, I would like to say a huge thanks to the Nichols family. Without your kindness and generosity, I would not have been able to have my "great experience that I would never want to have again" in Ecuador. That trip has inspired me continue my college travels. So, next semester in the Spring of 2015 I will be going to the Dominican Republic for four months. Although I'm not expecting the trip to be perfect, I am expecting to gain so much valuable knowledge and truth about our world as I did in Ecuador. Once again, thank you so much. The work you are doing is inspiring and truly changing lives.

Malak Elmousallamy

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

During my time in South Africa, I volunteered at the Human Dignity Center and Missionvale Care Center. The Human Dignity Center caters to the underprivileged people of the Walmer Township by offering them various resources such as education and crafts training, while the Missionvale Care Center provides love and care for the poor and destitute, with particular emphasis on those living with HIV/AIDS. My role at the Human Dignity Center was to assist the 3rd grade teacher with teaching existing lectures as well as designing new lectures. My role at the Missionvale Care Center was more flexible and alternated between working in agriculture, food parcels, clothing, and so on.

The most enriching part of my service experience, however, was not the physical work I did, but the people I interacted with while doing it. At the Human Dignity Center, I was able to make a genuine connection with the teacher I assisted as well as get a glimpse of what her day-to-day life was like. At Missionvale Care Center, where I spent the majority of my time, I was able to meet some of the most kindhearted and strong people I've ever known. Hearing Josita and Rosie, two of the women at the care center, greet me every morning became something I always looked forward to. The workers at the care center did not come from much themselves but worked tirelessly everyday to help those around them.

As I completed the same small tasks every morning, I had the chance to reflect on service and one's role in the global community. I realized that the potential of service does not only lie in the work but also in the human interaction. My contribution through my service work was not the bags I filled with food or the clothes I folded. It was my conversations with Rosie, Fannie, and Mandesi. It was my conversations with my peers in the cohort, who would later become my friends. It was living in a house with 12 other people with different values and viewpoints and consistently learning new things from them.

Overall, my experience in South Africa was a defining one. I was exposed to a relentless humanity and perseverance that will surely stick with me forever. I was able to critically examine service and, more importantly, my purpose.

Adriana Galindo

Quito, Ecuador

When I thought about all of the things I could do over the summer I never thought that I would end up in Ecuador. Thanks to the Nicholas Humanitarian Fund I was able to travel to Ecuador for two months this summer and intern with Manna Project International (MPI). Those two months in Ecuador have impacted my life in several ways, such as influencing my plans after graduation. I have always dreamed of living abroad one day; however, I was scared that once I was abroad, I would miss home, or I would realize that it was not what I actually wanted. My time in Ecuador has confirmed my desire to live abroad and do service work abroad one day. This is something that a travel brochure or an informational video could have never done, and I am internally grateful to the Nicholas Humanitarian Fund for allowing me to have this eye opening experience.

One of the many reasons that I am glad that I was able to intern with Manna Project International is because of the integration to the community that it offered. We had to learn how to walk to the market, the grocery store, and the bus stop. We had to learn how to work the bus system, which is hard considering the lack of system and sporadic nature of the busses. Working alongside project directors who had been living in the community for almost a year helped with the integration process. During their year in the community, the project directors had developed relationships with not only their students at the Manna library but also with others of the community, such as the woman who owned the "tiendita" (corner store) by the house. Traveling to a place and being guarded toward a new culture and way of life, in my eyes, defeats the purpose of travel. I was able to learn so much about the Ecuadorian culture, and the parts of their society that are beneficial to the whole, and parts desperately need change.

As an MPI intern I was challenged to think creatively and take initiative to start a program at the Manna library. As a 'pre med' student at Vanderbilt, I have always been interested in science. This interest inspired me to start "Science Tuesdays" every Tuesday at the library. It was interesting to see how excited and willing the kids were to participate in these sessions. It made me appreciate the education system in place in the US and made me realize that growing up, I took for granted all of the 'cool' science experiments we had the opportunity to perform. Every week the science experiments were completely different. For example, one week we used baking soda and lemon in a plastic bottle to produce CO2, that then blew up the balloon that was fastened to the top of the bottle. Another week, we talked about plants and how they receive the needed nutrients. To do this we put white flowers in water with food coloring. And of course, we had to do the classic Pepsi and Mentos experiment. Deciding on an experiment for the week was challenging because of the limited resources available. Part of this was a financial restriction, but also the scarcity of other resources. For example, I had no idea that baking soda is nearly impossible to find in Ecuador!

During my time in Ecuador I was involved in different community service activities every day of the week. I had the opportunity to work with a special needs school, teach my own Spanish class with another intern, participate in the small business development program, help with the planning of the Manna's annual 5K race, and help lead the Diabetes club weekly meetings. For the small business development program, myself and another intern were assigned to work with a woman who was looking to open up her own Tiramisu shop. Most of the work we did with her involved PR and marketing for her shop. With the use of one of the intern's professional cameras, we set up a food photo-shoot for her so that she had professional style photos to include on her website. I think about Anna often, and have thankfully been able to keep in contact with her and receive updates about her business development. It was humbling to see how much she valued our opinion and help in her business pursuits. The relationship that I developed with Anna over the summer is one that will stick with me for the rest of my life.

Adriana Galindo

Quito, Ecuador

The relationships I was able to build during those two months have left a lasting impact on my life, and I hope to be able to maintain those relationships. One of the ways I hope to do this is through a pen pal program I have started with a school near Vanderbilt and a school in the community where we lived. I love Nashville, but I love Ecuador more, and miss the country and the kids so much. I hope to be able to return soon.

DeLesslin (Roo), George-Warren

Sangolqui, Ecuador

I've always been involved in service- tutoring in middle school, volunteering at the Catawba Cultural Center throughout high school, and leading various service trips throughout college- but it wasn't until my senior year of college that I began to think critically about the role of volunteer work on the personal, community, and global level.

At the beginning of March 2014, during my final semester on Vanderbilt's campus, I embarked on my second service trip to Ecuador with the help of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. Only three months before I had led a service group to Ecuador in partnership with Manna Project International and now I was returning as a participant while many of my friends spent their spring break at Mardi Gras. During that initial trip to Ecuador we had long and contentious but ultimately enlightening discussions about the role of volunteers in communities that aren't their own. The discussion was initiated by an article entitled "Stop Voluntouring" which argued that short-term volunteers (e.g. me) are at-best ineffective and at-worst harmful. During that first trip we built a greenhouse out of recycled water bottles in an attempt to prototype a structure that would be useful in protecting young plants from hail and heavy rain. . By returning to Ecuador I hoped to better grasp how exactly my work on the initial trip impacted the community and what that means for my understanding of service.

Although there was not suddenly an abundance of water-bottle greenhouses upon my return, the prototype had been used by the Manna staff for gardening, healthy eating, and community activities serving their community. All-in-all I would say the effect on the community-at-large was neutral but for the people that interacted with the prototype it was positive but not life-altering.

But, I believe that is the issue: I, as a volunteer, entering a community that is not my own and expecting to alter the lives of those community members. Maybe the purpose of volunteering is something else entirely?

Growing up within the Catawba Indian Nation community, I had seen many of these short term volunteers during my youth and adolescence. They sometimes came for a day but never for more than two weeks. They usually focused on infrastructure projects: trail work, housing, and road paving. Other times they would attempt to implement projects that were not sought by our community. For example, as a young kid I remember sitting in my mother's office listening to a group of missionary-volunteers who were requesting the tribe's cooperation in a mission trip. They had not realized that virtually every Catawba self-identified as a member of a Christian church making their volunteer mission work unnecessary in the context of our reservation. Keeping this experience in mind I began to reflect on the extent to which I've participated in trips that work *for* communities instead of working *with* communities. This might seem like a small semantic difference, but the implications are huge.

For example, if the volunteers in my example above had simply asked what work the tribe would like help with (if any) then the entire meeting and volunteer trip could have been more useful, more productive, and more empowering. Instead of prescribing volunteer work for communities, volunteers should enter into partnerships with the communities to empower existing community leaders. Of course, this sort of partnership requires a certain longevity that is often missing with short-term volunteer trips.

DeLesslin (Roo), George-Warren

Sangolqui, Ecuador

One of the benefits of working with Manna Project International in Ecuador (MPI-E) is that they have a permanent non-profit located in a community outside of Quito where they develop ongoing partnerships and programs with the local community.
In this context our work as short-term volunteers can become a smaller piece in a growing and permanent service initiative. Upon returning to the MPI-E building and seeing the greenhouse, I began to change my perception of the usefulness of short-term volunteer work. While my greenhouse building didn't radically transform individuals or the community it became an asset to the ongoing collaborative efforts of MPI-E.

The narrative of volunteer work often emphasizes the good that a volunteer can do for those that they serve, but it rarely highlights the skills development that volunteers receive in fundraising, manual labor, communication, leadership, etc. Furthermore, while direct service (e.g. working in a soup kitchen or volunteering at a homeless shelter) can alleviate suffering of individuals and, more rarely, communities it does nothing to stop the factors that precipitated the suffering. These factors are vast and political and require advocacy, activism, and policy shifts on every level of government. In Ecuador, MPI-E serves impoverished community members by providing health, literacy, and English language classes. While this work definitely improves the lives of the individuals it doesn't directly address the local, national, and international policy and economic decisions that cause shocking wealth disparity.

Then what is the long-term good of volunteer work? I strongly believe that the most important effect of volunteer work for the future of the world is its ability to educate volunteers and develop deeper communication and understanding between vulnerable populations and justice-minded individuals. Service work is most effective when it challenges volunteers through education to understand the larger inequalities and power dynamics affecting vulnerable communities. It is one thing to understand that the community we served in Ecuador is impoverished and what that means for their educational, employment, and social outcomes. It's a completely different situation to understand what historical and political factors influence a community member's socio-economic standing and why that drastically reduces their access to healthcare, education, and employment. The true job of volunteers should be to act in service to others, develop their understanding of the issues at hand, and to advocate with communities to ensure a just and bright future for all. I am eternally grateful to Vanderbilt, Manna Project International, and, more than anything, the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for supporting me as I developed this understanding of service and as I strive to fulfill it every day.

Kaila Gilbert

Rabat, Morocco

1.) On Language. A scene from our family's first conversation is nothing short of chaos. Our house mother gestures to us in darija and French. I am spouting bits of classical Arabic and improvised Latin with an exaggerated French pronunciation. Farishtay is switching between Urdu and Spanish, trying words from both vocabularies. Everyone's hands are doing weird things, rubbing their legs, mimicking rain. My hands are on my forehead, and our housemother is squatting up and down. Then, there it is—the moment of comprehension. Bathroom! She means bathroom. Our eyes light up and for a split second there is harmony, a delicate equilibrium that crosses all of our countries and experiences and rests on our understanding of indoor plumbing.

By week three, we had a routine. She would mess with my hair and say "Coo-Ka-loo" (an imitation of a rooster: a nickname based on my unrestrained orange hair). We would converse with whatever words and motions we could—about family, the weather, and school. Occasionally, one of us would point to some object with very wide eyes and then ask "En Anglais?" or "fi Darrija?" and we built our vocabularies. **Still, Morocco gave me perspectives into being an outsider.** Not knowing the language meant being at the mercy of others, feeling childlike and burdensome. It meant people questioned your intelligence. I was so grateful at any point when someone would speak me, take it upon themselves to treat me kindly or make introductions.

2.) Romanticizing Service. Before I arrived at Morocco, I held a very romantic gaze towards service. Sure, I'd read all of the articles about "voluntourism," the dilemma of bad carpenters, and the problems of glorified selfies with brown children. Still, I had determined that I could do better and in the roughest of circumstances. I had entertained fantasies of leading workshops in dusty classrooms with no indoor plumbing. Instead, I was selected to intern at the National Human Rights Council. I would work in an administrative building that was literally a palace.

The CNDH was grand and ornate, with stained glass, Andalusian architecture, and a tiled floor. Our departments were more office-style, but still offered tea and coffee served every morning. My workplace had air-conditioning, Internet access, free tea, *and* Western toilets. This was not my safari-like fantasy of "roughing it." **Thus, Morocco taught me firsthand the dangers of a single story.** Morocco, like any country, is complex—it is no more grass huts and dirt roads than America is all cacti and buffalo. Rather than lament my comfort, I needed to do the task they asked for. The task happened to be research, which perfectly suited my strengths.

3.) Being Critical. My final week at the CNDH, Navi Pillay flew in. The palace was packed with diplomats, journalists and translators. Around 5pm, Navi sat down, pulled out a sheet of paper, and read it very slowly (In English! For the first time, I was one of the few people who needed no translator). The letter was a favorable evaluation of the human rights situation in morocco—from what she'd observed—and a very warm commendation. Then she left.

I had been somewhat star-struck the entire time, but my fellow intern walked across the room looking furious. "She literally didn't say anything!" he had said. I thought about it. Yes, I had just met the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. But, what had she left out? She had praised Morocco's strides and development . . .yet (thinking about it) made no mention at all of the Western Sahara.

Kaila Gilbert

Rabat, Morocco

Morocco invited me to question what I was seeing. Another time in the office, I poured through their English pamphlets on the history of Morocco. I remember saying, "Wow, Mohammed V hurt a lot of people." He had. The former king had committed over 10,000 human rights abuses. Khalid, my supervisor, set down his paper and responded. "Americans have their own problems, no?" His voice was stern. "What about the storm—what is the name? Years ago." He turned to his neighbor, who took off her glasses. "With the rain?"

"Katrina?" I say.

"Yes!" he says. "Katrina was horrible, no? People stranded on roofs for weeks." He shook his head. "And there is more. What about the brown boy with the hoodie? Or your attacks from the flying planes? The killers. Drones." I said nothing, and he continued.

"You see, no country is perfect. Our country has problems; your country has problems. We all have things we need to work on, and you cannot just judge us for these things. We are in a different place."

In retrospect, this was true. We were also similar. The catcalling in Morocco had sometimes amused me, but more often bothered me. But what I thought was a Morocco phenomenon was actually an *urban* phenomenon. No sooner had I visited D.C. for a weekend than I received the same unoriginal cat-calls beckoning me from the street. **In short, Morocco taught me that we our problems are different but similar.**

4.) Transcending Class. One of the wildest things about living in Morocco was that my socioeconomic status changed as soon as I stepped off the plane. In America, I was working class. My father worked in a manufacturing plant and my mother was either a hairdresser or substitute teacher depending on the economy.

I had fancied myself a progressive. With the added fact of being a triple minority (female and black with chronic health conditions) I had occasionally positioned myself on the side of, if not the oppressed, the most severely inconvenienced.

From the moment I stepped off the plane, however, I became a One-Percenter. In this strange new world, it was now *I* spending weekends of leisure watching snake charmers and belly dancers as I feasted on foreign platters. I experienced the curious sensation of walking down the street with the ability to afford anything I desired, if I wanted. Suddenly, I was a lucrative target. The first in my family to leave the continent, I felt an extraordinary sense of privilege, appreciation, and self-reflection. **Morocco caused me to re-experience my status and class from a global position and reflect on the opportunities handed to me.**

Kaila Gilbert

Rabat, Morocco

5.) Being Present. Living in Morocco entailed a great deal of improvisation, physical effort, adjustment, and strategic thinking. In Vanderbilt, you show up at the door and it swings open for you. You go the bathroom, and the water spews out of the faucet when you lower your hands. Life literally accommodates around you. There is something to be said about doors that must be shoved open, locks that carve into your hands as you pry them open—figuring out the conundrum of taking a shower in a Turkish toilet or trying to decipher a conversation happening in three languages. You find yourself more drawn to the present as your try to find your way home in the middle of the Medina, in the literal labyrinth of twisted streets, alleys, and multitudes of people. You must plan ahead how you will stay hydrated because water is not a given (nor is tissue paper). On campus, you spend most of your time planning, analyzing, and organizing with one foot in the future. Morocco taught me the rareness of being present and aware of others around me.

In Conclusion: Words cannot express how grateful I am to have received this opportunity. My life has been literally transformed from my experiences living in a developing country. I have loved people I cannot competently communicate with—I have learned to ask more questions, challenge more assumptions, and envelop myself in the issues and concerns of people hundreds of miles from myself. I have also learned to exist in the present.
To the Nichols, I extremely grateful for the chance to get outside the country, get outside myself, and learn what being a global citizen looks like.

Madeline Gootman

Quito, Ecuador

The Manna Project that is stationed in Sangolqui, Ecuador runs a community center and library that provides the town and surrounding communities with various opportunities to improve their lives. Among the different programs that Manna runs through the library are English classes, a microfinance loan program, business responsibility classes, and health education.

While in Ecuador, I was able to participate in a few of these projects. I helped teach in a few of the English classes, which was one of my favorite activities because I loved the look on the children's face when they understood their new vocabulary. I was also able to visit a local college's English language classes; this was the most amazing experience I had in Ecuador. I felt that I was able to really connect with the students in the class because of our similar ages and interests. While I participated in the projects that Manna runs on a daily basis. I also contributed to the project that my team from Vanderbilt had chosen to complete during our trip: a sustainable greenhouse made of recycled materials.

We constructed a greenhouse (pictured above) from old plastic bottles. The main purpose of greenhouses in Ecuador is not to trap heat but to protect crops from the damages of hailstorms. The thick plastic of the bottles does this really well. Also, the burgeoning development of Ecuador's metropolitan areas has led to a lot of plastic consumption that was not being recycled and often discarded as litter. By using recycled materials, we created an example of sustainable solutions for farming issues that local farmers in Sangolqui could emulate. Overall, it was a great service trip.

Caleb Hayes

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

I went to Quetzaltenango, Guatemala this summer on May 19th, 2014 in order to complete my practicum project for my Masters of Public Health. The project was completed in a not for profit clinic called Primeros Pasos, or "First Steps" in English, which provides health care services, education, and nutrition initiatives for the Palajunoj Valley communities. The clinic struggles to develop as it is in a stage of transition this year, and always appreciates volunteer work like mine to help support its operation and projects.

As to what some of the projects are: the clinic's mobile health schools project provides much needed services to children in the most remote of villages, which are ill supported by government health care. A more recent project of the clinic has been its nutritional recuperation program, which seeks to prevent outcomes of malnutrition in high-risk groups of mothers, soon to be mothers, and their children.

I received IRB approval from Vanderbilt to do my research on the operations of the clinic's EMR and information systems shortly before I left Nashville. The idea was to use a Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle so that I could find a pertinent area within the clinic's information system to work. By the time I came to the clinic I had at least become acquainted with the EMRs current form, which is a series of Microsoft Excel Spreadsheets containing approximately 6,000 patients, and talked with multiple volunteers.

After observing processes in the clinic for the first weeks, I finished the first of many iterations of a standard operating procedure (SOP) for the receptionists of the clinic. It accounts for the steps one should take related to entering and managing the data of patients. With further participation in this area of the clinic, new editions of the SOP were made, and it is hoped that new versions will continue to be made by future volunteers who work in the updated settings the clinic provides.

During the time I was working on the SOP, I was also sick with parasites which are endemic in the area of Guatemala in which I lived; however, it only marginally slowed down the work. By the time I felt better, I found myself with two other ideas that resulted from my in-depth experience with the information system of the clinic.

One was rooted in the volunteering I did by following around the nutritional recuperation program. I was interested in having the director of the program do usability reviews on a small-scale of some open-source EMR. This was because the current paper and EMR system she was using in conjunction with the clinic's Microsoft Excel EMR seemed burdensome and difficult to manage data with. The director agreed to the project and she took a usability review of her present system, as well as of another system called OpenEMR. I attempted to have her review a third system called OpenMRS; however, due to a lack of time and my inexperience with the web-application, she still has not been able to try the system with current patient data. The results of this research are now on a wikispace forum and webpage, which means to assist future volunteers with knowing the steps taken so far and reduce duplication of effort.

Caleb Hayes

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

The other idea was more successful; it consisted in "auditing" the quality of the data which had been recorded by receptionists and examiner's in the clinic over a specific period of time. Specifically three different weeks toward the end of my stay were audited – July 14th -18th, July 21st – 25th, and August 4th – 8th. By audit, what I mean was I checked to see how accurately data was being kept both on the paper form used by the examiner, and on the electronic Excel sheet used by the receptionist. The audit report provides accuracies in the forms of percentages by the week under exam, and by the type of paper form being used by the examiner. It does this according to the categories which were available for audit both on that version of the paper form and in the electronic database. For instance, the first two paper forms asked for the examiner to write the patient's first and last names and the last one, which was implemented over the three weeks I examined for the first time, did not. Accuracy was seen to change consistently based on which form was being used and in which week, with the middle paper form being the most accurate at the time of this audit. The full report talks about the implications of how data is managed in the play between paper source documents and electronic documents.

I learned so much in my time before I returned to Nashville on August 12th, 2014. There are educational aspects, information technology aspects, and data management and quality aspects to my project. I tried to do things, and I did things, I had never had the opportunity to do before – and have only benefitted from the setting of goals and challenges I faced. The experience was very valuable in that it taught me a bit of all of these areas of work, and what I like and dislike about each of them. It was also a very valuable experience on another level for me. The trip, in all of its appearance of "a long time" by being twelve weeks, in actuality flew right by. Time I shared with humans of all walks of life, Guatemalans and other volunteers, were at every corner found to be fleeting but priceless moments in which we shared experiences, meanings, and ideas.

Caroline He

Kathmandu, Nepal

"What are you looking for?" I recall my friend asking me across the table we shared.

I ponder this for a prolonged second, my fingers clenched, tethered to my palm. "I want to be completely and truly uncomfortable."

By all means, it was a wildly unsophisticated idea. I decided the summer after sophomore year was going to be about independence and plunging into the unknown. Up until then, I was stuck in this COMFORT ZONE. I was bored, learning the same things and feeling lost in a ghastly maze of college ennui until one day I woke up and realized I wanted something moving, profound, irradiant to come along and challenge me.
This was what I decided when I applied to work as a volunteer with the American NGO "Volunteer Nepal." I was going alone, in search of remote village work, devoid of any substantial knowledge about Nepali culture or language, for five weeks as a newly minted 20 year old. *Be adventurous, seek that newness you so desperately want. Be brave and do good.*

The profound and uncomfortable I sought, I found. Even just hopping into a cab on my way to the Volunteer House, I was overwhelmed by the noxious scents, dirt roads, and seemingly infinite sea of people that existed in this fantastically foreign place. The city resembled a Lego town—a brightly colored smorgasbord of crooked buildings. We stayed in a neighborhood called Dhapasi, a tightly packed hamlet with looming mountains on all sides, swirling monsoon clouds draping the tempestuous skies and slopes.

I spent a day and a half settling in, getting a feel for the place and seeing some Buddhist temples. Part of me loved being in an exotic place, another part of me couldn't shake that anxious feeling I had. With such a vague goal, what did I have to offer the children in the orphanage I was working with? I came here seeking the "uncomfortable" with this great journey, but in the end I was just looking for a holistic experience to shake me to the core.

The first time I met the girls at Papa's House, one of the children's homes of the organization, on day 3 of my Nepali Experience, I was undoubtedly nervous. The kids came up to the gate of the lawn to greet the volunteers, dragging us in, but watching at the same time with shy apprehension. Noticing some of the girls blowing bubbles, I approached them and gingerly popped one. Once this tenuous play bond was formed, I was welcomed into their games of basketball and Simon Says with the limited Nepali and English we both knew. My own nervousness was slowly fading, and each giggle or pat I earned from one of the girls just removed me further and further from the foreignness of this connection. I think every traveler experiences a sort of out-of-body sensation when abroad. What bridges this feeling is finding the familiar in the new.

In the middle of one of the games, I am taken aback when Jeni, one of the girls, begins to sing a very familiar song. "This is real," she would chirp in a singsong murmur and fade out. I pause for a bit and face the group gathered around me. Suddenly, with dramatic flourish, I put my hands in the air.

"This is real, this is me, I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be now!" I sing, in a shocking moment of recall from my middle school years when I watched Disney Channel's "Camp Rock" for the first time, that duet in the end by Demi Lovato. The girls stare at me with wide eyes.

Caroline He

Kathmandu, Nepal

Suddenly, they dissolve into a flurry of Nepali before one of them snatches my hand and sits me down in the grass. “Sister, song?”

I gather this is my cue to continue. With some effort, I manage to sing the lyrics I still remember from this vague movie I had watched as a child. The girls were enthralled and slowly, more and more made their way to our little circle in the grass before it became a spectacle and I was crowing my way into a sing-along. In a split second, all my fears, my superficial notions, my grandiose ideas of finding that exotic disconnect from my own world had been simplified to sitting in a circle singing Demi Lovato from Disney Channel. From that point, I saw the line between American and Nepali blur into this wonderful family that I grew to love and laugh with for the remainder of my stay.

“What are you looking for?”

I found what my soul unconsciously yearned for. I found a strange and beautiful draw in that landscape. The violet sunsets and the mystery of those shadows draped around the mountains at night when lightning illuminated the valley—I found something to quell the restlessness in my spirit. But I also found that the uncomfortable and the foreign mixed seamlessly into my feeling truly connected with the children I worked with.
Truthfully, there is nothing foreign about Nepal. I used to view travel as a safari for my hopes and thrills, but it took this experience to make me realize that traveling shouldn’t accentuate the foreignness of a place—it should seek to synthesize all that is new with the familiar. I found a deep joy in working with the orphanage, but I was being stimulated in a challenging way outside my comfort zone. We may not share the same culture or language, but we share a commonality in the human experience: love, joy, and affection.

But truly, how strange it was that while I came seeking to feel uncomfortable, reconciling what is beautiful, absurd, and gratifying all at the same time was inexplicably simple: watching these girls sing Camp Rock with me, sitting in the grass halfway across the world; I smile to myself, now a world away once more.

Lauren Hogg

Rabat, Morocco

This summer I went on the Office of Active Citizenship and Service May trip to Morocco. We were stationed in Rabat, the capitol. I worked at Amal Sale Association, which is a non-profit that provides workshops, lessons, and training for youth who cannot afford to pay for private classes in order to get a job. I spent my days teaching two different classes, one in the mornings and one in the afternoon. Teaching a foreign language without knowing their native language to explain things in was very difficult. This was probably one of the most intimidating situations I had ever been in. I found myself standing in front of 12 eyes staring blankly at me as I tried to teach them English when I did not know Arabic or French in which to explain things to them. I was thrown into an empty classroom with no suggestions, structure, curriculum or resources. Not so much as a whiteboard marker. – But the students were absolutely inspiring. They are here not because they have to be but simply because they want to be and they have a desire to learn. And the learning happened anyway. Despite my lack of knowledge, the lack of resources, they were there, and they learned. We worked through the language barriers. I adapted the teaching. The students and I formed relationships and had fun together. Despite everything, the learning happened anyway. One of the biggest things I learned was how to think on my feet. Teaching, especially when not knowing the language demands this of you. I have learned that even though I like being organized and planning, that working at Amal Sale has shown me that I know how to think on my feet and that going with the flow is good and sometimes needed. I also really wrestled with working through the language barrier, especially when I was volunteering and trying to teach lessons.

Having different languages and different cultures is something beautiful and appreciated, but we wished there was a way we could be more global and not be barred in communication with other places.

But in the end, I found it was worth taking a chance and just showing up for such a rare opportunity. Opportunities such as Morocco, even though they are difficult, they can lead to things you never expected. My showing up in Morocco did that for me, and I hope that my showing up was worth it to my students.

One of the most important lessons I learned in Morocco was dependency. Due to the language barrier, we had to rely on other people to do a lot of communicating for us. At our work sites we had to rely on the few people who did speak English to communicate.

Outside of work, we had to depend on our home stay mother for almost everything. She was the one to show us around, provide us food and transportation. Realizing that we relied on others throughout the entire Morocco experience was difficult since I like being independent and I don't like requiring others to take care of me. However, this trip opened my eyes to my own vulnerability and showed me that relying on others is okay. I learned that we all need to help each other along and that no one can really go it alone.

Another important lesson I learned while in Morocco was about privilege. We had many reflection sessions about this topic and spent a lot of time assessing how this related to us and our experience locally and globally. We discussed what privilege was and found that privilege is money, ability to travel, having a good education, being from a certain part of the world, being a certain sex, speaking a certain language, being a certain race. All of this can stem from power, oppression, and colonialism. This was a hard discussion to have because it really pointed out the extent to which our privilege reached. I struggled with being lucky enough to come from privilege and yet seeing so many others who were not as such. Through these conversations we reflected a lot on whether or not it was okay to be privileged and what we would do with our privilege. I realized that we are all born into and are made by our environments.

Lauren Hogg

Rabat, Morocco

Whether or not my environment looks like someone else's, it is what I do with what I have been given and the privileges that I have that make a difference. One of the things that our site leader said to us that was very thought provoking was, "Your 9-5 work wasn't an exotic abroad experience – it was life in a different place which will continue." This was such an important thing for me to recognize. My experience shaped and changed my perspective, and I can only hope that I contributed in a positive way to the students I worked with and the people I interacted with. Over our month, we were met with many challenges, predispositions, and questions about why were there. However, I learned that meeting people and having conversations and learning from other people will be the way to change negative beliefs. There always will be criticism and negative opinions but hopefully there will also always be relationships formed and a positive impact.

I will miss Morocco. Even with all the struggles I had and saw. I learned so much about myself and life in general. Morocco is a beautiful country with wonderful people. I am so glad I came to experience it and learn from it. I hope I will remember all I have learned in the coming years and in my future teaching. I hope I will remember how I was treated and welcomed and that I will treat people as such in my experiences at home. I do not want this to be a trip, an isolated experience. I hope it becomes a part of my story and changes me and my perceptions for the better.

Me with my students at Amal Sale.

Natlie Honkala

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

In the spring of 2014, I enrolled in a Medicine, Health, and Society seminar course on the "Health, Development, and Culture in Guatemala" through the Vanderbilt Initiative for Scholarship and Global Engagement. I had never before taken a class on public health, and I was intrigued by the prospect of studying a new field. Plus, as a Spanish major, I have developed a special interest in Latin American culture, and I was excited to go through an intensive learning approach to pursue this curiosity. In the course, I explored development theories, Guatemalan history, and the principle health concerns currently facing the country. The course captivated me and turned out to be the best one I have ever taken during my time at Vanderbilt. I thus was eager to spend a month in Guatemala the following summer and put what I had learned in the classroom into practice. And with the gracious support from the Nichols Family, I was able to do so. I would be living with a host family in the city of Quetzaltenango (also known as "Xela") and interning at Primeros Pasos, a clinic located 15 minutes away in the rural Palajunoj Valley; I couldn't wait. By the start of my journey on May 14th, I was armed with my knowledge, my passport, and my rain jacket, and I was ready to go and make a difference.

Or at least that's what I thought. The month I spent in the country turned out to be very different from what I had been anticipating, and no amount of classroom preparation- however thorough- could have prepared for the realities that I encountered. However, it was this very discrepancy between my expectations and my experiences that I was able to learn and grow the most. My time in Guatemala, therefore, served two purposes. On the one hand, it certainly deepened my awareness of the challenges facing the country's healthcare and the role that I as a global citizen can play in combating them. On the other hand- and perhaps most importantly- my experience taught me how to adapt. That is, it taught me how to *not* have expectations and to be willing to embrace unforeseen circumstances as learning experiences in and of themselves.

This process of adjusting my preconceptions began as early as the first day. During the spring semester course, we learned that the transportation system of Guatemala would look vastly different from what we had seen before in the States. Instead of metros, taxis and "typical" city buses, they use yellow American school buses (or "chicken buses") that they re-paint to make their own. Guatemala also does not have many of the safety regulations that exist in the US (seat belts, maximum capacity, etc.); instead, buses try to fit as many people on board as possible. I knew this information before arriving, and I knew that I would be using these buses on a daily basis to get to the clinic. I love public transportation, so although I was slightly concerned for my safety, I mostly was excited just to be able to experience this unique aspect of Guatemalan culture.

I rode my first chicken bus ride with three other clinic volunteers, traveling from Xela to a community called Las Majadas. Primeros Pasos partners with 13 different communities to provide medical services to their local elementary schools, and Las Majadas is the most remote out of all of them. Our chicken bus ride went over a steep mountain via a narrow dirt road, and I was grateful when we made it to the village safe and sound. We had planned to stay at the school for three hours to weigh and measure the children, but when we arrived, we discovered that the scale was missing. Moreover, a "chicken bus" would not be returning the village that day because of the coming rain that would wash out the road. Left without other options, we started hiking back up the mountain to begin the long trek back to Xela. It was only by luck that twenty minutes into our walk, a pick-up truck passed by and offered to take us the rest of the way into the city. In the moment, I was frustrated that certain roadblocks were hindering me from being able to make the impact that I was hoping for.

Natlie Honkala

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

Yet after reflecting on the day's events, I realized that what I had experienced was simply a part of life for all of the communities in the Palajunoj Valley. In this region, one has to wait for a bus that may or may not come (depending on the weather), rely on a chance encounter with someone with the luxury of a car, or (more realistically) wait for resources and aid to come to them. This recognition was humbling. Moreover, it helped me to understand that one of the most important aspects of "service" is not by "doing" a specific action but rather by acquiring new sensitivities through actually living others' realities.

My perspective of service continued to change through working in the lab at Primeros Pasos. As a science major, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to work in a laboratory setting abroad and to learn how to diagnose infections. After my studies in the spring semester, I knew that Guatemala suffered from high rates of parasites and that these infections were particularly debilitating in rural areas. I also knew that these very pathogens were the root of so many of the "don'ts" that pertained to Guatemalan travel: don't eat cut-up fruit from the street because you don't know where the knife has been, don't eat lettuce because it's very hard to clean thoroughly, and [most importantly] NEVER drink the tap water. I was excited to examine these live organisms under a microscope, but my initial idea of what I would be doing was, again, too idealistic. I didn't expect to examine upwards of 200 feces samples in one day, with 85% having at least one- if not four-parasites. And I certainly didn't anticipate contracting an infection myself. But both happened. And both ultimately made the work that I was doing all the more fulfilling because I had actually lived the experience of those I was serving.

I began my month in Guatemala with a desire to serve the indigenous population living in the Palajunoj Valley. Yet my actual experience gave me so much more than immediate community service. Because of my work, I have changed my entire mindset. I have learned how to relinquish expectations and adapt to reality. I now understand the value of vulnerability, and the perspectives that I've gained as a result will remain with me for the rest of my life. Thank you, Nichols family, for allowing me to have such a transformative experience that will forever serve as my source of inspiration.

Shelby House

Rabat, Morocco

It's hard for me to write this. It's hard for me to know where to start and what to say, because my experience in Morocco was life changing and multifaceted and crazy. So, I guess I'll just start from the beginning.

Before I went to Morocco, I was 10% scared out of my mind, 90% excited. It started to hit me about a week before my flight that I had no concept of what it would be like to get out of the plane in Rabat. And if there was one thing I was right about, it was that.

The first couple of days were amazing. My cohort and I toured Rabat. I saw things I'd only seen on Wikipedia, and I was blown away. My journal was filled with glowing reviews of the food, the beauty of the city, the people. And then the service began.

OACS and this trip were really my first introduction to the pride-swallowing siege that is ethical service. And it was a painful introduction. Halfway through my first full day of work, I was sitting in the Center for Cross-Cultural Learning in tears, crying to my site leader Lauren about how completely inept I felt. I had been teaching English to non-native speakers, which is much more easily said than done. At the Amal-Sale Association, I had nervously and inarticulately fumbled for two and a half hours in front of the blank faces of thirty Moroccan twentysomethings. I was not equipped to handle my job. But Lauren urged me to keep going, and I did. I had two 2.5-hour classes a day: one in the morning, one in the afternoon. My afternoon class was small, and I taught one to four of the same, sweet, motivated students each day. I actually felt like I adapted well and taught those students effectively. The morning class was a nasty beast. There were totally different students every single day of the week.
When I thought I was finally prepared, the morning class would smack me in the face. One Wednesday, I had thirty students. I made thirty copies each of three worksheets. Thursday, I had a grand total of *one* student.

In our second week in Rabat, we only worked two days, Thursday and Friday. On Thursday, I cried before my students showed up, I walked out of class halfway through to cry, and I cried after class ended. It was ugly. To be honest, I was crying all the time. My journal was also pretty ugly—*I hate this, I hate that, I hate, I hate, I hate.* I laughed bitterly about my first glowing and happy journal entries.I won't act like my time in Rabat was all sunshine and rainbows, because it wasn't. I lost a lot of weight because I couldn't accustom myself to the Moroccan diet, I got food poisoning, I was hit in the face by the nearly insurmountable language barrier, I was harassed, I cried, I 'hated' things. However, at this point in my trip, I opened up to my site leader Lauren about all of my problems adjusting. We went out to the beach in Rabat, perched atop some huge rocks, and talked for a long time. Once again, she was perfect. She was understanding but she wasn't patronizing; she was encouraging but she didn't ignore my fears and challenges.

The next week, I was working for Afrique Culture Maroc, an organization in Agdal-Rabat, which handles immigration for sub-Saharan Africans. While I am glad I made the switch to ACM for several reasons, I will always miss my afternoon class at Amal-Sale. Wafae, Ilias, and Khadija were all incredibly sweet and hardworking, and I looked forward to seeing and talking to them every day. I never realized how much I'd miss them.

Anyway, ACM wasn't without its challenges. Corinne, Marcel, and Onesiphore, the three ACM officials who I mainly worked with, spoke French and very little English. However, we pushed through, and I feel like I did good work for their organization. I created several flyers, brochures, and posters for their various events, and I also edited and translated several documents, which were to be sent to the Moroccan ministry of immigration. Onesiphore, the friendly Cameroonian man who supervised my work, was always curious about American culture as opposed to that of Morocco and Cameroon. According to him, I have an open invitation to visit Cameroon whenever I can make it.

Shelby House

Rabat, Morocco

The best part of my day was my lunch break. I would leave the ACM and walk two streets over to this tiny café. The food wasn't anything spectacular, but the man who worked there was incredibly nice and welcoming. I knew he suppressed laughter every day at my pitiful attempts at French. I holed up inside that restaurant and read whatever novel I was tearing through at the time, sipping on verveine tea (which I fell in love with and to this day regret not buying a package of).

For a while, I told people that while it wasn't true that I hated Rabat, there were nothing about it that I loved. I've come to realize I was wrong. I really loved that café. I loved that I commuted 45 minutes to and from work by myself. I loved that I survived in a city of 1.2 million people like I was a native. I miss that.

I love that I fell flat on my face in my first weeks in Rabat.

When I told a friend back home in Georgia about my experiences, she said "You know, that's good. You need to fail more often." And she's completelyright. Vanderbilt students aren't good at failing. We don't fail at things. We work hard, and we *quickly* overcome obstacles. But global service is a horse of a different color. The challenges I faced in Rabat were unlike anything I have ever faced. Entering the trip, I thought I was flexible enough, smart enough, culturally aware enough, to breeze through the month. I thought I would love everything, and when I didn't, I felt like I had failed. I didn't understand the challenges inherent to service in Rabat. I didn't understand how few resources Amal-Sale would have; I didn't realize how ill prepared to teach English I was; I didn't understand the challenges of communication in trying to get transferred to a different organization. At the end of the day, though, I did learn how to adapt and I didn't fail. I lived in Northern Africa for a month. How insane is that?

However, what I miss most are the people who were kind to me during my stay. I don't think I have ever realized—until just now, writing this—how life-changing acts of kindness are. I could write a novel about the love and appreciation I have for the beautiful Vanderbilt ladies that accompanied me on this trip. I am also forever grateful to Abdelghani, our guide from the CCCL; Ibrahim, the cook at the CCCL who would make us tea when we got back from work; the waiter at that little restaurant; the young man on the tram who gave up his seat for me and asked nothing in return; and many, many others. I was profoundly affected by their kindness. It hurts me to think that I may never see them again.

I cannot thank the Nichols enough for their kindness in helping me get to Rabat. I wouldn't do it any differently if I had the chance to go again. I learned more about the world and about myself than I ever could have imagined.

Erica Johnson

Quito, Ecuador

It is difficult to write about my time in Ecuador in English. Perhaps it is because so much of what is beautiful in that little corner of South America occurs in Español.
Being there, is not so different than being here. Except it is more beautiful and everyone is speaking Spanish.
When you walk down cobbled streets as the sun is setting and Pichincha casts a shadow that lingers over colorful buildings. That the clouds descend every day and it is like heaven meets earth except often times I wonder where God is amongst the Calle de Siete Cruces.
Where women sell grandejas y narajas y manzanas en every street, infants tied on their backs. They look tired.
Something so beautiful about sloping hills and endless concrete slabs where people make their lives.

Imprinted in my mind is map of Quito, the outskirts of the city unending as it grows in both directions. They say the wealthy live in the valley. But I think we do not understand wealth. For where there is laughter and color, there is abundance. Where there is sopa y arroz, where the sun rises and sets, where there is familia. And what happens when beauty meets the rough, American idea of service? Idealism and terrain meet with a righteous vengeance. Somewhere in the midst are people.
When I walked into Grecia II, and pressed button 6 for Familia Cobo, a strange feeling of home settled over me. My Mami opened the door and she screamed. It was like I never left.
The bus to get to Niñez y Vida stops at the corner of Bolivia y America. Ascending up the mountain the air gets thinner and this time it was tighter as I anticipated walking inside. Would they remember? Would I need to pretend to be new?

There is an endless stream of volunteers that go in and out NGOs in what are fondly labeled “developing” countries. Some speak no Spanish. And I find it fascinating, the way they are worked in and out of programs in a manner similar to adjusting to seasons of rain and drought.
One day there is rain, the next there isn’t and sometimes they don’t want rain. But sometimes rain makes seeds grow.
This is the context, then of international service. I speak a fair amount of Spanish, but I stumble over my words when I’m uncomfortable. I am taller than every woman who works at Niñez y Vida, and taller than the men too. I am often in the way, and offer little on my own.
It would be good to ask why I am here.
Instead I am quiet, as an almost 4-year old child touches my face and says, “Tú nombre es Erica.”

And I amazed that he remembers, it has been one year since I saw him last. Then, he was almost three and I was only there a month.
When the littlest ones remember, I pray they know that they matter. That they would not they are not a brown child that will end up on a Facebook page, but a being with a mind, a heart and a soul.
Soon after, we went to Sinchi Aqua Center. A destination for sure, but also a woman’s cooperative that supports their families. We stayed two days, and the son said to me, “you were here before.”
Step lightly, for your footsteps leave more trace than you imagine.
My host sister and I went to get papas fritas for dinner. We chatted about boyfriends and school and she said, “O, me encanta Quito. Y tú?

I do not love Quito, but I said, “Sí, a me encanta.” Because in that moment, we were sisters, and we spoke the same language.
There are many things I did at Niñez y Vida. I swept the floor and prepped crafts; I washed hands and served food.
But that is not why they welcomed rain. They welcomed me because I chose to come to them. And I went back because they matter.
Ecuador is not my favorite place in the world. Quito is most certainly not my favorite city. It is very classist and segregated. It is in many ways a reminder that a country can become anything it wants to be, and that the lesser of these are sometimes less important.

Erica Johnson

Quito, Ecuador

But the little family who lives at the corner of reina victoria and ventimillia, the women in the jungle, the children and teachers in Totucio, have found their way into my heart. It is not place that says I must or should come back to check on them. They do not need checking up upon.

Rather, it is that we are connected by something much more powerful than a month that I can spend abroad. We are intertwined though we live very separate lives.

It is something like how when I get on a bus here, I am amazed by the smoothness of the ride. However, there is no música that everyone hums along to. There are no people selling heldados and anything else one could possibly sell on the bus.

There is something genuine about the way in which people make sense of their lives, and I am so privileged to have been a witness of it. My host family asks if I'm going to come back here again. "Ojala," I say, "God-willing." The first time they asked me that, I said the same thing.

Little did I know that I would return so swiftly. Mi mami says I always have a home with her. I am grateful. And honored.

When we reach out our hands to one somewhere else in the world, we do not know the response. Sometimes we get fists. Other times hands are already full. But every once and a while, someone will reach back out and clasp the hand. And it makes all the difference.

Sigue no Más, You've Come this Far

Nisha Khorasi

Rabat, Morocco

Having the humbling opportunity to travel to Morocco and participate in a 10-day service-learning program over winter break was a phenomenal experience that I am sincerely grateful for. Along with 10 other Vanderbilt girls, I spent the majority of the time in Rabat, learning about Moroccan culture at the Center for Cross Cultural Learning. These classes on cultures informed us of pertinent information necessary in order to be able to serve the community to the best of our abilities. Throughout our time in Rabat, we volunteered at a home for the elderly, taught English to young adult students, and completely repainted the rooms of a small hospital. The hospital experience was one of my favorites. We thematically planned each room and bounced around, helping one another. We turned the largest room into “A World Under the Sea.” We painted schools of fish, a giant octopus, whale, seahorse, seaweed, starfish, and everything else imaginable in a true world under the sea. The perfect finishing touch was painting an anchor onto the wall, reading “Anchor Down!” We left Vanderbilt’s mark! Looking at our own before and after pictures of the rooms was so wonderful. In just a few short hours, we had done something to make a lasting difference in the lives of all of the children who will visit the hospital in days, weeks, months, and years to come.

Without the generous assistance provided by the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I would not have been able to create lasting memories and serve as a global citizen during my final winter break of college. From the bottom of my heart, I graciously thank you for the humbling opportunity to serve, learn, and grow.

Rachel King

Egynkwaa village, Ghana

Overview: Vanderbilt Global Brigades

This Spring, thanks to the generosity of the Nichols family, I travelled to Accra, Ghana with the Vanderbilt Global Brigades (VGB) to run a medical clinic for the Egynkwaa village community. It was my first trip to Ghana but not my first trip to Africa. I went to Uganda the previous summer through Vanderbilt's Ingram Scholarship Program to conduct a service project on education in rural villages. That summer was life-changing, and when I came back to the States I was eager for the next time I could return to Africa.

Going with the VGB team was a tremendous learning experience because I had never before volunteered in a public health setting. Of the twenty-eight people in our group, I was one of only two non-pre-med students. Majority of my pre-med peers, for understandable reasons, went on the trip in order to gain an understanding of medicine needs and applications in the developing world. The reason for my going, however, was unique in the sense that I wanted to learn how public health issues cause, correlate with, and/or perpetuate cycles of poverty and other poverty-related outcomes. Also, I want to live and work abroad after undergrad, presumably in a developing country, so this was a perfect opportunity for me to be exposed to another dimension of the third world.

The Egynkwaa Community

Our team worked in a small community called Egynkwaa ("Ee-john-qua"), which is located in Ghana's Central Region. There are roughly 1,300 people in this village with children accounting for about 25% of the population. On average, 20 to 25 people live in each home. While the village does have electricity, water is a scarce resource. There are only two rainwater harvesters in the entire community, one for the school and the other for the rest of the villagers. Most children bathe in the neighborhood pond, which in turn affects water borne illnesses such as diarrhea and cholera. The closest health center is 6 kilometers away. The clinic has no full-time doctors, no community health workers, no birth assistants, no hygiene or sanitation committees, and no toilet facilities.

Guinea worm used to be a problem in this particular region but because of national and international health initiatives, the infection is no longer a problem. In terms of education, this community has four schools (nursery, primary, junior high, and high school) but only 13 teachers to teach nearly 400 students, which is a 1:30 student-teacher ratio. The current school buildings are in unsafe condition and have no electricity. Construction on a new school building has been delayed because the builder was relocated.

People in Egynkwaa very much live on a day-to-day basis. Main occupations include farming, driving, and charcoal trading. Women work as housekeepers and craft-makers. Incomes are spent on school fees, transportation, and food. Global Brigades is the only organization known to serve in this particular village community. (For more information on this community, check out the Global Brigades website at https://www.globalbrigades.org/ghana-communities-ekumfiegyankwaa)

The Project

Our primary project was leading a health clinic where community residents could receive free health consultations, medical examinations and treatments. Our secondary project involved building two new latrines for the village members. Each day at the clinic we would alternate sites, from triage to delivery to pharmacy to physician's assistant to construction. Working alongside the physicians was most memorable because this was the point in the clinic rotation when we made diagnoses. I honestly could not believe all of the things we saw: two children with 103° fever (believed to be meningitis), fungal infections, cataracts, severe diabetic infections, malaria, lesions, osteoarthritis, chronic pain, neurofibromas, pneumonia, bronchitis, the list goes on.

Challenges and Successes

The very first patient I saw came in with a wooden crutch and a dirty rag wrapped around his ankle. Underneath the cloth he had pressed banana leaves around his ankle. Underneath the leaves there was no skin only infected tissue.

He had a severe diabetic infection and when diabetes is not controlled then the disease starts to literally eat away at the skin beginning in the feet. The doctors suggested amputation lest the infection spread to other parts of his body. Unfortunately we saw several other stories like this one, which presented an interesting question about the challenges associated with public health sustainability initiatives in undeveloped regions. While Global Brigades has essentially adopted this community, many of the villagers forego individual care or check-ups because they rely on the Global Brigades services. Like the case of man with the diabetic infection, this week-long medical clinic is, for some, the only time when they receive medical attention. On the one hand, Global Brigades' involvement is encouraging because trained physicians are able to address individuals' specific health needs; on the other hand, this is not ideal because some village members refuse to seek medical attention for severe needs because of costs, insurance complications, travel worries, etc. that are naturally curbed by the "we-come-to-you" organizational model.

The success stories, however, far outnumber the challenges. When I worked in the pharmacy I was personally in charge of manning the eyeglass station. Cataracts was a common complaint among women and while glasses do not eliminate the problem, they help alleviate vision blurriness. Before leaving for Ghana our VGB team collected a suitcase-full of donated eyeglasses. We had no means of writing eyeglass prescriptions for patients but, amazingly, every single eyeglass pair found an owner. It was rewarding beyond words to "guess and check" a pair of glasses with a patient and then see their face light once they could properly see. One man even communicated to us how excited he was to "go home and finally read the Bible."

Thank You

The memories and friendships I made from this experience will certainly last a long time. I am deeply grateful to the Nichols family for their kind generosity and support. Without them, this opportunity would not have been possible. Thank you so very much.

Deya Maldas

Kolkata, India

In the truest sense, Kolkata, India is a home away from home for me. Even though I grew up in the U.S., I moved around my entire childhood. Never really having a city that I could call home, my biyearly visits to my grandma's house in Kolkata provided the sense of consistency I needed in my life. As I grew older, I realized that Kolkata as was much of a home to me as the U.S. Because Kolkata was such a large part of my life, I knew I had to give back to the city that did so much for me. I was more than excited when I found out that I had received the Nichols Humanitarian to work for women's empowerment initiatives in Kolkata. After much consideration, I decided to use my Nichol's fund to intern under the fundraising and advocacy department with Sanlaap, an anti-sex trafficking and women's empowerment nonprofit.

I started my work off at Sanlaap confidently. I knew the culture, I had no language barrier, and I was ready to make a change in the organization. However, I soon realized there was a huge communication gap between my expectations of Sanlaap and Sanlaap's expectations of me. The first week, Sanlaap had me reading their publications. Though I was a bit disappointed that I was not doing anything hands on in the organization yet, I realized that it was important for me to learn about the issue before I tried to help out.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of the next week, Sanlaap once again told me that I would be reading publications and doing a few clerical tasks. Frustrated, I went in to talk to the Director of Programming. We had a long conversation about why I had come to Sanlaap and exactly how I wanted to impact the organization. After regrouping, the Director of Programming and I made a plan of exactly what I needed to get done to help Sanlaap out.

The next few weeks at Sanlaap went by doing various tasks. To help with Sanlaap's existing fundraising and advocacy efforts, I worked with the Director of Programming to plan and manage a conference Sanlaap was hosting. Local and international nonprofits were invited to this conference to discuss how to help trafficking survivors cope with the effects of their traumatic experiences.

I also assisted Sanlaap with educating Save the Children, an international nonprofit, on Kolkata's commercial sex industry. Together, the Director of Programming and I showed Save the Children International around Sanlaap's shelter home, where sex-trafficking survivors resided after their rescue, Sanlaap's drop in center, where children living in red-light areas seeked refuge while their parents were catering to clients, Sanlaap's Hub, where sex-trafficking survivors sold hand-made goods to generate income for themselves, and a government shelter home, where sex-trafficking surviors were kept under the government's jurisdiction. At each of these places, there was an open discussion with Save the Children about issues surrounding the sex-trafficking industry in Kolkata. These topics ranged from migration of illegal immigrants from bordering countries to India's sex-trafficking industry, rehabilitation efforts of sex-trafficking survivors, and reintegration of sex-trafficking survivors into society. Save the Children's visits also provided the opportunity to talk and connect with the sex-trafficking survivors and children growing up in the red-light areas.

The next large project I worked on at Sanlaap was assisting with their field research initiative in the Sundarbans area. Over the past year, Sanlaap had created a prevention and awareness program in remote villages in the Sundarbans area. Because this program was funded through the U.N. Anti-Human Trafficking Program, Sanlaap needed a field research team to go out and evaluate the program's performance. I volunteered to be a part of Sanlaap's field research team. Out of my entire experience, this component of my internship was the most memorable. It was also the most difficult part of my trip. During the field research, our research team would often pull 15 hour days. The remote villages were about 4 hours away from the city, given that there was no traffic. After arriving to the villages, each team member would have to conduct about 12-15 household surveys. These household surveys entailed following a questionnaire to gage whether the villagers had heard of the prevention programs and whether these programs had been implemented properly.

Deya Maldas

Kolkata, India

After going from household to household nonstop, we would get back in our car for the long commute back. While the process itself was exhausting, the first-hand experience of falling in the mud while walking on the unpaved roads in the rain, having the villagers carry me to one of their houses to clean off, talking to the villagers about the pain of poverty, spending an entire day with a 10 year old girl who took it upon herself to show me around her village, and listening to a fellow intern share her story about interviewing a sex-trafficking pimp in the adjacent village had an immeasurable impact on me. Being part of an evaluation team gave me the opportunity to see Sanlaap's work from an unbiased standpoint.

At the end of my internship, I generated reports on Sanlaap's publications, Sanlaap's conference, and Save the Children's visit with Sanlaap to help with their administrative upkeep and fundraising opportunities. I also combined my findings from my field research to analyze Sanlaap's current prevention and awareness initiatives and gave them recommendations to improve their program. Furthermore, as a personal project, I created a campus chapter program so that college students could advocate and fundraise on Sanlaap's behalf. For this program, I wrote a curriculum and handbook for Sanlaap to use. Overall, interning at Sanlaap taught me an immense amount about myself,sex-trafficking, and the nonprofit world. I also sincerely hope that my work at Sanlaap impacted the organization positively and helped them on their endeavors. In conclusion, I cannot thank the Nichols family enough for granting me the opportunity to go to Kolkata, India this summer.

Me and my fellow interns conducting field research in the Sundarban area.

Melissa Marts

Guatemala City, Guatemala

As the plane descended into Guatemala City, my stomach was tied up in knots. I peered eagerly out of the tiny plane window, desperate to catch a glimpse of the mountainous terrain that would become my temporary home. Wringing my hands and tapping my feet, I wondered *What should I expect? Will I be able to communicate with anyone?* Little did I suspect that the next six weeks would radically change my outlook on loving others well, the importance of community, and international service.

The Oasis, a rescue home for sex trafficked and sexually abused children, was nothing like I imagined it to be. But that's the funny thing about expectations, isn't it? They're never quite fulfilled the way you think they'll be. The first challenge I encountered almost immediately; I was not actually very fluent in Spanish. I've always thought that I was quite good at speaking and understanding the Spanish language. However, the classroom is nothing like a native speaking environment. I was completely lost.

The most challenging aspect of the language barrier was not actually practicing the language, but feeling helpless to love the girls at the home well when I couldn't communicate how I felt about them or why. But about three weeks in, I made a beautiful discovery. I was spending time with Mirzy (pictured to the right), one of the third graders in whose classroom I was the assistant, when she hugged me and told me that she felt really loved. She was safe for the first time in her life, and she explained that she knew she was a precious child of God. Mirzy had found so much love and redemption from her past in the home surrounded by healthy role models that she wanted to share it with her family. So when her mom came for Visitor's Day, Mirzy told her about the hope and joy she'd found and encouraged her mom to search for the same thing. Mirzy, although she's just nine years old, is already a catalyst for change in her family and community. It was in that moment that I realized the kids already know how loved they are and that a language barrier could never hinder expressing that.

As can be seen from Mirzy's story, a strong and loving community is key to the healing process these girls all undergo. Coming from the heartland of America, I was raised to place emphasis on the individual and on individual achievement above all else. However, as my exposure to other cultures has greatly increased in the past ten months, I've come to recognize the value of thinking about the community as a critical component to the development and adjustment of any individual. Unlike American society, Latin American culture is collectivist in nature. In Guatemala especially, family is everything, which makes the abuses the children at our home have suffered even worse.

Without a healthy family to rely upon, they will find it extremely difficult to ever become productive members of society. To counteract this tragedy, the Oasis builds community into daily activities. The kids live in one of six "houses" with housemothers, and this house essentially becomes their family. They study in small groups around a table instead of sitting in rows of desks. They play team games during gym, like soccer and matado (a Guatemalan version of dodgeball), instead of individual games like tennis or golf. Their community allows them to explore their individuality – instead of proving why they are deserving of attention, the kids already know that they belong and are free to be creative from that secure foundation of love.

Melissa Marts

Guatemala City, Guatemala

Working in a developing nation opened my eyes to the way many Americans view other countries beyond the individualistic/collectivist perspective clash. In addition to time with the kids, I worked extensively in the bodega, the attic where all of the donated clothing was kept. I sorted through piles of donations for nicer items and then organized them by size and style. However, I was horrified by some of the items donated. They were stained, ripped, drawn upon, and threadbare. One shirt said, "I'm sexy and I know it." While I know whoever donated those items did so with good intentions, they underscored an arrogant attitude. My sexually abused child should not wear a shirt that makes her once more a sexual object. My children are not naked, so they should not have to be subject to the humility of wearing an American's trash. I began to wonder what caused people to have such a mistaken understanding of poverty. Upon my return to the States, I've been looking more carefully at the way nonprofits portray children in developing nations as completely helpless, poor creatures that we can bestow a patronizing kindness on. I'm hoping to challenge some of these campaigns with the realities of life abroad, so that Americans can participate in service and aid that gives the exploited dignity.

Just as Spanish became easier, my allergies subsided, and I grew fond of the food, it was the sixth week and time to say goodbye. Leaving was extremely hard – after all, I had just adjusted to the culture and begun to form strong relationships with the children and housemothers. But I know that I can do my part to educate Americans about the realities of living on the ground in a developing nation and correct misconceptions many people hold. It was a privilege and honor to share in the lives of these girls for the time I was given. They have and will continue to inspire me to seek systematic poverty and education reform as a means of preventing human trafficking on an international scale. Whenever I become discouraged or frustrated, I can think about Mirzy or one of the other girls, and remember who I'm working for.

Lauren Paige McMillan

Queltzaltenango, Guatemala

My enthusiasm for a career in education work had started out as just a seedling of an idea in high school when I skimmed through "how to pick your major" pamphlet. The more and more I pondered and imagined and fancied over the possibility of becoming a teacher, the more the seedling in my heart grew. I had fallen in love with the idea of working alongside the youth day by day, inspiring them to love learning and grow into independent thinkers. Completely blessed, and still a bit of astonished, I ended up at Vanderbilt's Peabody College of Education and began my study of elementary education and H.O.D.: education policy. After two years of studying the introduction to pedagogy and educational philosophy, I knew that I yearned to try teaching in the classroom and to gain some genuine experience, especially in another country where I could give of myself – my energy, love, and willingness – and serve those who might not have had the opportunities I have had. To my dismay, my brimming idealism had to be anchored down in the hard facts – almost all of the teaching abroad service opportunities I looked into were thousands of dollars, plane tickets not included. I had almost let go of my aspiration to volunteer teach abroad, until I realized my aunt and uncle who live in Guatemala had invited me to come stay with them anytime. With rejuvenated determination, I quickly connected with a local Xela nonprofit educational organization seeking volunteers and planned out my own service trip, staying with my relatives, in the city of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala for May 4th – June 4th, 2014. Only with the help of the Nichols Humanitarian Service Scholarship, I was able to spend a month abroad, teaching and learning, serving and growing.

The service organization I had been in contact with before the trip was El Nahual Educational Community Center located in Pacajá, a town on the outskirts of Xela. As a volunteer here, I served during the children's afterschool program, Manos De Colores, in which children, ages 5 to 13, come daily for homework help and English lessons. When I began, the other college-age volunteer warned me that following through with formal English lessons would be difficult because the children were rowdy and only wanted to run around outside during afterschool hours. For the first few days, I prepared activities to teach the children new vocabulary words in categories, like emotions, personality traits, colors, and family members. The children enjoyed the games for at-most 15 minutes until they lost focus and began playing with each other instead. Other times, I would not be able to give any lesson because the children spent the entire time unhurriedly completing their homework; the motivation to learn English was minimal for these young children. While I was able to create relational bonds with these precious children, assist them with their homework challenges, and play with them outside, I wished that I could be in more of a classroom setting so that the children would be inclined to learn. The best days at El Nahual's afterschool program were when I was able to work intently with one to three students on an English lesson. I had created a bingo vocabulary game, an integrated art project, and other learning activities with candy prizes, and when I was able to successfully accomplish one of the tasks alongside a child, it felt meaningful. The children loved receiving one-on-one attention, and I was happy to provide them with that care.

After my second day at El Nahual, I discussed with my Aunt Katrinka about how I would have liked to give more formalized English instruction, and she came up with an amazing plan to turn my service experience in Guatemala into a one-of-a-kind opportunity. One of her nursing school professors taught in a public school during the day and was looking for someone fluent in English to assist in teaching her sixth grade classroom the English curriculum. We reached out to her, and the teacher Anabella enthusiastically welcomed me with open arms as a volunteer English teacher for the month.

Lauren Paige McMillan

Queltzaltenango, Guatemala

The following Monday, my aunt and I went to the rural public school La Emboscada, completely surrounded by mountains, to co-teach the introductory lesson to Anabella's 28 sixth grade students, ranging from 11 to 14 years old. My aunt and I facilitated get-to-know-you games while incorporating teaching English greetings and conversation questions. These students were enthralled. While they found the new language and the new concepts challenging and probably a bit overwhelming that first day, they had a lot of fun. The teacher was so pleased and said I could teach in the morning as many times as I wanted each week. In Guatemalan public schools, the national curriculum states that teachers are to teach Spanish, the native Mayan regional language, and English, yet none of the teachers are fluent in English, so instruction is very limited, to perhaps numbers, colors, fruits/vegetables, and animals. Anabella gave me a copy of the national public school sixth grade English curriculum to guide my month. Essentially, I had full reign to teach these students 3-4 times a week for the subsequent four weeks, which was crazy and exciting and nerve-wracking and incredible all at the same time. May 14th, 2014 marked my first day of teaching an entire classroom by myself, and it was indescribably amazing. I had stayed up until the early hours of the morning the day prior, preparing and practicing what I was going to say and do with the students (I had to teach in Spanish, which was a good challenge for me). It was amazing to experience with these students how much fun they were having saying "My name is.." and "How are you?" and learning the parts of the classroom. Over the month, I taught the units: first conversations, parts of the classroom, colors, numbers up to 1,000, intro to grammar, and family members. I would create hand-written worksheets and make 30 photocopies at a center in the city for the students to have homework practice. For the final week, I created an exam cumulating all they had learned, to provide the teacher with a measureable outcome of what they had accomplished with me.

The teacher was so pleased that she asked me to lead a session for all the teachers at La Emboscada to train them in the fundamentals for how to teach English. I was overjoyed to have been given that opportunity to provide a sustainable service that would leave an impact on the school. Over the next several evenings, I created a curriculum guide for the teachers, with vocabulary lists organized by themes and the basic grammar rules that could be easily photocopied and readily distributed amongst the school staff. Unexpectedly and sadly, one of the final days I was in Guatemala, the day that I was to present the lesson to the teachers a tropical rainstorm hit, and the schools and roads were closed. I was still able to provide them with the training booklet I had prepared, complete with all the worksheets and the exam that I had made, yet the training had to be canceled. Nonetheless, the time I spent at La Emboscada was the highlight of my service experience; these students would cheer enthusiastically when I entered their classroom each morning with a thunderous, "Good morning, teacher!!" to my daily "Goooood morning, students!!" Challenging them with this new, foreign language opened up their minds to an interesting, different academic experience. I am so grateful that Anabelle invited me into her classroom to me and that the students were so willing to get out of their comfort zones to try conversing and writing in English.

Lauren Paige McMillan

Queltzaltenango, Guatemala

Additionally, my aunt suggested that I offer to teach English lessons at the rural public elementary school that was just up the hill from their home, Urbina Mixta Primaria. We met with the director of the school, and she loved the idea. Unfortunately, they had two weeks of holiday break for the first two weeks of May, so I was only able to teach there for two weeks. The director wanted me to visit a different classroom each time I went, so that many students could get the opportunity. Because of this, I knew I was not there to well establish the children's foundation of the English language, but rather to expose as many students as possible to English in a positive, fun way that would hopefully leave a curiosity and yearning in them to learn more and pursue greater study of English. Thus, I visited kindergarteners through fourth graders, playing games to learn basic introductions (hello, goodbye, good morning, good night, my name is), colors, and numbers. At this rural school, each day was unpredictable as the director placed me in a new classroom. The younger children were wild and dirty, and the teachers were underprepared and classrooms had minimal resources. Students in one classroom ranged dramatically in age because many students do not pass because they would rarely attend school to help out family at home. Being at Urbina was an eye-opening experience for me, but I loved the energy of the children and cherished the precious time when I would walk home from school down the hill alongside sweet, curious students who would nervously and giddily ask me how to say words in English ("How do you say… corn? blonde? dog? truck? pink?"). Thus, for the latter half of my time in Guatemala, my weekdays would consist of teaching 6th graders at La Emboscada from 8 – 10am and a variety of students at Urbina 10:30 – 12:30pm, and then playing with children at El Nahual's afterschool program 3 -5pm. My days were long, and my evenings consisted of lesson planning with help from my cousins, but boy, did I love it! This experience really allowed me to grow as an educator and as a global citizen. I appreciate cultural differences, value any experience to practice my Spanish, and find language crucial for human connection and understanding. This experience confirmed all that I had been imagining for years: teaching is for me. I find it purposeful, inspiring, unpredictable, and meaningful. Guatemala has left a footprint on my heart, and it has changed me forever.

Alisha Newton

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Solving problems was never the goal. I understood from the beginning that the parallels between our own great nation and the southern-most tip of Africa were strong enough that if I wanted to tackle the issues of poverty, community health, civil rights, or education, I needn't look farther than my own ZIP code. No, it wasn't about solving problems; instead, I wanted to learn about South Africa, its history of colonization by the Dutch, decades of apartheid, and the process of reconciliation that is no older than myself. I wanted to shake hands with its people, look into their eyes, hear their stories.

On the first day in Port Elizabeth, I and eleven of my peers toured the Walmer township with Prof, a local. We saw tin buildings, buckets for toilets, communal taps, and a tangled network of electric cables. At nightfall, we drank the local beer at a shebeen and ate mielie-pap at Prof's house, and the starkness of what I'd seen didn't sink in until I returned to our guest house, to a WiFi network, to hot showers and a fully-stocked fridge: Western comforts.

Under the guidance of the volunteer organization Khaya, the next step was to survey all of the potential service options. In the Missionvale township, there's a Care Centre that includes community gardens, food distribution kitchen, and an HIV/AIDS clinic. In the Walmer township, there are crèches (daycares) and the Human Dignity Centre. Each location basically involves community outreach and and providing children and families with basic necessities like education, food, shelter, and health care, and the members of our group split up across the various locations.

Teacher's assistant at the HDC is what I became. It's not my lifetime goal, but it was an absolute pleasure for three weeks. I spent my days reading books to twenty-seven second-graders and letting them read to me. Sometimes my job called for sharpening colored pencils, or catching little bodies at the end of a playground slide, or pointing out P.E. on a map. "This is me?!" a little boy cried once, seemingly awed by the fact that he had a place in the world.

Having Miss Amy in the classroom was wonderful. The kids adored her. I adored her. She was strict but not imposing, kind but not submissive. But at the end of the second week, she left for South Korea—at least throwing a cookie-decorating party on her way out—and suddenly my role as a classroom assistant became more necessary. I saw myself as the transition slide, helping both the new teachers and the students become comfortable with new situation.

Afrikaans, a language that carries the weight of the historic oppressor, was easy enough for me. *Hallo, Dankie*. But even after a month in *uMzantsi Afrika*, it was all I could do to say "Molo" and correctly pronounce the isiXhosa names of my students. I tried to form my tongue into the shapes of clicks and novel consonants, but even the children laughed at my pathetic attempts. But they couldn't laugh when I said their names: Yomelela, be strong. Luphumlo, rest. Khanyiso, light. Ntiskelelo, blessing. Yonelani, be satisfied. Luthando, love. Babalwa, grace. They could only smile shyly.

Fire, said Wangari Maathai when she spoke at Vanderbilt in 2011—the world is on fire, and any one person who makes an effort to help is like a hummingbird carrying a drop of water. We weren't expecting to put out any fires, but we did all that what we could do. Perhaps when Dutch, South African, American, Egyptian, and Swiss people come together, the cultural exchange combines to create something greater than the sum of its parts. Perhaps our actions will ripple unseen through time and space, as we inspire more people to educate themselves about South Africa or their own communities, and to help in whatever way they can.

Reflecting on my time at Chalmers N°10 in windy Port Elizabeth, I saw that my expectations for the trip were very different than what I actually encountered. Based on past international service trips, I thought I was going to face hunger, fatigue, illness, and loneliness, and I was prepared to push through these "personal issues" for the sake of the service at hand.

Alisha Newton

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

However, the facilities we had in South Africa were almost better than what I have at home, and my main problem became feeling too connected to technology. And when our router stopped working, even that was solved.

In Cape Town, we stayed with host families who truly cared for us, which ameliorated the feeling of being your average American tourist. Still, we spent the days shopping and sight-seeing and trying to experience as much as we could in a week. We wandered through parks, museums, cupcake shops. We drove north to the wine country, sipped daintily of European customs, and dug our hands into carrot beds at the Lofdal Community Projects. We explored Table Mountain, overlooking the city, and later stood at the rocks where two oceans meet, imagining the Portuguese navigators of old praying for their lives in a wave-tossed caravel.

Could I now call myself a global citizen? It's hard to say, but after four weeks abroad and 55 hours of service, I at least had pictures to show and a story to tell. I'd stood in the cell where Nelson Mandela wrote his autobiography, I'd eaten stew cooked in a pot over the fire, I'd watched the sun rise over Mossel Bay while seals frolicked in the waters. Would I have changed some aspects of the program? Yes. Does it matter now? No.

As I returned home, I thought about the footsteps I'd left in sandy fynbos, the mountains I'd scrambled up like a child running to her mother, the cold waves that washed me from head to toe. I thought about the eager, upturned faces of my second-graders, and kept the sadness at bay only by promising myself I would write them every few months. I thought about how in the meantime, they would continue adding sums, tracing letters, reading books, and how maybe in twenty years, they would be a part of a new South Africa, a country wholly and rightfully theirs.

SOUTH AFRICA: the name still sounds exotic, faraway, golden. But I have lived it, and I owe a great deal of this to the Nichols family. So thank you, for the summer of a lifetime.

Oluwasijibomi Oluwadara

Guatemala

My experience on the Volunteers Around the World Medical Service Trip helped me realize one thing: Education is very important. This dawned upon me during my experience of shadowing doctors on the trip. The experience of shadowing doctors allowed me to observe the relationship and interactions Guatemalan doctors have with their patients. I would equate the relationship between doctors and patients in Guatemala to a teacher-student relationship. The student, which is the patient in this analogy, looks up to the teacher, the doctor, who the student considers a prestigious and knowledgeable person. The perceived prestige and knowledge of the doctors was contrary to the type of patients we served. The patients we served were mostly uneducated and resided in underserved communities. Therefore, the doctors and even us, as volunteers played a highly influential role in the patients' lives. The patients believed everything we said. I was glad to observe that the doctors used their influence as a way of educating their patients. With every prescription written, they also wrote and explained an educational plan that they had personalized for the patient. Doctors in the United States very rarely write a personalized educational plan for a patient. Here in the United States, many times doctors solely play the role of a medical dispensary, which I believe is not solely the role of a doctor. As a result of my reflection on this topic, I believe that I would like to become a doctor because I want to educate people about their health. I would like to encourage and help people to live a healthy lifestyle.

From this trip experience, I also learned a lot about the patient populations that we served. Many of the populations that we served spoke the local dialect and did not speak Spanish. For most of the sites we had a local translator translate into Spanish so that we could record chief complaints at the intake station. From my time at the intake station, I learned that certain communities had a chief complaint that was common to most patients. I also discovered that there was widespread need for children's vitamins in all the regions that we served. This need is a result of the Guatemalan's diet of mainly starchy foods. Therefore, our doctors many times prescribed multivitamins but also educated the parents about the importance of incorporating vegetables into their diet.

My experience at the intake station allowed me to have one and one interactions with patients. I had many interesting and anecdotal moments. One being that when I asked late 20 to early 30 year olds whether they were pregnant or not, all the women who were waiting in line and had overheard me would collectively laugh at me. It was quite puzzling at first as to why that would be an amusing question but I soon learned that most women had children as young as 16 to 18 years old! So, I guess it was quite amusing when I asked a late 20 to early 30 year old if they were pregnant. There were however, a couple of women between the ages of 16 and early 20s that fervently denied that they were pregnant when I asked the question. I think that some of them were career focused or were family planning with their significant other. Family planning is not very big in Guatemala but it seemed that from my shadowing experience that some doctors are strongly encouraging young girls to talk to their partner about family planning. I very much liked that doctors were having conversations with their patients about family planning but it was also surprising to me in a couple of ways. First, the doctors who were huge advocates for family planning were male. I think that that in itself is a very encouraging message. Second, the doctors spoke of family planning mostly to female patients. I think that the doctors did this on purpose because women are the ones who get pregnant and if the woman understands the importance of family planning then she will most likely convince her partner of its importance. Lastly, I found it quite unusual that some of our doctors suggested the use of contraceptives as part of family planning because Guatemala is largely a Catholic/Pentecostal. Moreover, this was yet another example of how our mobile clinic doctors played the role of influential educators.

At the other stations that I volunteered at, I also learned a lot...

Oluwasijibomi Oluwadara

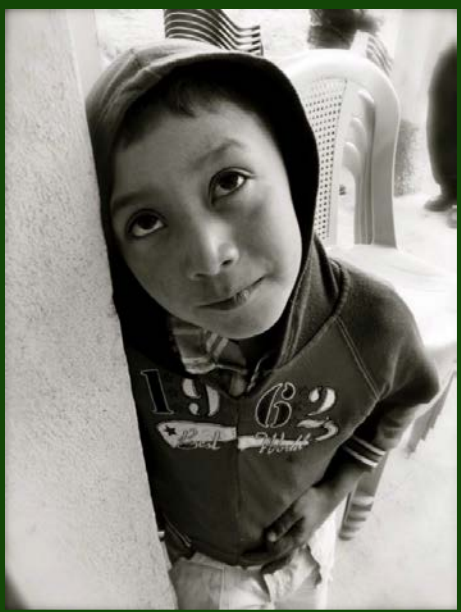
Guatemala

From pharmacy, I became acquainted with not only the medications that were dispensed but I also learned about what medications were commonly prescribed.In Guatemala, medications commonly prescribed pertained to blood pressure, gastritis, parasite infection, and malnutrition. From the vitals station, I had much practice with taking blood pressure, blood glucose and temperature. It was a rewarding experience to finally learn how to take blood pressure. Often, when I took a patient's blood pressure or blood glucose, the patient would ask me if his or her blood pressure or blood glucose level was normal. It was quite surprising to me that they trusted me so much, despite how young I appeared and the fact that I am not a medical professional. For this reason, we were told to make sure to conduct ourselves in a professional manner at all times and to understand what was considered normal for blood pressure and blood glucose. We often advised the patients to ask the doctor their questions, as we understood that the patient population that we were serving would hold every word that we said as important. We didn't want to misinform any patient. We had attempted at having another station called the survey station but taking a survey was a little more difficult than we had predicted. We were interested in finding out how much candy and sugary beverages patients consumed per week. From our experience in creating the survey we learned that for one, there were many translations for "junk food" and two, it didn't seem like people knew that they were eating junk food or they were afraid to admit it. One of our volunteers told us of a time when ironically, while he was asking a mother how much junk food her son consumed, her son was sucking on a lollipop. From that experience, we learned that we had to modify our survey and try again next year. Besides clinic days, we were also able to work with kids. We had an education day on which we taught over 70 kids about the importance of dental care.

We had coloring sheets, fun activities and hygiene packets, which included a toothbrush, toothpaste, floss and a personalized hand written message that encouraged the kids to brush their teeth. The kids loved the hygiene packets! Sadly, some of the kids didn't receive hygiene packets. Hopefully, next year we can find more sponsors for the hygiene packets. In addition to our education day, we worked with a program called Somos Los Hijos, which is a program designed for children with disabilities. We read books to the kids and assisted the kids in painting. This was a unique experience for me because I have never worked with kids with disabilities and to do it all in Spanish was difficult but a learning experience. Overall, I am so grateful that I was able to go on this trip. This trip is truly an unforgettable learning experience. I am so thankful to the Nichols family for providing me the funds to go on this trip. The Nichols family has supported me and the rest of the volunteers in providing healthcare to over 1,000 Guatemalan patients. As a result of the Nichols family's generosity they have also helped Volunteers Around the World serve over 20,000 patients this past year. Thank you so much for your support, Nichols family.

Oluwasijibomi Oluwadara

Guatemala



Lauren Pak

Nicaragua

The dictionary definition of service is “an action of helping or doing work for someone.” Service is directly applying and being the extension of societal change one hopes to achieve. It is about learning how to better fit the needs of the community and understanding the individual impact one can make on the world. Change is only as strong and powerful as those who initiate it.

I believe that service is not only about the logistical volunteer hours served, but also can be very much measured by the hearts of those dedicating their all to the service program. I decided to attend Vanderbilt specifically with the goal of going into international non-profit work after studying the Human and Organizational Development program in the International Leadership Development Track.

Coming to campus, I instantly fell in love with Vanderbilt’s service oriented culture and how many opportunities there are available for students to utilize their passions, interests, and skill-sets to directly serve and give back to the community as aware, intellectual citizens. I believe the essential quality of a good leader is found in his or her compassionate heart and genuine passion to serve others. The Vanderbilt community has inspired me to no end, allowing me the opportunity to actively serve and tackle societal issues through service. It never ceases to amaze me how blessed I am to be attending a university that supports its students so much financially with opportunities to serve through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. Community service allows for one to first handedly see and understand the needs within a community and then apply that knowledge to achieve effective, powerful change.

For the month of May, I had the wonderful opportunity to serve as a community development intern under non-profit Manna Project International in Nicaragua. Manna Project International was founded by a Vanderbilt University Human and Organizational Development Program alumnus.

My first year HOD professor Dr. Brian Griffith, specifically discussed with me how he had advised and mentored this past student in how to establish effective organizational community development through an educational-service mold. The mission of Manna Project International is to foster communities of young adults and encourage them to use their passions and education in serve to communities in need. Manna’s difference as an NGO lies in its commitment to sustainability, cultural sensitivity, and holistic approach to serving the whole community in order to enact effective, long-term change.

I had specifically chosen to work and serve at this particular Manna site since it was Manna’s first established situation in Latin America. The program has been immersed in the community for over 10 years now, allowing for an open relationship between community members and the non-profit. There are some children in the community that grew up with the Manna Project, and at the age of 16 are now fluent in English and are working successfully as a government translator with hopes of attending medical school. One such girl, Diana, told me that if it wasn’t for the role models of Americans working for Manna, she would not have known that she had the right to dream let alone have the chance to attend a private school that is mainly open to only wealthy families in the area. It is success stories like these that brought me to this specific Nicaragua site, site as a community developer, my hope is that education will allow for young people of the country to grow up and lead their country so that one day the teachers of these community programs would be native Nicaraguans since who knows how to teach, lead, and fix the problems of the country better than those who have lived in the area all their lives?

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, the first being Haiti. However, interestingly enough, Nicaragua resides as part of the top ten happiest nations in the world according to the Global Happiness Index.

Lauren Pak

Nicaragua

My time in Nicaragua can be described by the amazing conversations and interactions I had with some of the most genuinely loving individuals I have ever had the opportunity to meet. I was a sponge this summer, soaking in stories. I had with university students about the oppressive Sandinista political party and their opinions about the Nicaraguan Revolution, laugh over baby photos with a family in the village on a home-stay, play catch with two girls who adopted me into their home and who I now see as my little sisters, talk about the economy and work opportunity for low-income individuals with a group of lawyers. I created life-long friendships and came to love the country of Nicaragua like no other.

My role as a community development intern was focused on education. I taught mathematics, English, peer relationship classes, and business training at the local high school in Cedro Galan and through a women's co-operative in Villa Guadalupe, one of Nicaragua's most reputable areas for the highest poverty level. From daily meetings, I learned and read about the social issues affecting Nicaragua in areas of healthcare, migration, politics, economics, and industrial work. From this, I was able to apply my knowledge to approach the community with greater sensitivity. Learning about the issues gave me the passion why I wanted to serve this specific community.

After interacting with community leaders and learning about development through my summer service trip, I came to understand how individual, personal interactions and cultural sensitivity are essential in making an impact in a community. I realized that the key to breaking the cycle of poverty is heavily focused on giving the appropriate support to the next generation through educational vocations and opportunities. I believe that equal access to education can truly change the world and end the economic and social disparities plaguing society. My favorite teaching role was at the local high school of Chiquilistagua where...

...I taught classes for older students ranging from the ages of 14-16 who were falling academically behind.

At the beginning of the term, these students were rowdy and did not care about learning. But after four weeks of dedication and relationship building, my students who typically scored the lowest on exams got perfect scores on their midterm quizzes. It was amazing to see the light ignite in my students' eyes as they understood how to solve a math problem and became so excited that they thirsted for more knowledge. Great teaching can inspire, and these students became my little brothers and sisters in that I served as their schoolteacher, mentor, and friend. The greatest take-away from my internship however, was realizing that no matter how much I uplifted my students through direct teaching, that they still never stood a chance in overcoming their economic situation since the "door" was still closed to them. I found that no matter how great these students become at learning fractions, that the opportunity to succeed was still one in a million because the system was not in their favor.

Change requires constant communication and collaboration between non-profits, community members, and policy-makers. Coming from the non-profit level, I gained the knowledge and unique perspective of truly understanding the community. From this experience, I wished to apply my understanding even further in order to enact greater change. This made me turn to policy reform in order to achieve effective system-wide change.

My work in the impoverished community made me very interested in the issues regarding poverty and education especially from a larger-picture, legislative standpoint. For the future, I hope to instigate community change as a legislature with a specific focus on domestic as well as international education reform. My experience in Nicaragua inspired me to enter the law sector to advocate for student's educational right s in order to end the cycle of poverty.

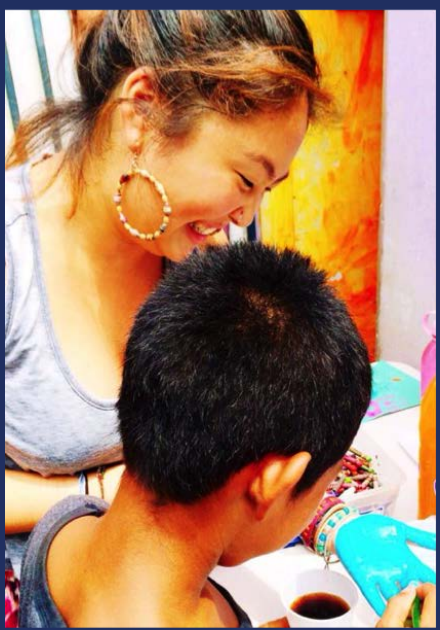
Lauren Pak

Nicaragua

As soon as I returned to the United States, during the summer months of June-August, I had the privilege of interning with the Children's Law Center of California under the education research and policy sector as well as aid in the strategic organization of the firm. I saw the power and impact of litigation in the dependency courts and the foster care system and its relationship with one's minority status. I was in charge of researching current education policy that impacted the firm's cases for attorneys as well as created a training manual for the Regional Center, which provides educational support for youth, on the California Welfare and Institutions Code in regards to Education Rights Holders. I worked on casework, serving as a liaison between attorneys, social workers, and youth, continuing my work in achieving social justice for minority students.

The Hebrew word "Manna" means "an unexpected or gratuitous gift". It is present in the story where it was the only source of nourishment for the Israelites as they traveled through the desert. My experience with Manna Project International was just that, a gift. Manna Project gave me passion, sensitivity, and lasting friendships.

Manna is a symbol of living one day at a time. It is about putting one's all into each and every day, and then taking a step back to realize that the sum of those days and each person's contributions adds up to something powerful. My internship with Manna Project international taught me how to be change at the communal, grassroots level and inspired me to tackle the "big picture" problems with my continuing Vanderbilt education. Manna gave me the experience to interact with the community at a deeper level so that I can understand how to serve and make an impact on the world.



Susana Pilny

London, UK

For me, writing this reflection is a bittersweet thing; when I attended the summer OACS trip to London, I had already donned my cap and gown and sweated with my 1600 classmates inside Memorial Gym, so reflecting on this inevitably draws forth recollections broader than the scope of a month of my life. That trip was essentially the last moment where I felt like I was still a college student, and by the end I had to shed that image of myself and start the alarming transformation into true adulthood. Suffice to say, it was hugely important to me to go on that trip, and it was only thanks to the kindness of the Nichols that I was able to do so. So before I go any further, thank you so much for helping me!

Coming into London, I wasn't entirely sure what we would be doing. I knew that we would be working in one of London's most diverse, unhealthy, and poor boroughs in an effort to help a local healthcare organization, and I knew that we were going to learn about healthcare policy; but the specifics were still unfolding as the project was brand new.

This may have stressed me out a little—I love to have all my plans set. Of course, there were other concerns too: could I really help all that much in a month? Would I be able to do what the community needed, as opposed to what I *thought* they did? And then other concerns as well: would London be safe? Would I like my group? I knew the only way to put these worries to rest was to dive in and hope for the best.

Our London partners worked to get us internships with local healthcare organizations, and they revealed them to us a few days after we arrived. I was to work with UCLP, which is a group of healthcare research partners. However, we immediately discovered a problem: UCLP had decided that a month was simply not long enough for what they had in mind, and asked us not to work with them.

"No matter," we thought, "Our London partners will just place us somewhere else!"

And so, a few days later, I ended up with two other Vanderbilt women and four University of East London (UEL) students at Mind, a national mental health advocacy group.

There, we were taught about the higher incidence of mental illness in the LGBT community, and then asked to survey local members about how easy and comfortable it was for them to access help for mental health issues and how past experiences with mental health groups had gone. After three meetings and twenty phone calls, we three Vanderbilt students had a very sudden realization: we were asking local LGBT groups to refer us to their LGBT members—which is private information—and then to ask LGBT members about their mental health experiences—which was also private information. No one was stepping forward (understandably) and so we were being encouraged to show up at these organizations in person to conduct extemporaneous interviews—which we definitely did not feel comfortable doing, because it seemed inappropriate to ask probably unwilling strangers if they were LGBT and mentally ill.

We were between Scylla and Charybdis. Mind had good intentions, but the means to their end were problematic—but it was also already two weeks in, so trying to find a new group would also be problematic. Thus, we made the best decision out of several bad ones: we asked for a reassignment, and then drafted a report for Mind in which we described a more private way to collect the information they wanted, a task for a group who had more than two weeks to collect hundreds of points of data.

We filled out applications to work with a local HIV/AIDS group, and waited on their response, but they declined our help. With one week left, our UEL partner decided it was best not to try to find us an assignment.

So in sum, one part of my trip definitely did not turn out as planned. After being juggled through three organizations, the only impact I might have had was with Mind by planning the future of the research project. However, I've always found that you learn much more from things that go awry than things that go well, so I didn't mind as much. Stumbling through these parts just reinforced that I need patience, adaptability, and the ability to know when to tell someone no.

Of course, there were two other major facets of the trip that turned out much better.

Susana Pilny

London, UK

First, we learned about healthcare policy, both on the local government level and on the national level—meaning trips to Parliament, meetings with local governing boards, discussions with Members of Parliament, and meetings with healthcare professionals, all of which really helped to broaden my understanding of healthcare in the US, because I was given knowledge that helped me to compare and contrast different healthcare systems.

The final facet involved us creating and presenting workshops to the local community via Bart's Health Trust, a local portion of the National Health Service. My group worked on a diabetes presentation, which had to be informative while being accessible to anyone, even those with no knowledge of the disease, as well as interesting and fun. I believe we did well on all accounts—we played a game of diabetes Jeopardy! with the community members who attended (and discovered that England did not actually have Jeopardy!), taught them about the disease itself, and linked it to the local area by discussing the rates of diabetes and obesity in their community. The network of the hospital wouldn't let us download the PowerPoint we created, but the people understood and we had a good time despite that issue.

All in all, this trip was important for me, because it helped to cement the confidence I needed to have in myself for post-grad life. I *am* able to adapt, to stand up for myself, to understand strangers; despite my future plans being wholly undecided, I would be able to get by until I figured it out, because I have grown into a person who *can* get by.

The future is decidedly less scary.

Maria Ramos

Rio Dulce, Guatemala

This spring break, I was given the opportunity to take a trip to Rio Dulce, Guatemala with Manna Project International, a campus service organization that is devoted to giving undergraduate students an opportunity to provide service on a global scale. Through your overwhelming generosity, I was given the opportunity to experience and interact with members of an entirely new culture— a culture that has drastically changed the way that I perceive the world. Thank you so much for providing me with the monetary support to take advantage of this enriching, once-in-a-lifetime experience abroad. I couldn't possibly explain to you in words the ways in which I have grown as a more civically-minded, globally-conscious learner, citizen, and individual; however, I would so appreciate the opportunity to tell you more about my experience working with my fellow Vanderbilt students to bring a sense of hope to this Guatemalan community.

Throughout our time in Guatemala, ten undergraduate students and I worked closely with the volunteers of Casa Guatemala, a place to call home for over 300 abused, abandoned, orphaned, or malnourished children. Casa Guatemala is truly an incredible place— one whose volunteer medical caregivers provide quality medical treatment and whose teachers provide a well-rounded education in and out of the classroom. Among all the tasks we performed during our one-week stay, our interaction and time with the students was most highly valued and treasured. Although it was challenging to overcome the language barrier, the pure joy and excitement of simply interacting, smiling, and playing games with the students of Casa Guatemala made our time together so worthwhile.

Although so many of these kids have endured challenging times and conditions, all of them seemed to contain the capacity to love the simplicity of life. It is so easy to allow our burdens to overcome us and paralyze us from seeking happiness; however, in that moment, whether playing soccer, coloring, or eating lunch with volunteers, the children of Casa Guatemala were genuinely content.

Although many of these children only had one pair of pants and did not own a single pair of shoes, they didn't seem to be bothered by their lack of material goods but chose to concentrate on what they did have at the time. To this day, I think of the children of Casa Guatemala when I find myself overwhelmed by my busy schedule or worried about something out of my control. I constantly remind myself of the appreciation of the simplicity of life in Guatemala and the ability of the students to find joy in the littlest things.

One of my favorite parts of the entire week was on our last day at Casa Guatemala. Every year, the students of Casa Guatemala hold a "Carnaval" in the main area between the dining hall and one of the residence houses. During this event, students of all ages gather to either side of an aisle draped with colorful streamers, and every grade selects both a boy and a girl to take part in a pageant. Each student gets dressed up and struts his or her way down the aisle to music played on a stereo. While the boys were humorously dressed in mismatched outfits of their own creation, the girls wore beautiful dresses and had their hair pulled back in braids. To celebrate the start of the event, every student was given an eggshell filled with glitter and tiny pieces of colored paper to crack over another person's head. By the end of the ceremony, everyone sparkled from head to toe. Through the "Carnaval", I had the opportunity to join the students in experiencing their Guatemalan culture while also celebrating a place that provides these children with the support and care that they need.

Maria Ramos

Rio Dulce, Guatemala

When we weren't spending time with the students, we were given the opportunity to complete maintenance projects around Casa Guatemala. One of the projects involved replacing old window screens to protect the residence areas from mosquitos. At one point, another volunteer and I were trying to pry the wooden paneling away from the windows of one of the residence houses while only balancing on a wooden beam off the side of the building! The second project involved painting the inside of a classroom with the letters of the alphabet and pictures that started with each of the corresponding letters.

The project presented all of the Vanderbilt volunteers with an opportunity to work together in completing a project that would facilitate learning for these kids. Performing these maintenance jobs was an opportunity for all of the volunteers to have a lasting impact on the physical structure of the residence houses and classrooms of Casa Guatemala. Despite the lack of resources available to Casa Guatemala, we took advantage of what we did have to make the school a better and safer place to live, learn, and play.

Finally, all of the volunteers had the opportunity to assist the long-term volunteers of Casa Guatemala and several of the students in cultivating an area of land to grow peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, and watermelon. Our job, as was instructed by the other volunteers, was to break up the dried-up soil and dig small holes to plant the seedlings. What appeared to be a simple task turned out to be a long day of tough manual labor! As our group of volunteers was struggling to endure the heat of the afternoon, the students with whom we were working were on their hands and knees, planting row after row of vegetables with ease. Working with these students toward completing this project was an opportunity to learn about and participate in a large part of their childhood and upbringing.

When I now look back to my experiences at Casa Guatemala, I think back to the numerous ways in which my perception of the world and its people has drastically been transformed. I could only hope that I made as much of a difference in the lives of the students of Casa Guatemala as they did in mine. Through this experience, I have developed a passion to further continue learning about disadvantaged populations in hopes of identifying the means to best meet the needs of the community. In the upcoming years, whether through my ongoing education or future career, I look forward to continuing to experience the world through the lens of global engagement and service. Thank you so much for this incredible experience.

Devon Calla Reese

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Before leaving for this OACS trip, I discussed with friends and family, who insistently inquired about what I'd be doing for the month of June, how I intended to experience South Africa through direct experience and subsequent reflection rather than allow any preconceptions to interfere with my understanding of the people and structure of the communities I was at the time about to enter. I know enough about the world that I know I don't know much. Over my four weeks in South Africa, I feel as though I was fulfilled and uplifted by both the interpersonal relationships I formed along with my grown regard for the physical environment.

My experience amongst the group was unique in that I had not attended seminars prior to departure nor been introduced to the concepts and central objectives on the same terms as the other students, but I at least had the advantage of my prior exposure to extreme poverty and experience within service learning initiatives, namely my year spent in Thailand working for a non-profit. These skills transferred fairly easily and aided in my ability to be a leveling force amongst the group.

In Port Elizabeth, our morning and afternoon commute had become so familiar and comfortable, and our a.m. arrivals on our service site, Missionvale, were always warm and welcoming. The names to the faces came easily, and we were received with all smiles and more than often hugs. Before leaving the Chalmers house Junayne, our volunteer coordinator, was always sure to remind me to grab my second mug of tea that I would have steeped for our drive, and I'd usually be the last of our group to scurry into the kombi. When we pulled up to the entrance to Missionvale I would look for Wellington's once removed but by the end of our stay friendly and inviting face, and he would come open the gate for us. I'd continue scanning out the window for our welcoming committee, two of the Care Center's dogs who would follow the kombi in and wait eagerly outside the van door.

Throughout our time working at Missionvale, the dogs had begun habitually following me closely into the garden, to and from the equipment locker, and into the townships to plant gardens.) I usually began my days with hugs from the ladies in nutrition when I would go looking for Louisa, my overseer in agriculture, and I'd remind my cohort, Mandizi, to take his iron pill. Everything had grown surprisingly familiar and comfortable for the context to be so foreign and unsettling. But our work always held purpose, and within the structure of Missionvale, we could fully commit to a known goal utilizing and expanding upon existing support systems.

It was in my second week at our site that I decided to devote the majority of my time and experience to the agricultural initiative, as our group seemed invested in the other projects, like the school, nutrition unit, clinic, clothing warehouse, and so our resources were dispersed fairly evenly. In addition, I have a spirited connection to land and nature, as I have always been concerned for self-sustaining environmental initiatives, especially those rich in an awareness of the personal and social benefits of holistic health and agriculture. I also regard sustainable and ecologically aware initiatives in service as dependent factors in truly making a shift of perspective and approach to global responsibility and citizenship. It is through direct contact with the earth I am able to witness the literal fruit of my labor. In our township visits, we – Louisa, Mandizi, Fani, and I – would arrive at homes with barren, trash ridden, unappealing soil and were able to leave having transformed and prepared a garden that should have already begun to sprout by now.

It is this unique aspect to the ecological service that has helped me combat the self-doubt or debate over personal influence that we as volunteers had expressed and revisited together in all of our reflections.

Devon Calla Reese

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

The question of time and impact had been overriding, and one member framed it beautifully; rather than overthink and wonder what good we are able to contribute in only three weeks (which ultimately interrupts and prevents what influence we do have the opportunity to contribute) it is most important to "just be." Our physical presence, our intentions for service, and most importantly our compassion for fellow human beings prevailed over any stigma surrounding volun-tourism or white privilege or racial and social divides. Don't overthink it, we tried to remind ourselves. Through building positive and lasting relationships, by identifying oneself within a network of beautiful individuals, and living as mindfully and naturally within the present moment, we as a group of volunteers left Port Elizabeth with a soothing sense of self-actualization, shared experience, and passion for making positive change.

Adeline Reiser

Jikaze Village, Maai Mahiu, Central Kenya

My two weeks in Kenya were two of the best in my life. I learned so much from being immersed in the culture and just living simply, focusing on the things that truly matter in the world. Every day was filled with meaningful human connection, which was amazing to see given the differences between us on the outside. One of my favorite things about the Kenyans is that they have no concept of time. They prioritize people and their interactions above following a schedule or getting things done. This was so refreshing to me and I found it very life-giving, coming from a place like Vanderbilt where everyone is so competitive and there is always so much work to do. I loved how they viewed their success collectively and wanted everyone in their village to do well, rather than going behind each other's backs or caring only about their individual needs. The women we met in particular showed remarkable strength, not just physically but in their character and willpower. Their work ethic was incredible, and they were so open about showing us their lives and their hearts. They had so little, but they were extremely generous and shared all they had.

Our group worked about an hour away from Nairobi in a resettlement village called Jikaze, where a whole community of people had to move after post-election violence in 2007. These people lost everything in the violence – their homes, their businesses, their loved ones, and their land. Their community is growing in this new place, and they are exploring social business to pull themselves out of poverty. We got to help them build a new greenhouse to replace one damaged by wind and storms. We also cleared the land with them and planted crops at their lettuce farm. One of the women I spoke with told me, "When you have things that look like mountains, God will come and make them flat." The people there have seen so much trouble and felt so much pain, yet they have a peace and a faith about them that gives them hope. They take their lives day by day and appreciate the little that they have; they are content despite their circumstances. They care about people and their hearts rather than appearances or other superficial parts of life. They love helping each other out and teaching their children to be good people. Most of all, they love their country and believe in its potential. Even in their poverty, many said they never wanted to leave because they wanted to see it become as great as they knew it was. They respected their land and animals, and they were resourceful with their possessions. I loved their custom of afternoon chai and enjoying each other's company and conversation. They find strength in each other and come together to help each other through hard things. They are like one big family. The lessons they taught me renewed my faith in the world and made me love people and community deeper than I ever had before. It taught me how to adapt to a different lifestyle (one that I loved) and how to work with people very different from me, yet fundamentally similar at the same time. My experience opened my eyes to the fact that things can be done and viewed in many different ways, and the Kenyans have a great perspective on life that we would all benefit from emulating.

We also got the opportunity to volunteer in three different secondary schools for girls. This was my favorite part of the experience. The girls and I were mutually fascinated by each other, and we spent hours talking and asking each other questions – just learning and being human together. They were all confident, driven, and friendly. Each girl has a dream of what she wants to be when she grows up, and it was very evident that they are willing to work hard to get there. We got to encourage them and tell them how much we admired them, and they renewed my love for education and my desire to do big things. They displayed a love of learning and excellence that bodes well for the future of their country. I learned that investing in a goal and believing in people is powerful and rewarding. We taught the girls lessons on goal-setting, healthy relationships, social business, and technology. I got to lead a small discussion group after each session, and I really enjoyed spending time with the girls in that setting.

Adeline Reiser

Jikaze Village, Maai Mahiu, Central Kenya

It was fun to share stories from my own life and listen to their ideas, and I loved seeing their eyes light up when they got excited about something they learned or understood something for the first time. The trip really got me interested in pursuing a career in education, which I had not thought about for many years. I wanted to be a teacher all during my childhood, but in high school I realized I did not want to teach kids that didn't value their education or work hard. This trip showed me how great a need there is for teachers willing to pour into their students, and that there are so many kids out there who deserve a chance to succeed. It renewed my love of being in a classroom and helping people learn, and it made me want to think about teaching in a low-income community in the states or even returning to Kenya and starting a school of my own one day. It impacted me so much that I changed my schedule this semester to take a class called "Society, School, and the Teacher."

My work in Kenya changed me for the better in countless ways, and I am forever thankful for the opportunity to go and serve. I hope to return in the future and do as much as I can in the States to continue to help the community in Jikaze. My heart for the world and appreciation for different cultures is exponentially greater because of this trip, and I will never forget the things I learned. Thank you.

Else Sharp

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

With the help of my Nichols Humanitarian fund award, I spent one month volunteering in Port Elizabeth, South Africa during summer 2014. I am extraordinarily fortunate to have been given the means to be able to pursue my academic and professional interests through this trip, and I am eternally grateful to the Nichols family for supporting service at Vanderbilt.

My experience with the OACS service trips was a bit different than most. I came on the trip with specific intentions of research and service learning. Throughout my academic and professional career, I have been sustained by a passion for global health, a proclivity for service, and a fervent interest in studying the history and prevention of the HIV/AIDS. During the spring semester of my senior year, in preparation for a yearlong graduate program in the Social Foundation of Health, I began a service-learning research project to study the stigma of HIV/AIDS in the long shadow of apartheid. This paper served as the foundation for my current Masters thesis. Over the summer, my trip to South Africa allowed me to work directly with the population that I am studying, a rare and exceptional opportunity that enriched my thesis research, but also reinvigorated my own personal convictions as to why I have chosen this work.

For a while now, I have been fascinated by the global HIV epidemic and its history. The virus is incredibly complex and multifaceted, dealing with sensitive issues such as sex, sexuality, religion, gender, politics, poverty, lifestyle, education, family planning, and so much more. At Vanderbilt, I have been studying the history of the virus in South Africa and am uniquely drawn to the historical context of apartheid and the issues involved in health care delivery in low-resource areas. I had studied, read, researched, and wrote about the subject, feeling prepared for whatever this month would bring. Sitting on the plane, I realized I had never actually seen someone very sick with the virus in person. What would this really look like? How would I react? How would this make me feel? I didn't yet have the answers.

In this reflection, I want to share two moments that have stuck with me as I am now back at Vanderbilt, continuing to study this topic. These two moments, thanks to this trip and to this Fund, I now have the ability to look back on and to cherish.

I spent the first few days of my service trip shadowing the doctor and nurses of Missionvale Care Center Clinic, retired caregivers who donate their time and energy to the Missionvale people. Missionvale is a non-profit organization driven by love and compassion, seeking to respond holistically to the needs of the Missionvale community. The care center is made up of a nutrition unit, a clothing warehouse, the Father Christmas room, a primary school, twenty-five community health practioners, and a clinic. The clinic, open three mornings per week, is where I spent most of my first few days volunteering at Missionvale. Almost every patient who came into the clinic had HIV, TB or both. Many patients were healthy, thriving, and living lives that were not consumed by illness. Some had infections and sores that took advantage of weakened immune systems. Some were too ill to come into the clinic.

One afternoon in the clinic I was dressing a wound of an older woman who came into Missionvale often. Dr. J A Strombeck, the retired general practioner working at Missionvale came to fetch me. I finished wrapping her foot and walked with him into the next room where a patient was lying on his side under several blankets. This was my first encounter with an end-stage HIV patient. That afternoon I helped bandage his sores and later helped tie his shoes, put on his jacket, and lift him into his wheelchair. It was deeply moving, exemplifying all that I had studied about the virus, how it burrows into a patient's life both physically and psychologically, and how, if left untreated, it can consume you. I will never forget those moments I shared with him-- they allowed me to recognize my own strengths and limitations to his care, stimulating the same passions that had brought me to South Africa in the first place and inspiring me to continue on this path.

Though I ended that day on a somber note, I started the next filled with immense gratitude. I was able to witness and participate in a completely different side of the HIV/AIDS epidemic-- a joyful, empowering side.

Else Sharp

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Missionvale Care Center employs 25 community health practioners who are tasked with visiting patients at home to provide basic medical care, check up on physical and mental health, and serve as a liaison between the care center and the community. As I learned from my research, these care givers are meant to 'accompany' patients and are a vital piece of community based care. Research has shown several critical benefits of community health practioners for HIV/AIDS patients including increased adherence to ARVs and increased psychological well-being. The next afternoon, I was able to participate in an HIV/AIDS training session for the CHPs. I was sitting in on a moment I have read about and revered throughout multiple years of study. For me, this moment was as if pages from journal articles and books had come to life right before my eyes.

Following along in a 'learning guide' created specifically for CHPs, we read aloud multiple-choice questions, read case studies, played games and sang songs. Although I was an outsider, everyone treated me as if I belonged. For just a moment during the training I had to pause and ground myself in the extraordinary circumstance that I was in. There I was, sitting on a plastic chair on a cold afternoon in a rural township outside of of Port Elizabeth, South Africa learning about HIV alongside community health practioners. Exactly week earlier, at about the same time, I was standing on the Mass Ave bridge connecting Boston to Cambridge looking out on the Charles river. I remember how the river looked, speckled with white sailboats and lined by trees. I thought it looked so beautiful. That day, sitting in the lecture room of Missionvale, listening to a slow and melodic voice reading aloud multiple-choice questions on HIV transmission, was a completely new type of beautiful.

Thank you, Nichols family, for these moments and for this opportunity. I am so grateful for your help.

Laura Silliman

Rabat, Morocco

It may sound strange, but culture shock is one of my favorite parts of going abroad. Though often awkward and uncomfortable, I love the sense of exposure that you experience upon visiting a place that challenges what you believe about the world and about yourself. When one surrenders to this vulnerability in an unfamiliar cultural context, personal growth is inevitable. For this reason, I was eager to apply for the 2013 Morocco Winter Break Program.

Since I had never before traveled to an Islamic state or an African country, the culture shock that we experienced in Morocco certainly met my expectations. Waking up to the sound of a rooster crowing, hearing the Islamic call to prayer five times daily, and—unfortunately—experiencing street harassment were frequent reminders that I was in a culture that I did not know, but that I hoped to better understand. Yet, though our group was challenged by and also eagerly engaged in a myriad of novel experiences, what impacted me most was the immense common ground that we found that we shared with the Moroccans.

Engaging in a variety of service-learning opportunities over the course of our 10-day trip enabled us to not just experience Morocco as tourists, but to really immerse ourselves in the culture and interact with people from distinct sectors of Moroccan society. One afternoon, we took a tram to the slums of Salé, which is the sister city of Rabat. In a community center there, we taught basic English lessons to Moroccan youths who hoped to secure employment in the hospitality industry. Though their limited English made communication difficult, we found common ground by using gestures to tell about the activities that we enjoyed doing, as well as by sharing aspects of U.S. and Moroccan popular culture with one another.

Later, the director of the community center described our time with the youths as essential to "give them another vision of life—more than Salé, more than Morocco." In catching a glimpse of their goals and dreams for the future, I feel that we were impacted just as much, if not more than, the youths were.

In addition to visits to a nursing home and a community hospital, we had the opportunity to engage with Moroccan staff members at several human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and the National Human Rights Council. As we sat around a table and discussed issues of human rights and gender, I realized that despite our cultural differences, our values were exactly the same—freedom, equality, and justice. Engaging with these human rights groups reminded me of the need for international solidarity—across cultural divides—in order to achieve common goals in the struggle for human rights.

Experiences such as eating snails in the marketplace, riding a camel, and watching the flow of traffic stop amid the celebration of a Moroccan soccer team's win gave me a greater appreciation for different cultures. But perhaps even more importantly, our trip to Morocco enhanced my understanding of the need to establish solidarity across cultures and unite in the commonalities of our humanity.

Logan Stroburg

Kathmandu, Nepal

This summer I travelled to Kathmandu, Nepal to volunteer in a hospital in the Lalitpur district in the heart of the city. To be honest, before arriving in Nepal I had no idea what to expect. I imagined a cliff-side hospital high up in the freezing Himalayas. However, when I landed I was greeted with 100+ degree weather in the tropical Kathmandu Valley. From the airport I went to meet my host family and get a tour of the hospital, I was so excited. The family was incredibly nice and their house doubled as a kindergarten. After seeing the family and their home, I was off to the hospital. I received a full tour and was met with many friendly and warm welcomes by nearly everyone on staff. My first impression, and one that proved to be true, was that the people of Nepal are so incredibly welcoming and kind. I could tell this would be the time of my life. This was just day one and I felt as though I had already gotten to experience quite a bit of the Nepali culture. I think the easiest way to break down my journey is to reflect on the three main aspects of my trip: service, travel and food.

The piece of my trip that stuck out most to me, both because it was where I spent most of my time and the fact that it has the most lasting impact, is the service. I worked in Alka Hospital essentially shadowing physicians around 6 hours a day. In the beginning I rotated through all of the departments of the hospital so that I could get a taste of which department I might like best. However, it quickly became clear to me that the emergency room was too impersonal and the operating room was too intense for me to handle. After about four days I settled in on the pediatric ward. I partnered with a doctor—Dr. Sangita—who had been practicing as a pediatrician in Nepal for over thirteen years. Dr. Sangita was incredible, in that she would explain everything in extreme detail when diagnosing and assessing patients. Apart from this, she would also explain why certain diseases such as typhoid fever were very common in Nepal but practically eradicated in countries like the United States. Dr. Sangita was a great resource for understanding the differences in quality of healthcare between modern countries and countries like Nepal, as well as how the Nepali culture, environment and infrastructure contributed to certain health problems. Working at Alka was an incredibly rewarding and informative experience that I would gladly be a part of again.

Apart from being exposed to culture through service, I was also able to experience Nepal through the food. Since I was living with a host family I ate traditional Nepali food at nearly every meal. The staple food of Nepal is dal bhat. And by staple food I mean that we ate it for every single meal. There was some variety, however, in what would be served with the dal bhat. Sometimes we would get various curried meats or vegetables, or more rarely we would get momos. Momos are also a traditional Nepali food dish. Momos are delicious dumplings that are filled with chicken, vegetables or buffalo and steamed or fried. I even had the opportunity to learn how to make momos from a group of Buddhist monks. On the weekends, other volunteers and I would venture into the “upscale” district of Kathmandu and try out some of the nice restaurants and the food they had to offer. I was able to sample lots of Nepali dishes and even some brick oven pizza.

Logan Stroburg

Kathmandu, Nepal

The most fascinating part of my time in Nepal was definitely during my weekend excursions. One weekend, other volunteers and I traveled six hours to the south of Nepal to Chitwan National Forest. While in Chitwan we were able to go on a walking safari and encountered rhinoceroses, elephants, monkeys, crocodiles, peafowl, and more. It was incredible to see so many of these animals out in the wild. I also had the opportunity to ride and bathe the elephants the locals had tamed, which was both terrifying and exciting. On my last night in Chitwan the village had a traditional dance performance in the town hall. The dance was a storytelling of nepali culture and history followed by a comedic love story between a peacock and a human. My time in Chitwan was probably one of the most informative excursions I went on regarding Nepali life, culture and history.

I am so thankful and grateful for my time in Nepal. My service there definitely inspired me to venture out and try new things across the world and at home. I learned so much about not only Nepal, but also myself while traveling there. I met so many individuals and had so many experiences that will have a lasting impact in my life and cannot wait to get back out in the world serving and experiencing other cultures.

Tremonisha D. West

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

"Dreams Bigger than the Mind can Conceive"

During the last month of my undergraduate career at Spelman College, several of us seniors met in our campus chapel for the annual Senior Prayer service. As we gathered in a circle for prayer, the Dean of the chapel made her rounds to each of us-praying a different prayer for every young woman she approached. When she got to me she prayed that God bless me beyond my imagination, and fulfill "dreams bigger than I could conceive".

This prayer has stuck with me for the past few years for numerous reasons. While I often set goals for myself, seeing them all come into fruition is an entirely different story. Even more importantly, challenging myself to do something new and unknown has also served as a roadblock. Such was the case with studying abroad. Twice I had opportunities to go to a different country during my undergraduate matriculation; one for a semester and another for a summer. It is true that money and a lack of resources kept me from going. But in all honesty, it was mostly the fear of stepping out of my comfort zone and doing the unknown. No one in my family had travelled internationally and it just seemed out of scope. I questioned whether I would feel comfortable abroad; I questioned if I would be welcomed or accepted.

However, when I entered graduate school at Vanderbilt I made a decision that I was going to push myself to try new things and travel abroad before I received my master's. This led to me seeking out opportunities and discovering the OACS Global service programs. Many of the other opportunities for graduate students I considered were housed at other universities and focused of research. As a future community development practitioner, I thought it would be more beneficial to work in a nonprofit and observe the day-to-day operations. I was ecstatic when I found out I had been accepted to the program, and even happier when I learned I had received scholarship funding.

Nevertheless the reality of it all didn't sink in until I landed in Port Elizabeth. Even after planning, packing, travel immunizations and a fifteen hour plane ride I couldn't believe it was happening! I wasn't prepared for the immense beauty; not just of the land but the people as well. For a short period of time I was able to experience another way of life - one that is arguably better in many ways to life here in the United States. I was surrounded by kind people who welcomed us with open arms. I was very comfortable there and had a sense of feeling like I was home. The same core values I hold dearly- those of faith, family, and community- I saw in the individuals I worked with and communities in which we served.

Unfortunately, some things that were familiar to me were not pleasant at all. I not only share similar values with South Africans, but a similar history as well. The Apartheid era is reminiscent of Segregation and Jim Crow laws that were enforced here in the United States. In both countries, the legacies of both cruel systems are evident in many ways. As an African American, this weighed particularly heavy on me. It was challenging to deal with the global reality of it all; to experience the systemic nature of racism, elitism, oppression and inequality. I saw it there in the massive townships with homes that lacked plumbing and electricity. I was reminded of it upon returning due to the deaths of Ezell Ford and Michael Brown.

The juxtaposition of beauty and pain could be a theme of the trip for me. Still, I find joy when I think about the work I was able to do during the bulk of my time in Port Elizabeth. I was fortunate enough to be placed at Missionvale Care Centre, where I met numerous wonderful individuals: the loving Aunties that served food in the Nutrition Center and packed family bags in the clothing warehouse, the principal who worked tirelessly to ensure that students were educated *and* cared for, the caretakers who traveled to homes of the severely ill to provide food and medicine, and countless others. While there I spent most of my time working in the school's library hosting small reading groups with fourth and sixth grade students.

Tremonisha D. West

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

A few of us were able to connect with the Director of the Board of Trustees, who then asked us to write two reports assessing Missionvale's current programs and adapting a future program for the center- a twenty year poverty reduction intervention. I'm looking forward to hearing updates on the center's progress and feel blessed that I was able to contribute in such a way!

This entire experience for me has been a journey of hope, faith, and persistence. While it may seem like a small matter to some, taking this trip abroad was a huge step for a person like me who has to actively and mindfully challenge herself to step out of her comfort zone. While I was there to serve, South Africa opened my mind to another way of existing. I feel as if doors have opened; not just for me but for family and friends who wish to travel abroad and learn from different cultures, but have yet to do so. The world is bigger and better than we are taught to believe.

Shailoah Wilson

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

When I first found out that I had been selected to go on an OACS service trip to South Africa I had no idea that it would have such a great impact on my life and who I am. The trip was more than just doing service. It was connecting with people, learning from people, and learning about myself. It beautifully demonstrated and cemented everything that I was told about the purpose of service.

When I arrived in Port Elizabeth, it was not a movie-esque "this is where I need to be", wow moment. It was late and I was tired from the 20 hour flight. I couldn't even see the city I landed in. I did get this moment later on when three other girls and me, the last of our cohort to land, arrived at our house. Others from our group greeted us despite their exhaustion. They also surprised me with a cake for my birthday which was the day before when I was getting ready to leave America. I didn't even know they knew about my birthday because I never mentioned it. From that moment I knew I was home and that these people would change my life.

When I finally got to see PE in the daylight, I was overwhelmed by its beauty. I never appreciated nature more than I did when I was in South Africa. Everywhere we traveled I was overwhelmed with breathtaking landscape. It was never so easy for me to get lost in the moment. I learned to really appreciate where I was and not think about the future. It was something that I was not used to doing. This was echoed in the people I met as well. I am thankful that South Africa taught me how to appreciate the small things and just live in the moment. That's something that I believe is forgotten way too often here in the United States where being future- oriented and trying to figure out how things could be better are valued.

The service itself opened my eyes in a way I did not expect. Before the trip. I thought that I would hear people's life stories and see where they come from and just be overtaken by it. Although this did happen, it was not the most prominent thing for me.

I learned the difficult lesson that you may not see the results of your service and that service is not something with an explicit input and output. I worked at a crèche, which is like an American daycare center. I talked to 3-5 year olds all day who did not have any unique perspectives or reflection to offer because of their youth. Other people had these impactful, emotional experiences every day at their service site. At first I envied them, but then I had an epiphany. During my last week of service I began to reflect on my time spent there in the crèche. The teacher was reading a story as I sat cross-legged on the floor surrounded by children who wanted nothing else than to just be close to me. I realized at that moment what really mattered. The main thing I gave my children those three weeks was love, support, and dedication. They gave me the same things in return. Yes, I taught them lessons, but that was not going to be the thing that made a difference. I was overjoyed with the fact that my kids, with their wide-eyes and open hearts, could be the generation that really changes things in South Africa. I was thankful to just be able to share my love with them. I didn't care anymore that I didn't have as many impactful moments throughout the service time. I almost cried at that moment. I saw so much potential in them. I think about my children every day. I hope that they were able to take something away from my time with them. I know they taught me way more than I could have ever imagined.

The thing I remember about the people in South Africa is their openness and welcoming nature. Although I was working and visiting people in some of the most horrible living conditions, every person I met was happy, friendly, and welcoming. I was confused when I returned home the first day because I felt nothing but joy. I thought something was wrong with me. I did feel sadness, but it wasn't the over empowering emotion I felt.

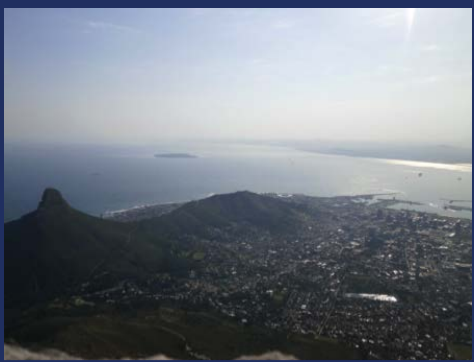
Shailoah Wilson

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

I came to the conclusion that they were happy and willing to open up because they knew what was important in life. They knew that wealth comes from within and not from how much money is in your bank account or how big your house is. They taught me that there is a positive in every situation in life. I truly felt like I was at home when I was in South Africa. I appreciate how they were willing to share some of the most vulnerable things in their life with me, a complete stranger, and still have a positive outlook on life. I learned so much about life from them. I hope now to be more open with people in my life, treat everyone like family, and always find the good in a situation. If they can do it despite the circumstances they are forced to live in so can I.

Not only did the people of South Africa teach me, so did the members of my cohort. I became closer with my group than I ever expected and learned way more than I imagined I would. I believe that the trip would not have been the same without them. Having my group there to share in the happy and sad moments was amazing. They taught me so much about what it means to serve and how to be an amazing human being. I gained some new perspectives on life. I love my group more than anything. I could not pick a better group of people to travel and do service with than them. They have impacted my life in ways they could never know.

I thank you Mr. and Mrs. Nichols so much for making this experience possible for me. I would not have been able to go to South Africa without your generosity. We need more people like you in the world. I'm glad that I got the chance to tell you just how your gift changed my life. I will never forget my experience and will use the lessons I learned as I continue on in life.



Farishtay Yamin

Rabat, Morocco

I told Lauren I'd be twenty minutes late, and walked to the Koutoubia Mosque. Once I found an open gate, I stepped inside and was immediately overwhelmed by the empty space. I had never seen a mosque so open, so airy, a red carpet and endless white pillars with an open courtyard in the center to perform ablution. I walked slowly, "Am I allowed to be here?" A couple asked me the direction to pray- I responded in English, and the guard's ears perked up.

"Are you Muslim?"

"Yes, I'm from Pakistan."

"Ah, Ah. Pakistani Muslim."

He nodded and let me stay inside. As I wandered deeper into the mosque, I heard the soft hoots of a dove. I turned and watched one circle the ceiling and land on a sloping arch. It was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever felt- the quiet of the enormous mosque, the gentle calls of the bird as it flew into the home of its Creator.

It was my first time trying to withdraw money from a bank in Morocco- actually, my first time ever using an ATM. Not only were the ATMs different from those in America, but I had never done a cash exchange before. As I fumbled around with the buttons, the man waiting behind me looked over curiously. He wasn't angry or impatient- but rather offered to help, without me even asking. He tried his best to give me privacy as I used the machine, but I kept calling him back and in the end, asked him to do the entire transaction for me (without any spoken language). After he was finished, I grabbed the notes from the machine and walked away. I heard footsteps behind me and turned around- the same man was running towards me, his fist full of the change I had left in the machine.

It was night, and we had all gone out to the bazaars for the first time. Narrow roads, red tiled streets, small shops of fruits, belly dance scarves, abayas, jelabas, bedsheets, leather slippers and illumination from the yellow lamps that hung low in each store.

I wandered into one, and asked for the price for a pair of pants. I tried Spanish, and for the first time in my trip, it worked.

We conversed for ten minutes, talking about our lives, why I'd come here, "Why don't you parents live in Pakistan?" In the end, I didn't buy anything and I half-ran out of the store before he had a chance to get angry.

It was nightfall in Chefchaouen, the blue city. A beautiful leather bag with Berber woven work caught my eye, and I gravitated towards it, eyes shining. The shopkeeper noticed and grinned. "500 Dirhams."

"I really don't have that many. Could you lower the price?"

"No, I can't. Please try to understand- we're just trying to make enough to live. What are you doing here, anyway? Where are you from?"

"My family is from Pakistan- I speak Spanish because I learned it in school."

"Ah. The Pakistanis, they are poor like us. Here, you can have this for three hundred."

Whilt I was walking home, I crossed paths with a well-groomed black poodle that was completely shaved except for its ankles and ears. In America, the dog wasn't worth a second glance. But in that moment, nothing seemed more ridiculous than the anachronism of this pampered French poodle in the crowded medina. Moroccan passerbys and I stared for a good thirty seconds, and as soon as the dog passed, everyone began to make conversation. A man looked directly at me and talked about the dog for a good two minutes until he realized I couldn't understand a word. He then laughed, waved, and turned into an alley.

Tom and Jerry was playing on the television, as it did every afternoon. Like every afternoon, Yassine, my host mother's grandson, fell asleep. Nabeela and I slowly finished the lentils, making whatever small talk we could in our broken phrases.

Farishtay Yamin

Rabat, Morocco

Mostly, a lot of smiling. I heard the call to prayer and got up to leave. She held me back and told me sit to sit down. I asked her how she was feeling. She smiled and touched her belly.

“Today, I went to doctor. I have baby.”

We both laughed nervously. I didn’t what to say- I stupidly exclaimed, “Wow!” and gave her a hug. We sat on the bed for a few more minutes, just smiling and looking up at the episode of Tom and Jerry that had already aired three times in the past two days.
At five o clock in the morning, I woke up to a sound my ears had been aching to hear for years. In the United States, Islam is a religion to be hidden and be ashamed of. The call to prayer, recited so that everyone living around the mosque can be alerted to the time of day, is called in a loudspeaker where only those inside the building can hear. But for the first time, everything was transparent. Everything was wholesome, there was no hesitation, no fear. That morning, I woke up and performed ablution for the first time in my life with the call to prayer, the Adhan, in my ears. The Adhan rang through the dim streets of the medina, Muezzins from the three surrounding mosques reciting in staggered intervals, their voices and meshing and overlapping one another. Finally, the heart-wrenching moment ended with the phrase unique to only the morning prayer- “as-salatu khayran minan nawm.” “Prayer is better than sleep.”

We are in Marrakesh.

Walk into the square, and in between the scorching heat, your ears will reverberate with the sound of drums. You will hear the shrill flute of the snake charmer, the frenzied cries of shopkeepers calling you into their stores, and the hum of twenty thousand people making conversation under tents dotted with orange juice stands.

Then the night falls.

Gone are the orange juice stands playing loud Western music, and in their place are Berber musicians and children dancing to their guitars. Veiled men, who had hidden themselves from the sun, come forth during the night and line their eyes with kohl. Flat-chested and narrow hipped, they move like waves while an old man beats a drum. People pour into the square, thirty, forty thousand. You are suffocating, but you can’t leave.The square draws you in. Every time you walk towards its walls, the snake charmer changes his tunes and the Berbers change their drums and you find yourself walking towards the center once again. Smoke burns and flows into the sky, the moon hidden behind a shroud of gray. But still, the moon manages to bathe the square in a soft light, its beauty sacrificed to piercing shouts and movement.

We are in Marrakesh.

I sat down to write a past-tense essay about how Morocco changed me, but I now see that I can’t. Morocco continues to change my perception of the world every day. When I first came, I wasn’t held back by “culture shock”- being the child of two Pakistani parents, I imagined Morocco to be much like Pakistan- a clash of West and East, scenic landscape, and the ever-growing wealth disparity characteristic of developing countries. What I didn’t expect, though, was the religious and cultural differences that not only make Morocco different from Pakistan, but from the entire Arab world.

Morocco is a melting pot of Spanish, Arab, French, and Berber influence. Its language, Darija, is a blend unlike any other language spoken in North Africa. (I realized this when I attempted to use my linguistic skills on my Arab friends in the States and only received blank stares.)
Upon my arrival in Rabat, I ran off the plane and to the closest bathroom, disappointed to see that there was no bidet. “They’re too Western,” I thought to myself. But the car ride from the airport to our hotel set the tone for the thirty days to come.

Farishtay Yamin

Rabat, Morocco

Decaying concrete set against the brown tones of earth, women and children and men walking along the side of the road dressed in abayas and western wear- boys playing soccer in the streets, vendors selling small goods. The air ripe with scent of French pastries and Ghraifa, honey bread, ripe with the simmering burn of grilled lamb and chicken. Cats of every imaginable shape and color wandering the streets, docile enough to be petted, scavenging under cars for fallen scraps of food.

I had never felt more at peace with myself. I had never understood the meaning of being "the majority." It meant that I could practice my beliefs freely, that I could show my identity without justification, that I didn't have to insist, "I'm one of you." I didn't have to try. I just was.

It was a culture of intimacy not only in family life, but even in the workplace. Everyone interacted not only as colleagues, but as true friends. Every lunch break, they ate lunch and had coffee together. They laughed, joked, and greeted every face in the building.

As the days passed, I grew more confident in my sense of direction. I began to travel independently through the medina, the small alleys surrounding my home. This is the Morocco I remember. Of course, I remember the scenic, blue Chefchaouen, I remember the scholarly, beautiful Fes, Marrakech. But those narrow alleys, women buying bread and fruits, children chasing after one another, girls returning from the Hammam, bath house, bucket in hand- these are the moments I see when I close my eyes and imagine my life four months ago.

On my last day, I sobbed into the carpet during my prostration in the Friday prayer. The woman next to me touched my shoulder and offered me tissues. I gave her a weak smile. I looked into her eyes and wondered if she could understand the pain of this strange foreigner who looked like her but couldn't speak to her. I hope that my eyes told her that this foreigner had experienced nothing more painful than leaving behind a homeland that wasn't hers, a homeland that in thirty days, gave her more safety and love than the land she had lived in for nineteen years.

Paige Yelvington

Rabat, Morocco

During the month of May, I traveled with Vanderbilt's Office of Active Citizenship and Service to Morocco in order to volunteer with an NGO. While the adjustment period was slightly intense, I was so grateful to have the opportunity to experience such a different culture. I had so many new experiences, had so many expectations shattered, and met so many interesting new people that it will be hard to recount them all; however I will try to give a small snapshot of some of the highlights and lowlights, specifically focusing on aspects of my home life in Rabat, Morocco.

I'll start with the highlights, which would definitely be my host family and my experience with food. These were the two things that I was the most anxious about before leaving for this trip. The thought of living in a stranger's home, eating the food the family typically eats, and adjusting to their way of life originally seemed really overwhelming. In addition, the fact that I speak neither French nor Moroccan Arabic and so have difficulty communicating with the people here originally seemed like it would make living with another family extremely uncomfortable. However this whole experience was one of my favorite aspects of the trip so far in many ways, and led me to learn so much about life in Morocco that I could have never learned from a classroom or a tour.

First of all, one of our host sisters spoke almost perfect English, and when she picked us up from the Center for Cross Cultural Learning (the company organizing a lot of our trip details) she showed up with her hair down and uncovered, wearing jeans and a tee-shirt, and was basically looking and speaking like any typical westernized 22 year old. While she was not around a ton during our family interactions, it was a great relief to know if there was something we really need to communicate to our host mom or a question we really need answered there was someone we can go to for help. Second of all, our host mom WINS.

I may be biased, but even though there is a huge language barrier (she speaks no English, we speak no Arabic) Lauren Hogg (my roommate) and I really hit it off with our host mom. I tried (and mostly failed) to learn some Arabic words from our mom- the pronunciations were really hard! But even without knowing exactly what each other was saying, we were able to laugh together; she was so welcoming and kind. It was easy to tell when she was disappointed in me, like when I didn't finish my meals, which happened often because it almost seemed like she was actively trying to fatten us up. It was also easy to tell when she was proud too, like when I finished all my food (rarely) or like when her friend came over and we welcomed her using Arabic phrases.

I cannot write about my experience in Morocco without further elaborating on the food situation. Even though there was always too much of it, I always looked forward to our house mom's cooking, which for anyone who knows me was actually the most shocking aspect of this whole experience, if not the most shocking thing to happen in my entire life. I'm probably the pickiest person I have ever encountered. While I'm not sure how much of what I ate really authentically Moroccan and how much was just what my host family happened to make for us, I walked away stuffed from every meal. I was expecting the food to be a lot spicier and a lot more exotic.However even one of the most traditional Moroccan foods I had while I was there, couscous, which is a grainy type of food that people eat on Fridays, I have liked. Before I came to Morocco, I even had made jokes before the trip that coming to Morocco would be like forcibly going on a diet without any way to cheat. I couldn't have been more wrong. The 3 words I would use to describe what I ate would be "bread, bread, and bread." We had bread for breakfast, everyday. Just bread. Different types of bread sometimes, but still lots and lots of bread and basically nothing else.We also had bread snacks in the afternoon, and bread with lunch and sometimes dinner.

Paige Yelvington

Rabat, Morocco

Luckily, bread is one of the few things that I do like in this world, although unluckily I feel like that may go south in the near future given the mass quantities of bread I consumed this summer. If I had to actually choose two other words other than bread, they would be “french fries”, and “vegetables.” Our host mom had a lot of American students before, so we really lucked out. I had french fries with my lunch four days in a row; needless to say it was one of the things I looked forward to the most during my day. I also lucked out that carrots, potatoes, and green beans were such a big part of our meals, because they are realistically the only vegetables that I eat back home in America as well. We also had fresh squeezed orange juice, nectarine juice, and strawberry banana smoothies frequently, and it is common for people in Morocco to have whole fruit for dessert, which is delicious and also made me feel slightly better about eating tons of bread and french fries.

While I could go on and on about all the ways that my Moroccan homestay experience exceeded my expectations, the low parts will only take a minute to explain, although they are pretty significant as well. They pretty much center around bathroom and personal hygiene experiences. First of all, google Turkish toilet. That is the majority of what you need to know. Let’s just say that not going to the bathroom for 15 hours and waiting until you can go somewhere that has a western one is often worth it. Second of all, showering was kind of weird and awkward and not really a thing. People bathe about once a week, and they go to this place called a hammam and exfoliate for hours in a hot bath. We luckily had a mostly normal shower, but it also happened to be right next to the kitchen and living room, and not near the bathroom in the slightest.
The first time I showered our host brother who is 14 years old was just sitting right next to the shower in the living room, so he could see me clearly as I awkwardly held the shower curtain while poking my head and arms out of the shower to grab my clothes.

So while there were some cons, I loved the pros of the homestay experience in Morocco. I wish I had time to list all of the fun facts and cultural norms I have learned and experienced. In the meantime for anyone who is studying or volunteering in a foreign country and is debating whether or not to do a homestay, I would definitely recommend it. It’s a great way to gain empathy for people who live differently than you, a way to bond with others very quickly, and definitely the best way to learn about another culture from the inside out.

Adria Zern

Rabat, Morocco

On our first full day in Morocco, we got to see some of the most beautiful aspects of Rabat - the markets in the old medina, the beach, and the Khasba on the ocean side. It was hard not to fall in love with the beauty of Rabat. However, later in our arrival was a bit of a culture shock for a lot of us, I think. We met our host families that afternoon, and my roommate, Chelsea, and I discovered that our host mom did not speak English. I attempted to communicate with her with my limited French, but it was difficult to hold more than a basic conversation. We were slightly relieved when we got to the house and discovered that the oldest daughter spoke a little bit of English. With her basic knowledge of English and mine of French, we managed to communicate what was necessary. Even with the language barrier, our host family situation was nothing but wonderful. Our mom cooked the best food (Moroccan cuisine is known for these large dishes called tajine and extremely delicious bread), was very accommodating, and wanted us to experience as much of Morocco as possible. Moroccan tea was also unbeatable - green tea with mint and tons of sugar. Luckily, the tea was served with practically every meal so I certainly got my fix of it before the month was over.

Though the initial cultural change was quite strong, I grew to really enjoy spending time with my host family and getting to know more about the culture of Morocco as the month went on. I found that Moroccan culture was unlike any place I had been to before: the people were unbelievably welcoming and wanted to share their culture and beautiful country with anyone who would listen. I think that's the perfect way to describe Moroccan culture: sharing. Everything is shared. People share food, cabs, and even living space. It's also a culture of people who truly care about one another. There were several times when I noticed that an elderly person was struggling to get in a cab or struggling to carry something, and someone always made the effort to help them.

Additionally, spending time with my host family became my favorite aspects of our evenings. I would try to ask the oldest daughter as much as I could in English to learn about her life, her schooling, and anything else that piqued my interest. I also tried to share as much with her about my life in the states. Even though my communication with our host mom was limited to my broken French, every conversation I had with her was just so special. She was truly interested in what we were doing and how we were enjoying Morocco. When I left for the airport on our last day, I was truly sad that I had to say goodbye to her, and I promised that I would keep in touch and return eventually (which I still hope to do).

Now, on to where I worked for the month. My roommate, Chelsea and I were working at the same place, Organisation Pan-Africaine de Lutte Contre le SIDA (OPALS). OPALS is an international organization with 18 branches in Morocco that provides social and medical services for people living with HIV or AIDS. The Moroccan government covers the costs of all medical care for people with HIV, which is very different from the situation in the U.S. Our commute consisted of walking a winding path through the medina, taking a 15 minute ride in a big white taxi (a normal sized Mercedes with 6 people plus the driver shoved into it), and another 5 minute walk through a town called Yusefia. OPALS operates almost entirely in French, which was slightly better than Arabic because I could pick up on some of the words. Our supervisor, Ilhame spoke English pretty well and really wanted Chelsea and I to learn as much about the culture and OPALS as possible so she let us observe and interact with her sessions a lot which was been nice. We did mostly administrative work, but one of the highlights was far partaking in the education session for "sex workers" (this is the direct translation from the French word for prostitutes).

Adria Zern

Rabat, Morocco

Part of the session was more of a celebration and gathering of friends than an informational meeting which consisted of painting nails, doing hair, and eating pastries. Though we couldn't communicate much with the women, they fully welcomed us into their circle of friends. One of the younger women who was around my age even styled my hair. It was such a great experience to see how welcoming Moroccans are and how much they want to share their culture.

Unfortunately, Ilhame took off the last two weeks we were at OPALS because she got married (which I learned is a very long process in Morocco), so the only person who spoke English proficiently once she left was the finance assistant, Tarik. Tarik was super friendly and welcoming, but he unfortunately didn't know what to do with us most of the time. However, Chelsea and I usually managed to find something useful to do, and we ended up doing a lot of data analysis for them that they probably couldn't have done on their own since their Excel and Word proficiency wasn't very high. A highlight for me during the last two weeks was that I got to attend a discussion at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization about a theatrical performance that they're planning to educate people on safe sex habits and STIs. Since sexual education does not exist in public schools in Morocco, they have to come up with more creative ways to educate the population, so hearing all of the different ideas being thrown around was really interesting.

Overall, my experience in Morocco was so worthwhile, and I learned so much about myself and what it is like to experience other cultures. Thank you so much for supporting me in this journey!!

Renee Zhu

Rio Dulce, Guatemala

This past spring, I travelled to Rio Dulce, Guatemala to participate with Manna, a student service organization. Without the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, this would not have been possible for me – I am so grateful that I had this chance to experience what it is really like to give back to a community in need. Having never done a service trip before, I was not sure what to expect. I admit that prior to the trip, I thought I knew exactly what it would be like simply from hearing what my friends and peers had told me. However, nothing could have prepared me for the deep effect the trip would have on me. Something about being there in person, and seeing those that you are doing the work for, makes it so much more meaningful.

My trip consisted of 13 participants, two of which were our site leaders who had also never been to Guatemala. After our 4-hour flight, we had to take a bus for another 4 hours to get to Rio Dulce. The town of Rio Dulce was small and impoverished. The houses we passed did not have windows – instead, families used mesh screens and replaced them every 4-6 months (the rain is what wore them out so quickly). The town seemed to completely shut down once the sun set, but on the other hand the whole town seemed to wake up when the sun rose. We lived modestly in a hostel called Hotel Backpackers, which sat right on the river. We too, did not have windows in our rooms, and lived modestly.

Every morning we woke up around 7-o-clock, ate breakfast at the small restaurant attached to the hostel (fried plantains were a hit among us), and clambered on to a small speedboat that came for us each morning at 8. From Hotel Backpackers we enjoyed our 20-minute boat ride each morning down the river until we arrived at Casa Guatemala, a boarding school for local orphans and children whose families could not afford another mouth to feed. The ages of these children ranged from 3 to 18. Some of these children stayed only during the week and returned to their families on the weekends, while some children only saw their families during school vacations. Casa Guatemala had several different buildings as classrooms, and one large dining hall, but the entire premises was not at all like a school we would have here in the US. The entire place is integrated into the jungle, with tropical and exotic animals/bugs everywhere. The children have no electronics to use or play with – our iPhones fascinated them. Each class had to spend a couple hours each day farming; it was part of their agricultural education. Lunch was served at noon each day and usually consisted of noodles, or rice and beans, and there were always tortillas.

Our jobs varied – we helped with several different projects during our time there. The main goal of Manna is to help communities achieve their goals, and so we asked Casa Guatemala what they needed help with. On the first day, we helped to plant a variety of things such as tomatoes, peppers, and other foods the children could eventually eat. Breaking the soil with our small farm tools was eye opening; the soil was rock solid and completely dry. The sun made it sweltering hot, and by the end of it, all of us were completely exhausted. It was unbelievable to think that these children were the ones who usually did this task. We worked alongside some of the children, who were all around 8 to 12 years old, and they worked so steadily and quickly, doing a much better job than we did at first. However, working together got the job done much quicker. The next day we helped clear an entire space of shrubs, weeds, and small trees for what would be a larger chicken coop. Casa Guatemala relied on these chickens for meat and eggs, and so this chicken coop was very important. Our next task was replacing the mesh sheets – the ones that they used in place of windows. Scaling the sides of the buildings, we were instructed by two boys – one was 15 and the other 17. The buildings jutted out over the water, and there was no walkway around the house. This meant that replacing the outside screens meant climbing onto the side of the house, hoping you didn't fall off or else you'd fall 6 feet into the lake (though it was so hot that this didn't always seem like a bad thing). After gripping the side of the house, we had to pry off the old screens, and use a staple gun to attach new mesh screens.

Renee Zhu

Rio Dulce, Guatemala

The excess portion of the screen then had to be cut off with a knife. The next task we had was repainting an entire classroom. The ceilings were surprisingly high – at least 10 feet – and painting the very top was a challenge. However, we were able to repaint the whole classroom while also adding on some cartoon pictures to make it more fun for the children.

In our free time, we were able to interact with the kids and just play with them. It was amazing to see that even though they had so little, they were so full of life, so loving, and so happy. The little girls would stroke our hair and giggle and tell us how pretty we were, and the boys would tug on our clothes to get us to play soccer with them. It was an extremely humbling experience, and I've really gained a much deeper appreciation for even the most basic things our society has. It was a good feeling to know that we helped Casa Guatemala get some of their projects finished, but I think another main point of this trip was to raise awareness. I personally feel more aware, and more responsible, for helping communities like Casa Guatemala.

This trip gave to me an experience that I will always remember, and will always love to share with others. Thank you again, to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, for allowing me to experience such rewarding work, and for making my trip to Guatemala possible.

During our lunch breaks, we got to relax and play with the kids. This is me and Pato dancing!

Chelsea Fitzgerald

Galway, Republic of Ireland

This summer, the Nichols Humanitarian Stipend Fund enabled me to volunteer as a legal research assistant at the Irish Centre for Human Rights in Galway, Ireland. I was assigned to work with the talented Dr. Kathleen Cavanaugh, who specializes in human rights law in states of emergency and the international humanitarian law of belligerent occupation. While working at the Centre, my main responsibility was to assist with the research and editing of a piece on truth commissions, specifically the legal framework behind truth commissions and the right of victims of human rights violations in post-conflict situations to learn the "truth" about the harm they suffered.

My only initial knowledge of truth commissions was the famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that followed the end of the apartheid regime. The most notable aspect of this truth commission was the opportunity it provided for perpetrators of human rights abuses to admit to their wrongs and seek forgiveness for their crimes. Victims and perpetrators came forward to share their experiences with the aim of moving on from the past atrocities that had been committed. Members of the Commission would observe these hearings and had the power to grant reparations to victims, or alternatively, amnesty to perpetrators in some cases. The Commission has been credited with easing the rehabilitation of South Africans during a difficult transitional moment in their history; however, it has also been criticized for failing to address all rights of victims that are guaranteed by international conventions and human rights declarations. While researching for this project, I was exposed to many more examples of truth commissions as they have manifested across the globe to address a diverse array of human rights and post-conflict concerns. I learned about the duties imposed on states to address the rights of victims as well as the legal remedies victims of human rights violations are entitled to under international law.

These remedies include a right to know the truth about what happened to them, which includes a thorough and effective investigation of the human rights abuse that is capable of leading to the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of abuse. In many cases, these specific remedies for victims go underserved and many victims never get the access to justice that they deserve.

I think the significance of the work I did was fantastic, because it highlighted an area of international law that affects so many people, yet is so underused and misunderstood by many governments. By clarifying and explaining the law of human rights victims' right to truth, more scholars and government officials can exercise additional care when considering conducting a truth commission or deciding how to handle human rights abuses during times of turmoil or transition. The decision to grant amnesty during truth commissions remains a controversial issue that balances the interests of victims against the state's interest in arriving at the truth and putting the past to rest. My hope is that the piece I worked on will contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding victims' rights to truth and aid leaders in crafting responsible solutions in post-conflict situations that prioritize and recognize the duties owed to victims by the state when grievous human rights violations are committed.

Katherine Dutcher

Washington D.C., USA

This summer I had the pleasure of working for the American Bar Association's International Criminal Court Project in Washington, D.C. The mission of the ICC Project is to increase U.S. engagement with the International Criminal Court by fostering dialogue between the ICC and a variety of American audiences. The initiatives of the project are designed to develop understanding and trust between the U.S. and the ICC as well as to strengthen and broaden the field of international criminal law. The ICC Project meaningfully furthers the ABA's goals of "[increasing] public understanding of and respect for the rule of law" both domestically and internationally, as well as "[working] for just laws, including human rights."

During the summer, I conducted research on international atrocity crimes and co-authored an ABA policy paper on US-International Criminal Court relations. I generated content for the ICC Project's new, interactive website, which informs visitors about the ICC's jurisdiction, judicial process, constituent organs, and State Parties, as well as US-ICC relations. Together with the Justice Counselor and Congressional Liaison for the Netherlands Embassy, I worked on an extensive advocacy project in order to promote US-ICC relations, and throughout the summer I participated in various human rights advocacy events, such as International Criminal Justice Day, in order to raise awareness about on-going human rights abuses around the globe.

Most of my labor for the ABA-ICC Project consisted of advocacy work—each project was designed to educate others, whether members of Congress, the general public, or working groups within the ABA, about the International Criminal Court and its importance in promoting the global rule of law. Unsurprisingly, however, my work for the Project was most significant for the deep ways in which it contributed to my own education. Before I started at the ABA, I had long considered a career in human rights, but I had no practical experience in the field. This frustrated me and made a career in human rights feel like a pipe dream.

My summer at the ABA gave me my first taste of what it would be like, and what it would take, to work in international human rights. It helped me to understand more about the career opportunities available in the field, as well as the steps I must take in pursuit thereof. Having that experience has lifted a great weight off of my shoulders.

In addition to learning extensively about the International Criminal Court, my time at the ABA and in Washington, D.C. provided me with a multitude of other learning experiences. I attended a Congressional hearing on human trafficking, sat in on part of the Blackwater trial, attended a Q&A session with a clerk at the Supreme Court, and another with Tiina Intelmann—an Estonian diplomat and President of the Assembly of States Parties of the International Criminal Court. I met and worked with members of various non-governmental organizations such as The Enough Project and Physicians for Human Rights, and listened to a speech given by David Crane, former Chief Prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, in which he eloquently talked about his experience in the field. And very importantly, through the ABA I was able to work with students from other law schools who share my interests and who had experience and insights that were valuable to me. My summer internship at the ABA introduced me to the small and exciting world of international criminal law, as well as to the many people and organizations working for change in Washington, D.C.

I came to law school because I believe that, as the language of rights, the law is the most powerful tool I can use to help vulnerable people. The law is a system that is primarily designed to protect, and I want to harness that system for the benefit of others. I majored in International Studies as an undergraduate, and spent my four years post-graduation teaching abroad in both Europe and Asia. During that time, I committed myself to learning more about injustices in different regions of the world. While living in Hong Kong, I closely followed human rights abuses committed in China and Burma, and became frustrated by the ineffective legal recourse available to citizens in those countries.

Katherine Dutcher

Washington D.C., USA

Among other reasons, it was a desire to become involved in developing the scope of legal remedies available to these and similar groups of underprivileged people that drove me to begin a career in the law.

Before starting at the ABA, I was anxious to begin helping others in a way that had direct, physical results, and I pursued a summer internship in public-interest legal work in order to take a concrete step toward achieving that goal. My work with the ABA-ICC Project put me in a powerful position to become familiar with organizations and to make contacts in a part of the law that I have a deep moral connection to. I had the unique opportunity to interact with leading players inside the American Bar Association, the Justice Defenders Program, the International Criminal Court, and the close-knit field of international criminal law. Through my internship, I gained insights into how I should focus my legal education in order to pursue a career that I will enjoy and that will allow me to be most effective in helping others. That experience has been invaluable to me, and it is one I could not have afforded to have without the generosity of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund grant. I am so grateful to the Nichols for allowing me to have this opportunity, and for supporting students who want to use their education to help others and better their communities. Their generosity will continue to serve me in the future as well, as a reminder that I must always seek to better the lives of others as I begin my career in the law.

Jimmy Balser

Syria

In an anonymous office building, an ocean away from the conflict in Syria, men and women pour over endless boxes of evidence. The documents inside each container smell of rubble and decaying paper. Every time a box is cut open, a small cloud of dust releases, and reminds that the parcels were thrown together under the most chaotic circumstances imaginable. The half-hazard nature of the packaging suggests that there was no time for organization, and certainly no time to figure out what might be valuable. That job is the responsibility of the team of analysts and lawyers who receive the documents many miles away and days later - a team which I had the incredible opportunity to be a part of.

The Syrian Commission for Justice and Accountability (SCJA) is an organization that has taken on the enormous tasks of gathering documents, locating and interviewing witnesses, conducting open-source research, and preparing cases against the grave crimes that have taken place in Syria over the past five years. These crimes include massacres of civilian populations, torture of detainees, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and targeting and destroying civilian property. For the men and women sent into war-torn Syria, this work is also very dangerous. As such, the mission of the SCJA relies in large part on their ability to move large amounts of sensitive information securely.

I was fortunate enough to be able to come on board as a legal intern with the SCJA. My work dealt primarily with research, evidence analysis, and translation. The internship afforded me the opportunity to handle sensitive evidence, prepare reports on the significance and value of certain information, and assist with the tasking of investigators within Syria. Much of my excitement in coming to work for the SCJA stems from my desire to pursue the practical fieldwork involved with international law.

The SCJA is at the very front lines in preparing evidence for what will one day be the prosecution, hopefully in an international tribunal, of the Syrian War crimes. The work at this stage in the process can be frustrating due to the unpredictability of surrounding events, but for the same reason it can be compelling. The team has had experience in countless organizations and tribunals involved with international prosecution, and now they have chosen to work for the SCJA. This choice comes from an understanding that involvement in the beginning of the war is essential for collecting and analyzing evidence for prosecutions. Evidence in war zones has a tendency to disappear. The first few years are a crucial time in proving that atrocities actually occurred.

Working with an organization like the SCJA informs the way a person views a war. The chaos of armed conflicts often reduces the events to white noise. Only by studying a specific area in careful detail can one understand the necessary series of events that take place which lead to an organized pattern of criminal behavior in a armed conflict. Names, places, and details that were once essentially meaningless to me became imbued with deep significance. A large part of international prosecution is piecing together the links between the orders of leaders and the events that might take place on the ground a good deal later. Moreover, through a detailed study of atrocities, one becomes truly aware of what human beings can do to one another, and how important it is to make sure the perpetrators do not commit such crimes with impunity.

The opportunity also gave me insight into the lives of lawyers building a case under uniquely troubling circumstances. The logistics facing lawyers in the context of war are distinctly frustrating.

Jimmy Balser

Syria

It is an arduous and stressful process. I am certain that the senior staff, and much of the junior staff, essentially lived within the confines of our office.

And for the investigators on the ground, even when they are not “working”, they are putting themselves at constant risk of beheading or worse. The investigation is constantly met with roadblocks… sometimes literal roadblocks. There are entire armies with an interest in destroying any evidence of criminal conduct within Syria. The collapse of international support against the regime and the growth of ISIS have exacerbated the risk against investigators who could be killed by parties on either side of the conflict.

Perhaps the most impactful aspect of this line of work is the acquired understanding of how complicated the politics involved are. In armed conflicts, there are often few clear allegiances, and fewer moral certainties. There are many people, many groups, fighting a war. And some number of warfighters are doing so through methods that have been internationally condemned as criminal. My career training has been immeasurably strengthened by an ability to look at warfare through a legal lens.

Office of Active Citizenship and Service

Embedded in the rich intellectual setting of Vanderbilt, OACS aims to support the university to achieve an undergraduate experience that exposes students to a wide variety of perspectives and immersion experiences aimed at educating the whole person while cultivating lifelong learning. This is done by creating service immersion experiences that give every undergraduate an opportunity to engage, to question, and to create change locally and globally. OACS creates trans-institutional programming, including programing that embraces the centrality of public health and other thematic experiences central to the strategic mission of the university, through supporting and advising students and student service groups and through leveraging and embedding the use of digital technology to foster interaction and learning between students and the communities in which they serve.

We encourage all students to EXPLORE. ACT. REFLECT.

The Office of Active Citizenship and Service (OACS) provides programming that encourgaes students to engage with the local and global community with the mission to create a culture for exploration and learning on campus followed by critical reflection and action for the common good.

OACS offers opportunities for Vanderbilt students, including a diverse array of global service immersion projects and internship programs. OACS' suite of Global Service Immersion Projects provide students with an opportunity to engage with critical issues of inequity in a globalized world through engaging in community-based service.

To find out more about our local, national, and international service opportunities offered through OACS visit www.vanderbilt.edu/oacs.

Vanderbilt University

Office of Active Citizenship & Service

2301 Vanderbilt Place | VU Station B #356308

Nashville, TN 37235

615-343-7878

oacs@vanderbilt.edu

www.vanderbilt.edu/oacs