



VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY
Nichols Humanitarian Fund



2024 Reflection Reports



To the recipients,

Thank you for living beyond yourself and making service to humanity part of your life. Never lose your enthusiasm and your idealism and never stop doing what you can to help others and improve the human condition. You are the best of Vanderbilt. You are our heroes!

With all our gratitude and admiration,
Ed and Janice Nichols

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Introduction

The Nichols Humanitarian Fund is a companion scholarship fund to the Nichols-Chancellor's Medal. These programs seek to make Vanderbilt students better members of their communities and society in general by supporting their humanitarian activities and bringing speakers to Vanderbilt who embody the best of humanity. For more about the Fund, visit its website or contact the office of Immersion Vanderbilt.

Forty students received awards in 2024 to work on humanitarian projects during the summer academic break in three U.S. cities and twenty-three foreign countries.

The projects are in Honolulu, Nashville, New York City, Bolivia, Cambodia, Chile, Costa Rica, England, Ethiopia, Honduras, Iceland, India, Japan, Kenya, Malta, Morocco, Nepal, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Rwanda, South Africa, and Zambia.

The projects include increasing access to clean water in Cambodia; creating free sensory kits for patients at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital and Vanderbilt University Medical Center; tutoring high school students in Pakistan in physics and the natural sciences; helping the homeless in Nashville; doing archeological surveys in Chile; developing improved methods to monitor the movement of animal populations in South Africa; working to end malaria in Rwanda; providing counseling and suicide prevention services for young people in Japan; helping children with diabetes at an Ethiopian orphanage; teaching health education classes at Nashville summer camps; creating an online learning portal for New York City students; facilitating the reforestation of the hills around Mysore, India; making a documentary film about how climate change is affecting Iceland; providing medical supplies to poor communities in Bolivia; creating an organization that provides free transportation for Vanderbilt students to visit hospice patients; and much more.

Recipients and projects can change after the Recipients Booklet is posted. The Reflection Reports contain the final recipients and projects for the year after all changes and may differ from the Recipients Booklet.



BAMLAK AKLILU

Medicine, Health, and Society, '26

Hometown: Annandale, VA

Project Location: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Bamlak partnered with the Wegene Ethiopian Foundation and worked in a school for impoverished children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

This summer, I had the privilege of collaborating with the Wegene Ethiopian Foundation (WEF) and School in a Box (SIB) to provide tablets equipped with self-paced educational material that could be accessed offline and monitored by facilitators. My goal was to instill excitement about education among the students at the WEF facility in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, offering them hope for a promising future despite their challenging circumstances. For two weeks, I dedicated myself to ensuring the success of the project, forming enduring connections with the students, and leaving them with the confidence to pursue their aspirations.

Although I was born in Ethiopia, receiving this stipend was pivotal in deepening my understanding of the education and living conditions in my home country. Spending eight hours each weekday with children from impoverished backgrounds gave me a deep understanding of the unique challenges they face in pursuing an education. Before this trip, I had lower expectations due to their hardships, but they quickly proved me wrong. Despite the obstacles, they remained optimistic and eager to learn, which profoundly changed my perspective.

Reflecting on the collaborative learning and discovery that took place between myself and the community I served, I realized that the exchange of knowledge was mutual. While the tablets I provided included various subjects, from health sciences to mathematics, I chose to focus on English, as I was informed that it was the subject many students struggled with. Being fluent in both English and Amharic, I felt uniquely positioned to help bridge this gap.

One of the first things I noticed was how different the Ethiopian classroom dynamic is compared to the Western model, particularly in terms of the student-teacher relationship. Students are expected to stand and greet the teacher upon entering the classroom, and they must stand to answer questions. This formality creates a more rigid environment where students may become shy about making mistakes. Later I realized this may be hindering their learning, so I encouraged students to embrace mistakes as part of the learning process, emphasizing that even incorrect answers can lead us to the correct ones. I also introduced more collaborative activities to help

them feel less isolated when tackling challenging questions. Although this made the classroom a bit livelier, it ultimately fostered a more comfortable and effective learning environment.

In turn, I learned a great deal from them about my own culture. Despite being fluent in Amharic, I can't read or write in the Amharic alphabet, so I spent time playing traditional Ethiopian games with the kids, which made them excited to teach me their language in return. I also bonded with the cooks, who taught me how to make injera and shared the cultural customs surrounding food and dining in Ethiopia. For example, I learned that it is considered rude to return an unfinished plate for washing or to decline a "gursha" (a traditional gesture of feeding someone else). This experience deepened my connection to my heritage and enriched my understanding of Ethiopian customs.

This service project reinforced my long-term goal of returning to medically serve my home country. The experience was so enriching and insightful that I am now considering working with an NGO in Addis Ababa during my gap year before medical school. This opportunity allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of what life is truly like for the average Ethiopian citizen, particularly through my interactions with the children, who are comically known to be overshareers.

I plan to continue my involvement with WEF by staying in contact with the organization and actively working to kickstart their social media presence in Addis Ababa. My goal is to increase awareness among young people about WEF's work and encourage more volunteers to join the facility. Before I left, I conducted a demonstration on how to use the SIB platform for the volunteer teachers and directors. I also provided them with the contact information for Victor, the IT employee who has been instrumental in assisting me with the platform. I plan to conduct monthly check-ins with the director to monitor the program's progress. I hope that Immersion Vanderbilt will provide me with another opportunity to build upon this program next summer, ideally allowing me to stay for a month or more to make an even greater impact on the WEF community.

If I could plan my project again, I would streamline the approach and be more attuned to what the students were eager to learn, making the experience more engaging and exciting for them—especially given my short two-week stay. I realize now that I could have used the time as a kickstarter to spark their interest, rather than diving into the finer details too quickly. This experience has been transformative, and I am eager to see how my continued involvement with WEF will evolve in the future.



SHANNON ALPTEKIN

Biomedical Engineering, '25

Hometown: Smithtown, NY

Project Location: Cambodia and Kenya

Shannon distributed biosand water filters to improve access to clean water in Siem Reap, Cambodia, and assisted local doctors and medical staff in Nairobi, Kenya.

I spent “Week 1” of my trip across the globe in Siem Reap, Cambodia improving access to clean drinking water via the development and distribution of biosand filters to local communities in need; this was done in collaboration with The Trailblazer Foundation and Globalteer team.

In high school, I founded an NGO whose pilot project aimed to provide water sustainability to a Kenyan community via implementation of a solar-powered microgrid and atmospheric water generator; the venture was ambitious, and ultimately, I did not secure sufficient funds to facilitate the project. The Nichols Humanitarian Fund was an outlet to continue this work—be it down a different path.

To step outside of my Nashville bubble and into a third world country over in Asia was unlike anything I’ve experienced before. At the start of the trip, I anticipated encounters with poverty, poor infrastructure, regressions in technology, some misogyny, and overall, a significantly less developed economy. These expectations were certainly met, but what I found most striking was the stagnant mindset of the people and lack of opportunities for self-transcendence. From as early as I can recall, I grew up hearing (and boasting myself!) how America is the land of the free, the land of opportunity! Not until this service trip at 21 years of age did I fully realize the verity to this statement. I have never felt so blessed to be in good health, to receive such a wonderful education, and to have the opportunity to pursue a career in cardiac surgery—let alone as a woman; these opportunities are—unfortunately—not universal.

For decent medical care, the locals will ride for hours by bus to cross the border into Thailand. I passed kitchen sinks and bathtubs repurposed into outdoor furniture seating. On a filter delivery to a village outside of the city, I watched a young girl walk outside of her house and over to the nearby stream for the sole purposing of disposing of her plastic food wrapper. Her negligence for proper garbage disposal is not entirely her fault; it’s the fault of the community’s culture which promotes lack of cleanliness and organized sanitation systems, lack of education, and simply a lack of care for the state of their environment.

For “Week 2” of my trip, I headed east to Nairobi, Kenya where I spent time as a medical service volunteer at Tigoni Hospital; this was done in collaboration with Volunteering Solutions, which included a diverse group of other volunteers—most of whom in their 20’s—from Portugal, Italy, the United Kingdom, and America.

Kenya is a third world country in Africa, and although I did experience similar socioeconomic conditions here as in Cambodia, it really was a whole new world. The poverty line is lower than I think most people can even imagine. There’s an area called Kibera (which I passed Ubering into work daily) that is the biggest slum in all of Africa. 60% of the Nairobi population resides on this one plot of land in shacks made of mud walls and tin roofs with no electricity, no running water, severe overcrowding, and heavy pollution by garbage and human waste.

We spent time at an orphanage where 150+ children currently live in immensely close quarters—10 to a single twin-size bed. Mama Margaret, the owner of the orphanage, shared countless heart-wrenching abandonment stories with us. In one case that truly stuck with me, Mama Margaret pointed out a physically & mentally disabled girl whose father raped her when she was quite young. The mother of this child defended her daughter and told her husband she and the children would leave him if he continued this behavior. The husband complied but later broke his word, shot his wife, and raped his daughter again. And now his daughter lives in this orphanage—broken and scarred for the rest of her life; this is one story of many. I’ve never been so inspired, however, by Mama Margaret’s unrelenting grit and desire to love, to feed, to clothe, and to heal these abandoned, sick children that appeared on her doorstep despite insufficiency in funding, resources, and space. When you pour into others even as you feel empty, God will pour into you; she will forever be my paradigm of this.

Inadequate living conditions are a breeding ground for disease; lack of medical resources and healthcare personnel stifle your chances of subsequent successful recovery. Tigoni Hospital met the bare minimum requirements for a functioning hospital. I am honored to have been able to collaborate with their staff. And I am hopeful that when I become an exceptional cardiac surgeon one day, I can return to Kenya with a renewed invaluable skillset to offer the community via pro bono heart surgeries.

I’d like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Nichols for helping to fund one of the most insightful experiences of my entire life! I have no doubt that the lessons I’ve learned will be pivotal in paving the way to a brighter tomorrow for myself—but more importantly for others—for the rest of my life.



ESHANI ARUMALLA

Molecular and Cellular Biology & Medicine, Health, and Society, '25

Hometown: San Jose, CA

Project Location: Nashville, TN

Eshani created free sensory kits for patients at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital and Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

Spending much of my adolescence supporting my brother's autism struggles, I often heard doctors dismiss my brother's issues as behavioral, suggesting medication. My mom knew there was more wrong and suspected his sensory processing disorder. We noticed that my brother sat at his desk longer with a sensory cushion under his feet, and that bringing his sensory chew tool vastly improved our grocery store outings. These experiences made me consider narrative medicine for the first time and the importance of listening to a patient's personalized medical history during evaluation.

As a Vanderbilt University Medical Center sensory autism research assistant my freshman year, I was excited to learn about evaluating sensory differences in autism. Beyond learning research methodologies and scientific knowledge, my experience was instrumental in teaching me to consider the effectiveness of research and clinical methods for autistic patients. Seeing my lab have our autistic graduate student test out and provide feedback on our research protocols, and purchase a mobile EEG to account for autistic patients with hyperactivity further emphasized the importance of considering respect in all interventions I put forth.

I did not realize the larger impact of ineffective systems outside my family's experience until a mother in my support group cried over her autistic son having a sensory meltdown in a hallway because the hospital did not have facilities for private regulation. She felt that her son was disrespected and insensitively dismissed in a care setting. Relating this to my brother's hospital-induced anxiety and patients experiencing sensory overload in my research, I wanted to understand how this barrier could impact diagnosis ease or healthcare access while also creating a solution that honored the dignity of patients who are susceptible to sensory overload.

Preliminary probing revealed a literature gap in understanding sensory sensitivity as a significant healthcare determinant for autistic adults. Thanks to funding from Nichols Humanitarian Fund and the Joe C. Davis Fund amounting to \$4,700, I created sensory kits for Vanderbilt Children's Developmental Clinic and certain adult inpatient units. To ensure the longevity of my initiative, I

have embedded my sensory kits as a volunteer opportunity for Autism Tennessee Vanderbilt to recruit volunteers and establish partnerships with more clinical specialties in the hospital long after I graduate. Given my immense passion and the timeliness of this solution in light of recent reports on autistic patient aggression towards healthcare staff, the VUMC Nursing Leadership recognized the importance of easing sensory overload to create better health outcomes for autistic patients and improve the work environment for healthcare workers around. They contacted me to create a research study based on my sensory kits, and I will be leading this study alongside my team to assess how my kits impact anxiety in autistic adult patients. We currently plan to submit the study to the IRB by September.

Through this process, I gained experience in IRB methods, clinical projects, and research initiation. Most importantly, I fell in love with quality improvement research, through which I can tackle various health disparities for disproportionately impacted minority populations. Nominated by the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, I was selected as a panel speaker for the 8th annual Sibling Symposium at Cincinnati Children's Hospital to share my perspectives and communicate about sensory kit expansion by collaborating with the host organization, Siblings with a Mission. I am also currently applying for a Medicine, Health, and Society Honors Thesis to evaluate healthcare providers' perspectives on treating patients with intellectual and developmental disabilities to further identify roadblocks in the healthcare experience for patients with disabilities.

I hope to continue expanding my sensory kit research by further exploring systems-based practice and patient-centric improvements. As a physician, I hope to utilize narrative medicine, reflect on standards of care, and use my knowledge of the biological underpinnings of health determinants to create solutions for disabled populations and other healthcare minorities that have trouble accessing the care they deserve. In the future, I will continue to value the dignity of my patients and treat them with compassion and respect through service, research, and the care I provide. None of this would be possible without Nichols Humanitarian Fund or Joe C. Davis Fund, and for that I am forever grateful.



AARIJ ATIQ

Electrical and Computer Engineering, '26

Hometown: Lahore, Pakistan

Project Location: Lahore, Pakistan

Aarij conducted a series of workshops in Lahore, Pakistan, for high school students passionate about physics and the natural sciences.

This summer, I worked with PYIMS Pakistan, an organization dedicated to sparking the curiosity of young minds in STEM. My project took me to Lahore, where I had the privilege of mentoring two teams of motivated high school students to conduct research in physics and the natural sciences. Every day was an exciting challenge, from diving deep into the world of experimental design to seeing the students' eyes light up as they made connections between abstract theories and tangible results.

In the sweltering heat of Lahore, my students and I spent hours huddled together, brainstorming ideas and fine-tuning experimental designs. Whether it was investigating how young adults with different addictions perceive temperature changes or unraveling the intricate patterns of crystal formation in solutions, each session brought its own set of challenges and excitement. Each session was a mix of intense focus and bursts of creativity as the students brought their ideas to life, transforming them into projects worthy of the international stage in Tbilisi, Georgia where the final competition would take place.

At the start, many of the students were hesitant to approach me, often shy to ask questions or seek help. This initial reservation made it clear that our relationship would require patience, understanding, and time to develop. However, as we progressed, I noticed a gradual shift. Through consistent encouragement and open communication, the students began to feel more comfortable, not just with me, but with the challenges they faced in designing their own research projects. Watching them grow in confidence was one of the most rewarding aspects of the mentorship. They also started to take ownership of their ideas, ask insightful questions, and engage more actively in discussions.

Initially, my primary objective was to help the students develop their research projects and prepare them for the upcoming tournament. However, as the project progressed, my goals evolved beyond just guiding the students; I became deeply invested in their personal and academic growth. I realized that my role was not just about teaching research skills, but also

about fostering a sense of confidence, curiosity, and independence in these young minds.

The stipend I received this summer was instrumental in making my mentorship journey possible, covering essential travel and equipment costs that allowed me to fully immerse myself in the program. With the financial support, I was able to dedicate my time and energy to guiding young minds in Pakistan, a commitment that would have been challenging without this aid. This experience has been transformative, not just for the students but for me as well. It broadened my global perspective by deepening my understanding of the importance of science communication across different cultures and educational backgrounds. The hands-on experience in experimental design, education, and management taught me invaluable skills that I now see as crucial in bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and real-world application.

While I continue to keep in touch with the students and the managing team remotely, my project also ensured that the impact we had lasts longer than just this summer. The equipment I bought- including sensors, lab safety gear, and other tools- will continue to enable future students to continue experimenting and exploring on their own. The resources are versatile and will allow the students to tinker and pursue their own projects independently. Additionally, the training I provided has also equipped them with the skills to carry on this work and support others in their learning journey.

If I could plan the project again, I would keep the hands-on mentoring approach and the focus on building a strong foundation in research skills, as these were key to the students' growth. Learning from this experience, I would also incorporate more collaborative projects from the start to foster teamwork and peer learning earlier in the process and to get rid of the initial hesitations and awkwardness that the students faced. Overall, the experience was incredibly rewarding, and I'm proud of the progress we made together. I'm excited to see how the students will continue to grow and innovate in the future.



GABRIELLE BECK

Neuroscience; English, '26

Hometown: Tenafly, NJ

Project Location: Nashville, TN

Gabrielle interned with an NGO that serves Nashville's unhoused community where she coordinated an event to aid those who are experiencing homelessness.

What would happen if we all came together to channel our collective energy, love and compassion? Homelessness is something we see all over Nashville, but actually seeing people for who they are, their humanity and their story, is something we often miss.

On July 6th, I collaborated with The Contributor, a local non-profit organization that helps our homeless neighbors establish their own micro-businesses and work their way into housing through selling an award-winning street. We hosted a photography and poetry showcase featuring the works of the unhoused folks they serve and support.

This event aimed to provide a platform for unhoused vendors to share their creative writing pieces, generating an anthology of street poetry. Many unhoused vendors want a larger platform to amplify their perspectives on encampment carelessly bulldozed over, deaths of friends, and their struggles while living on the streets. Additionally, the event incorporated a unique disposable camera element—unhoused vendors received disposable cameras to document their daily lives. This initiative disrupted stereotypes surrounding who is considered "disposable" in society and to highlight voices that are often unheard. These kinds of efforts that allow people to connect at a very individual level and be seen are vital for self-esteem and social change.

In search of people, places, and experiences that allow me to experience grace deeply, I hope to not only raise awareness about the challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness but also to empower them by showcasing their creativity and resilience. By bringing their voices to the forefront, we can challenge the stigma associated with homelessness and advocate for more compassionate and effective solutions to address the root causes of this issue.

In addition, I collaborated with India Pungarcher, associate director of advocacy at Open Table Nashville, and the Metro Public Health Department to create a policy report examining Nashville's homeless mortality in 2023. The experience of homelessness has well-documented long-term consequences on health and well-being. However, due to a lack of national review or

standardized data collection for homeless mortality, it is difficult to calculate the extent that homelessness is killing people. Tracking and evaluating homeless mortality data, locally and nationally, is essential to developing health and housing strategies to save lives. We hope that this preliminary report allows us to better understand the cause of death among our neighbors as well as make informed policy decisions. I also partnered with Supergoop to provide sunscreen supplies to unhoused folks as they endure extreme heat and constant exposure to the outdoors.

Amid encampment closures and rising housing prices, The Contributor's and Open Table's work represents a glowing ember of a maybe — that perhaps the Nashville community can meaningfully come together and deviate from a history steeped in racial inequality and systemic injustices. With the Nichols Humanitarian fund, the hint of change flutters in the air, blazing with possibilities.

Across Tennessee, pitching a tent on public land outside of designated campsites is a felony offense. Tennessee is the first state in the country to criminalize homelessness to reduce the number of unhoused people sleeping on the streets, at bus stops and in city parks. Despite a lack of affordable housing and shelter space, many cities have chosen to criminally punish people living on the street for doing what any human being must do to survive. I am committed to relational outreach which involves journeying with un-housed and precariously housed individuals and families and being a consistent presence in the homeless community. People are not numbers in a data sheet but our friends that we journey with. I seek to create a community to develop stability that moves people into housing first, standing in solidarity with the homeless community.

No one should die for lack of housing, but as they are, it is our responsibility to end this epidemic. I am dedicated to actively investing in the health and well-being of homeless communities and combating unjust legislation as I move towards a career in social justice and healthcare.



ADITYA BHATT

Neuroscience; Economics, '26

Hometown: Simpsonville, SC

Project Location: Japan

Aditya studied the healthcare system in Japan.

This summer I had the incredible opportunity to explore the public health infrastructure of Japan, spending an unforgettable two weeks on the ground in the world's largest city: Tokyo. Through ethnographic research on the social determinants of health, my partner and I learned about what's important to the population that Japan's health system serves – how their food choices, lifestyles, culture, and relationships impact their health. We were given the privilege to visit Japan's National Center for Global Health and Medicine where we saw firsthand how citizens interact with the universal healthcare system of their nation – from filling out intake forms to scheduling appointments – and through partnering with Mirai no Mori, we were able to work with Japanese youth, seeing how healthy habits are instilled from an early age.

Starting from a young age, the reliance and trust on the mechanisms of urban life are integrated into one's mindset. During our travels, we saw young children riding public transportation alone to school, parents sending their toddlers out to run errands, and local stores and shops working in synchronicity with the communities they serve. Public infrastructure is a key component of health, especially in a city as vast as Tokyo. What we saw was that the whole city was connected, alive, pulsing with swaths of people from all walks of life, contributing to the health of the whole.

At the NCGHM, patients could check in through either electronic kiosks or with the help of secretaries. This seamless process, combined with accessible translator services and a strong focus on patient needs, demonstrated why Japan's healthcare system is highly regarded worldwide for both its quality and affordability. Through our tour and visit of the NCGHM, we learned about its rich history as a central player in international healthcare coordination, addressing a wide range of global health crises. The organization has embraced a generalist perspective on care since its founding as the First National Hospital of Tokyo, paving the way for Japan's modern preventive checkup system.

What amazed me personally was the ease of access that residents of this urban metropolis had to peaceful getaways. We took a day trip to Kamakura, a city on the coast of Japan that took less

than an hour and a half to get to through public transportation that was reliable, affordable, and accessible to all. It was a beautiful day spent at a relaxed beach town where we got to interact with locals – many of whom commute to Tokyo for work every day! We also got the opportunity to take a brief trip to the Kyoto prefecture, visiting the slower side of the country. We visited shrines and temples, and helped supervise a local hike on which we met people of all ages – ranging from grandpas and grandmas that were 80+ years old (easily surmounting a hill that was giving me trouble!) to young children that were on the hike as a part of their field trip from kindergarten. Seeing this emphasis on connecting with nature and daily exercise was a key highlight of my trip, showcasing what truly makes a country healthy is their lifestyle and how their community supports that lifestyle.

As a practicing Hindu, I was astonished to see Sanskrit writing at many of the Buddhist temples that we visited, and striking similarities to my faith in the way that Shinto shrines operated and venerated local deities (like the Hindu concept of kul devtas). I gained greater cultural awareness and appreciation for Japanese culture and no longer viewed it as a monolith. Furthermore, I was surprised to see many people of South Asian descent like me working and living in Tokyo, and I made sure to have conversations with them every moment that I could. I met a man who left his home in Nepal in search of a better life in Tokyo, and through hearing about his life learned more about the struggles that immigrants face in Japan — a highly assimilatory society.

Visiting Japan renewed my outlook on human society, giving me a short glimpse into how a developed nation outside of the US and Europe operates. If I were to plan this trip again, I'd ensure to visit more of Japan's rural countryside to see how different life is there, and if access to essential medicine and treatment is ever an issue. I will forever remember this trip and the lessons I took away from it.



KAROLINA BISIAK

Secondary Education; History; Spanish, '25

Hometown: Niles, IL

Project Location: Krakow, Poland

Karolina volunteered at a school in Krakow, Poland, for Ukrainian children living in Poland because of the war.

Having been directed to meet with the English teacher of the school on my first Monday in Krakow, I set off on my journey to the address I had been given. Krakow was as vibrant as I had known it to be. Countless florists and restaurants lined the streets of my route, birds chirping and people chattering on their way to work. Suddenly, the address I had put into my phone appeared in front of me. A large, imposing, ancient-looking brick building towered above me, its entrance leading to a courtyard. One of the doors had Ukrainian writing on it, so I stepped inside and thus began an amazing, transformative experience.

Miss Yuliia, the English teacher, met me in the echoing atrium, with a spiral staircase in the middle that seemed like it led to the sky. As we chatted about our expectations for my time with Unbreakable Ukraine, we seemed to hit an obstacle: although I was told over email that I would be assisting in the camp's English classes, Miss Yuliia informed me that the language-learning portion of the camp wouldn't start until August, when I would return home. Even though it was daunting, I went home with the task of coming up with alternative activities to the English-learning ones I had been planning for.

The next morning, after a trip to the grocery store for some candy, I scoped out the nearby park that the camp took a two- or three-hour break in each day, devising a scavenger hunt from the different things that could be found there. Using an online translator the night before, I had also prepared a list of machines in Ukrainian that the kids could "build" together in a game of group charades. Miss Yuliia turned out to be sick that day, but my Polish carried me through a conversation with some of the other teachers present, and with the kids, who could be bribed to get off their phones and participate with the lollipops I had brought.

As I built rapport with the kids over the weeks, I became more integrated within the 9am to 4pm day at camp, preparing fun activities like obstacle courses and cooking classes in which we made bubble tea and tanghulu. Over shared games of soccer and badminton, I told the kids about my life as a Polish-American in Nashville and Chicago, making sure to detail the Ukrainian Village

neighborhood. In turn, they told me about their lives: Sofija, who enjoyed practicing her English with me, missed her dad, who split his time between Georgia, Ukraine, and Poland. Ksenia and her family came to Krakow on the first day of the war. She attended a Polish school during the year and wanted to be a professional soccer player.

I grew a deep admiration and respect for the children and adults I was spending time with. I was under the impression that Polish and Ukrainian were quite similar, so I was shocked when the kids were speaking to each other in Ukrainian and I couldn't understand a single word. I felt useless chaperoning a trip to the Polish Aviation Museum when I couldn't tell that two kids were making snarky comments toward each other. The kids taught me some Ukrainian over time, which was more useful than the Duolingo prep I had done. All in all, the students and teachers had come to a new and unfamiliar country out of necessity, adapted, and managed to retain and uplift their culture through community building. It was incredibly inspiring.

I visit Krakow every so often to visit family in the city and nearby, so I plan to maintain a relationship with Unbreakable Ukraine. I received a few text updates on how the end of camp is going since I've returned home, which has been heartwarming. My time with Unbreakable Ukraine was full of growth from a pedagogical standpoint for me. Learning how to communicate with kids in a variety of languages and being culturally responsive to their needs was paramount to this experience. I hope that they will remember the past summer as fondly as I do!



ANNAKATE BLANKS

Law, '26

Hometown: St. Louis, MO

Project Location: Valetta, Malta

Annakate interned at the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law.

This summer I had the incredible opportunity to work for the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IIJ) in Valletta, Malta. The IIJ works in the counter-terrorism space, creating programs, workshops, and space for collaboration amongst practitioners to discuss approaches to countering terrorism. The IIJ's vision is to be an international hub that increases the capacity of practitioners to combat terrorism and other related transnational crimes, while upholding human rights and navigating within a rule of law framework. I was able to continue making the IIJ's vision a reality by working on a program and helping put on a workshop. First, I worked on their counter-terrorism financing program by writing an in-depth article that explains the role of cryptocurrency in financing terrorism. The work I did will be sent out to practitioners during the upcoming counter-terrorism financing workshop the IIJ will be holding in September. Second, I compiled a portfolio on cumulative charging that will be used in both the upcoming counter-terrorism financing workshop, as well as other workshops in the future, as this is a procedural topic that touches most subject areas. Third, I helped in the planning and was able to attend a workshop put on in Valletta during my time. This workshop, titled "Improving International Cooperation for ISIS Prosecutions" brought together practitioners from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Germany, Iraq, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Türkiye, and the United States to discuss the adjudication of ISIS terrorist defendants. In addition, I helped the IIJ with daily tasks and crafted smaller research reports focused on human rights in Southeast Asia and the role of recognition in statehood.

The Nichols Humanitarian Fund Experience Stipend allowed me to go to Malta and gain hands on experience in the counter-terrorism space as a 1L Law Student. Without the stipend, I would not have had the opportunity to learn from those at the IIJ who have spent their careers upholding the rule of law and holding terrorists accountable to human rights atrocities. I had so many unique opportunities, such as the chance to sit in a room with Iraqi judges and hear about their experience with ISIS and repatriations. Overall, this experience gave me a new perspective on the ever so important role of collaboration amongst nations, especially those with extremely different legal systems, in the fight to combat terrorism. On a molecular level, this experience

strengthened both my research and writing skills, as well as my relationships with others who find interest in this area of law. I wrote a plethora of papers, from memos to short articles, and researched a broad range of topics and regions. I feel more confident in both skill sets now. I created strong relationships with my fellow interns, other law students, and the IIJ staff, who all enriched my overall experience with different ideas and perspectives on the world.

I will continue to keep in touch with the IIJ and have voiced my continual support for their work. I will continue to update my cryptocurrency article as the IIJ needs and look forward to the workshop commencing in September. While I will go on to work in a law firm next summer, I feel confident in the skills, both professional and personal, that I will bring to the firm due to my time at the IIJ and the experiences I had there.



OWEN CAI

Medicine, Health, and Society; Public Policy Studies, '26

Hometown: Pearland, TX

Project Location: Japan

Owen studied the healthcare system in Japan.

This summer, I was able to spend time in Tokyo, Japan thanks to the support of the Nichols Fund. With my partner, I conducted ethnographic research on the social determinants of health, how they shaped quotidian life for Japanese residents, and how historical and cultural decisions manifested in their current health system. I had the privilege of visiting the National Center for Global Health and Medicine (NCGM) and learning how individuals navigate a regular appointment intake process; work with Mirai no Mori and Japanese youth for immersive outdoor programming; and experience Japan's cultural heritage through shrine visits.

The built environment is an essential determinant of health and critical to everyday access to work, sustenance, healthcare, community, and more. In a city as dense and massive as Tokyo is, urban planning plays such a critical role. The ease of accessing public transportation like buses and subways was remarkable, and it was common to see young school children boldly and smoothly hopping on and off buses. This spirit of connectedness was tangible, from the connection to other people (collective principles) to the connection with nature.

Beginning with the collective mindset, a common theme I observed through my immersive observational analysis was a socially implied and explicit regulatory emphasis on keeping public spaces clear of trash and public transportation similarly tidy. Being mindful of one's space was emphasized, not just for tidiness, but to not impose negative externalities upon the broader community. Through our analysis, I believe that some of these very principles exist in the structure of the healthcare system. Talking to local individuals about their healthcare experiences, it was fascinating to see how the universal healthcare system simplifies certain mental and logistical processes of obtaining care. Citizens pay around a relatively unchanging proportion of their medical expenses based on income.

The NCGM was full of activity and had both secretaries and electronic kiosks to sign in. With the smoothness of operations, accessibility of translator services, and patient-centered approach to understanding healthcare needs, it was clear why the Japanese healthcare system was regarded

so highly around the world in terms of affordability and quality. The NCGM was particularly interesting for its history as a coordinating center for international healthcare issues as well as infectious diseases and non-communicable ones. Although they have the title of global health, which usually indicates a strict focus on international health, they take a generalist approach to providing care— something they've done since they created the modern preventative checkup system in Japan under the name of the First National Hospital of Tokyo.

Beyond the time in a clinical setting, I was fortunate to incorporate the ethnographic and immersive lens by working with youth that faced abuse, neglect, or other circumstances affecting their relationship with parents/guardians. I helped supervise a local hike and was able to take a brief trip to the Kyoto Prefecture to traverse Daimonji-yama, Ginkaku-ji, and the Fushimi Inari shrine. I was incredibly grateful to be able to experience this syncretic blend of spirituality/religiosity and nature in close proximity to a bustling city; a true feeling of satisfaction came from the realization that I helped these children forge a positive memory, connection to one another, and appreciation for nature. Reflecting on my life growing up in the stereotypical American commuter suburb, the individualistic gravity of single-owner households and vast parking lots shaped my early perception of nature as a facet of human society, rather than something that we are inherently connected to as a condition of our existence on this vast planet.

A common assumption about the strong presence of mindfulness and taking care of one another in Japan is that the country is monocultural/monoethnic, and that this is the only way to achieve such robust social systems and public infrastructure. After this immersive experience, I understand that to call all of Japan one culture would do a disservice to the diversity of traditions and outlooks on life in each prefecture, each city, and each cultural space. I also leave with a renewed sense of our global connections. From the Sanskrit and Hindu inspirations present in the walls of Buddhist-Shinto temples to the Japanese university student hailing from mainland China who I conversed with in Mandarin, we all found a shared connection to point to and laugh about.



GRETA CULLIPHER

Anthropology, '25

Hometown: Brevard, NC

Project Location: Neltume, Chile

Greta did archaeological surveys of the Huilo Huilo Biological Reserve in southern Chile to gain a deeper understanding of the indigenous cultures..

A couple of weeks into our time in southern Chile, my cohort and I found ourselves in the back of a decades-old, previously-military Jeep, driving shakily through fifty minutes of streams and potholes up to the Pampa de Pilmaiquen, in the Huilo-Huilo Biological Reserve where our archaeological research was focused. Our purpose? To experience life as a guardaparque (park ranger). We cleared roads, fed the endangered huemul (the south Andean deer) in their enclosures, and participated in the hours of meetings required to keep a biological reserve running. This day-in-the-life as a guardaparque was not the main purpose of our work in southern Chile, but it is a clear example of how the structure of this research trip prioritized the understanding of real people's experiences in the region. We were there to research the lives of people there hundreds or thousands of years ago, but to do so without also investigating the lives of people there now does the entire work a disservice; how do you understand how people interacted with the landscape one hundred years ago if you don't look at how people interact with that same landscape today? How do you ever hope to get the full story without asking those with deep knowledge of the region, passed down through generations?

To rewind a bit—me, two other students, and our professor were in the town of Neltume in southern Chile for six weeks this summer in order to research the archaeological record of the Huilo-Huilo Biological Reserve, and look for evidence of past human settlement. Specifically, we wanted to see if and how the indigenous people of the region, the Mapuche, had utilized the landscape and its resources. We were focused on this region in particular because of the considerable volcanic activity (within one hundred square kilometers there are seventeen active volcanoes), and we wanted to see how indigenous peoples had adapted to that threat. To focus our archaeological survey, we talked to multiple members of local Mapuche communities, which was an invaluable part of the process, and did a lot to expand our understanding. Beyond that, our day-to-day life included lots and lots of travel. Every day we would either drive for hours looking for and documenting Capuchin churches (as our secondary goal of this trip was to illuminate the abuses of missionaries upon the indigenous peoples, abuses similar to those enacted by the residential schools of the United States and Canada), or walk through heavy brush

for hours doing archaeological survey, looking for pottery, hearths, burn-lines, and other evidence of settlement. All of this in a region that averaged 40°F and rained for 75% of our trip. We definitely had a lot of personal growth as well as intellectual!

Our archeological survey did not turn up anything, but truly this was not a blow to our spirits. In fact, the absence of evidence in a region is evidence in and of itself, for then we must ask whether the region really did not hold any human settlements (and if so, what factors dissuaded people from setting up there) or if something is making those artifacts difficult to find (environmental factors, change of topology, human development, etc.). While we learned very quickly that the realities of archaeological research can be very tiring, monotonous, and disappointing (in the moment), this logical optimism built into the nature of the work is something I hope I can apply to every area of my life!

Next year, another cohort of students will go down to that region with LiDAR, to get a better look at areas that we could not examine thoroughly with the naked eye (the underbrush was thick enough to be prohibitive). I feel good about our work in Chile for many reasons (including personal: I got very good at building fires), but especially because it paved the way for more students to get to experience archaeological work, and set up their future success. I wish them the best of luck!



PATRICK DOBRANOWSKI

Computer Science, Physics, Mathematics, '26

Hometown: Castle Rock, CO

Project Location: South Africa

Patrick created a new intelligent sensor to monitor the movement of animal populations in South Africa.

This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to work on a project that combined my passion for technology with my deep commitment to wildlife conservation. I collaborated with Smart Savannahs, an organization focused on using tech-based solutions to protect endangered species in South Africa and Kenya. Specifically, my work took place in and around the Kruger National Park and SanWild Sanctuary, two critical areas where poaching poses a severe threat to wildlife. My primary objective was to develop and deploy a custom microcontroller-based camera system that could monitor and track the movements of endangered species in real-time and report on any immediate poaching threats. This system utilized cutting-edge tiny ML models, designed in collaboration with professors from Sweden and South Africa, to identify and classify animals, helping to deter poaching and support conservation efforts.

As a result of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, the stipend for my project became a crucial factor in my time internationally. Before this experience, I viewed conservation largely through a technological lens, focusing on how innovative tools could solve complex environmental problems. However, being on the ground in South Africa, working closely with rangers and conservationists changed my perspective in many ways I could not anticipate. I came to understand that while technology is a powerful tool, it must be integrated with local knowledge, culture, and practices to be truly effective and there is so much I have learned about animal conservation and poaching as a whole. This collaboration was certainly the most rewarding aspect of the project with the local rangers and conservationists sharing invaluable insights into the behavior of the animals we were working to protect and a variety of incredible pieces of information from how to identify animals by their tracks to all about their habits and intricate practices. For example, their deep understanding of animal movement and knowledge of the terrain helped us identify the best locations for deploying the camera systems ensuring sustainability of the project. In turn, I was able to share my technical expertise, teaching them how to operate and maintain the devices.

Throughout this project, my own goals and skills evolved in ways I hadn't anticipated. Initially, my

primary focus was on the technical challenge of developing a reliable and effective wildlife monitoring system. However, as the project progressed, I realized that my role was just as much about fostering relationships and building capacity within the local community as it was about the technology itself. I developed stronger communication skills, learning how to convey complex technical concepts and adapt the devices to be easily deployable in the areas they were to cover. Additionally, I became more adaptable, learning to navigate the unexpected challenges that arose, from equipment malfunctions to the difficulties of working in remote, sometimes harsh environments. In traditional computer science related work, it is easy to rely on consistent access to electricity and internet but having to adjust the project and its goals to account for the remote nature of the sanctuaries became a particularly interest challenge.

As for the future, I plan to continue supporting the work I started this summer. While I may not be physically present in South Africa, I have established strong connections with both the rangers and the academic collaborators from SmartSavannahs and South Africa. I have already been looking for additional funding sources to be able to return to and continue my work in-person both at SanWild and at some of the neighboring reserves which would benefit from similar anti-poaching measures. It is hard still to quantify fully how much this experience has changed me and my perspectives but I hope I can make animal conservation and a commitment to this kind of work a priority in my future and fully integrate it with any of my plans career-wise. Smart Savannahs has already given me a multitude of ideas for new projects and there is much work to be done before the sanctuaries and reserves of this part of the world are fully protected from the nature of poaching and animal harm.



CLAIRE DUFFY

Medicine, Health, and Society; French, '25

Hometown: Washington, D.C.

Project Location: New York City

Claire served as a refugee resettlement volunteer for newly arrived refugees in New York City.

This summer, I was given the opportunity to work with Catholic Charities Community Services Office of Refugee Resettlement in New York, NY. My role varied from day to day, but I worked alongside a team of social workers, teachers, policy makers, and lawyers to support newly arriving refugees and asylum seekers during their transition to life in the United States. I worked largely on the job development team, through which I assisted clients with resume and cover letter preparation, contacting clients regarding their job search status, and helping with mock interviews.

Additionally, I translated for French speaking clients, guided them with filling out SNAP, Section 8 Housing Vouchers, and other forms of public benefits in NYC. I also researched and referred clients for English classes, childcare, and educational opportunities in their area. On the job development team, I often worked with clients to identify barriers to the job search that we could assist with, such as need for transportation, professional attire, or lack of childcare.

Receiving the Nichols stipend enabled me to have an experience that would not have been possible without support, due to the unpaid nature of the position. Prior to starting my project, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in an area which would enable me to engage with and experience the entirety of the world outside the United States. Having the opportunity to work with individuals coming from all over the world—both clients and employees—confirmed these desires to contribute to the betterment of the world on a global scale. This experience showed me how interconnected humans are, and verified many of the concepts I had learned in the classroom.

For example, this summer has shown me that borders are created, adjusted, and maintained by humans—they are not natural nor eternal. The way in which we categorize individuals through our laws, policies, and procedures, for better or worse, affect how an individual experiences life in a new country. Being able to work in the field of refugee resettlement affirmed this idea of interconnectedness through both client experiences and the colleagues I worked with.

I worked on a diverse team with individuals from various countries, backgrounds with different language and professional skills. Many employees at the office had arrived in the United States as refugees themselves and had a first-hand experience of the refugee experience. No matter their background or story, everyone worked as a team to best serve their clients.

I feel that I gained an immense amount of knowledge through the relationships I formed, stories I heard, and lessons I learned through my service. Many of the clients I worked with shared with me their journey to the US and their hopes for the future. I was able to refine my language and communication skills, in both French and English, as well as my ability to connect with individuals from all different backgrounds. Additionally, I believe I was able to share my talents through the work I completed.

During my service time, I strengthened my ability to be an effective communicator, team player, and leader. I would love to return to the organization I served with full time after graduation and continue working with the refugee and immigrant population through both direct service and policy advocacy. I am hopeful that my service this summer will help sustain and contribute to growth in the organization. Namely, the time I spent researching various opportunities for clients, and creating easily accessible databases for various resources such as resume templates and instructions for public benefits applications.

If I had the chance to serve in such a capacity again, I would. I am eternally grateful for wonderful relationships I cultivated, lessons I learned and shared, and the community at the organization I am proud to be a part of.



ELANIL ERDUGRUL

Cognitive Studies and Computer Science, '26

Hometown: Istanbul, Turkey

Project Location: O'ahu, HI

Elanil created a database and interactive dashboard for Sustainable Coastlines Hawaii containing cultural, historical, and environmental information about the island of Oahu.

This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to work with Sustainable Coastlines Hawai'i (SCH), a grassroots nonprofit dedicated to safeguarding the coastlines of Hawai'i. From May 6th to June 28th, 2024, I collaborated closely with the SCH team in Honolulu, focusing on a project that not only expanded my global perspective but also deepened my understanding of environmental stewardship and community engagement.

During my time with SCH, I played a key role in developing "The Place Library," a comprehensive database containing cultural, historical, and environmental information about environmentally vulnerable places on O'ahu. This resource was designed to help SCH respond swiftly to environmental threats and empower individuals to protect Hawaiian coastlines. My work involved extensive research, site visits, and interviews with local volunteers and educators, aiming to raise awareness of O'ahu's cultural and environmental significance. In addition to The Place Library, I created an interactive Educator Dashboard for over 300 educators working with SCH. This dashboard serves as a hub for organizing and planning educational initiatives focused on plastic pollution and waste management. The work I did on these projects is intended to have a lasting impact on SCH and the communities they serve, providing tools that will continue to foster environmental consciousness and action long after my departure.

Receiving the stipend that made this summer possible was instrumental in broadening my global perspective. Before this experience, my understanding of environmental issues was largely theoretical, based on academic studies and news reports. However, being on the ground in Hawai'i, directly engaging with the local community, and witnessing the tangible effects of plastic pollution on the environment profoundly changed my viewpoint. This experience taught me that environmental challenges are deeply intertwined with cultural and socioeconomic factors. In Hawai'i, the issue of plastic pollution is not just about waste management; it's also about preserving the cultural heritage and natural beauty that are integral to the Hawaiian way of life. My perspective has shifted from seeing environmental problems as isolated issues to understanding them as complex, systemic challenges that require holistic and culturally sensitive solutions.

The collaborative learning that occurred during my time with SCH was one of the most enriching aspects of the experience. Working alongside local volunteers and SCH staff, I learned a great deal about the unique environmental and cultural landscape of Hawai'i. They taught me the significance of various sites on O'ahu, the traditional Hawaiian practices that have sustained these lands for centuries, and the community-driven efforts to combat pollution. In return, I was able to share my technical skills and knowledge, particularly in developing the Educator Dashboard and The Place Library. These tools were designed with input from the community, ensuring that they meet the specific needs of SCH and the educators they support. This exchange of knowledge and skills was a true partnership, with each of us learning from the other and contributing to a shared goal of environmental preservation.

This project significantly influenced my personal and professional growth. One of the most important lessons I learned is the importance of adaptability. Initially, my project proposal included creating a Sustainable Travel Guide, but after discussions with my supervisor, I shifted my focus to the Educator Dashboard to better serve the local community's needs. This flexibility allowed me to deliver a product that will have a meaningful and lasting impact. Additionally, I gained a deeper understanding of how to communicate technical information to non-technical audiences, an area where I received constructive feedback during my exit interview. This insight will be invaluable as I continue to work in multidisciplinary teams, ensuring that my contributions are accessible and effective.

Looking forward, I plan to continue supporting SCH from afar by providing occasional updates and advice as they expand The Place Library and Educator Dashboard. While I may not be directly involved in the day-to-day operations, I have prepared comprehensive documentation to ensure that the SCH team can sustain and build upon the work I started. If I could redo this project, I would place even greater emphasis on understanding the organizational structure and internal dynamics before diving into the work. This would have allowed for smoother collaboration and perhaps more efficient progress. However, the relationships I built and the feedback I received have been invaluable, and I wouldn't change the core of what I accomplished.

In conclusion, my summer with Sustainable Coastlines Hawai'i was a transformative experience that deepened my commitment to environmental stewardship and expanded my understanding of the complex interplay between culture, community, and conservation. I am grateful for the opportunity to have contributed to SCH's mission and to have learned so much from the passionate individuals working to protect Hawai'i's precious environment. I hope that the work I did this summer will continue to benefit SCH and inspire others to take action in their own communities.



OCHUWA GARUBA

Public Policy Studies and Law, History, and Society, '26
Hometown: Powder Springs, GA
Project Location: Kigali, Rwanda, and New York City

Ochuwa studied the state of governance in Rwanda and interned at the Brennan Center for Justice in New York City.

This summer, I culminated my immersive learning by traveling to Kigali, Rwanda, and New York City. There, I conducted comparative research on global democracies and elections, paired with an internship I completed at the Brennan Center for Justice. Passionate about civic engagement and democracy, I was able to broaden my perspective and worldview by exploring the state of governance and civil society in Rwanda 30 years after the genocide. In New York, I served as an undergraduate intern in the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center, where I contributed to democracy reform projects, including voting rights, election security, court ethics reform, and free speech issues. The generous stipend enabled me to deepen my understanding of and passion for global democracy work, appealing to broader themes of civic participation, high court reform, reconciliatory justice, and peacebuilding.

Throughout my time at Vanderbilt University, double majoring in Public Policy Studies, with a concentration in International and Foreign Policy, and Law, History, and Society, I have taken several courses on African history and politics. In Rwanda, I visited memorials and museums and learned from community members, even picking up some Kinyarwanda, one of the primary languages in Rwanda. This allowed me to fully immerse myself in the culture and visualize what I had learned in the classroom. My trip to Kigali specifically reinforced insights from my HIST 1271W: War, Refugees, and Reconciliatory Justice in Africa course, where I learned that justice can vary depending on the context. In Rwanda, justice is not only legal but also community-centered. While I approached the topic of the genocide with great sensitivity, one profound lesson my community and I took away was the value of unity and healing through community-led initiatives and everyday interactions.

At the Brennan Center, I collaborated with lawyers and researchers who specialized in both domestic and global democracy issues. My independent research spanned topics such as campus protests around the world and high court reforms, both in the United States and abroad. This work, combined with my experiences in Rwanda, gave me clarity on my academic and professional goals. I am committed to pursuing a public service-oriented career focused on

upholding democracy and justice, particularly in the areas of elections and democracy reform at both the domestic and international levels. Continuing the work I started this summer, I am serving as a fellow at Fair Fight Action, a Georgia-based nonprofit founded by Stacey Abrams to fight voter suppression and advocate for voting rights. At Fair Fight, I am developing my knowledge of voting rights and election security by partnering with the data analysis team. By contributing to the organization's advocacy efforts, I am helping protect and promote fair and equitable access to voting rights, which echoes the larger themes of democracy reform that I engaged with over the summer.

Reflecting on my summer, I experienced extraordinary growth and experiential learning. My time in Rwanda, despite my work with Bridge2Rwanda not panning out as anticipated, deepened my understanding of post-genocide reconciliation and the nuances of community-based justice. The research I conducted there, alongside my work at the Brennan Center for Justice, reinforced my commitment to advocating for democracy and justice both domestically and globally. Additionally, I have learned the value and importance of breaking down my research into actionable steps for maximum impact, and I am eager to continue this journey through my current fellowship at Fair Fight Action. This summer gave me valuable insight into my professional and academic goals, reinforcing my dedication to public service and my desire to use my experiences to create positive change in my community while inspiring others to do the same.



LILY HOFSTETTER

Cognitive Studies and Computer Science, '26

Hometown: San Diego, CA

Project Location: Japan

Lily volunteered with an NGO that provides mental health and suicide prevention services to Japan's international community.

This Summer, I traveled to Japan alongside my project partner, Kai, to collaborate with Tokyo English Lifeline (TELL) Japan, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing critical support and counseling services to Japan's international community. As someone deeply passionate about mental illness prevention and psychopathology research, I was immediately drawn to Japan's mental healthcare systems and the cultural perspectives on mental disorders. The alignment of TELL's mission with my interests made me particularly eager to contribute to the organization's work.

Our project began with the development of targeted outreach strategies aimed at enhancing awareness of TELL's psychological services and advocacy among youth, particularly university students. Kai and I compiled a leads list of over 100 student organizations across various universities, with a focus on groups centered on psychology, mental health, and affinity interests. By visiting campuses in person and conducting virtual meetings, we introduced TELL's initiatives to student leaders, laying the foundation for collaboration in the following semester.

Through our collaboration with TELL's team, we gained insights into the current landscape of mental health support and legislation in Japan. I learned about the nation's stigma surrounding mental illness and the challenges posed by corporate work culture on individual wellbeing. After leaving Japan, our work continued virtually and evolved into a research project conducted in partnership with TELL, where we examined the impact of various government ministries' policy responses to the growing emphasis on mental health advocacy. Our ultimate aim is to compile a meta-analysis of Japan's mental health policy landscape, with the intention of sharing our findings with psychological services nonprofits, government agencies, and academic policy circles.

This service-learning project would not have been possible without the support provided by the Nichols family through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. In addition to the fulfilling opportunity to work with TELL, I appreciated how the experience expanded my worldview through interacting

with peers who grew up in vastly different environments. From students in rural communities to foreign exchange students living in the heart of Tokyo, I was fortunate to have spoken with diverse individuals and learned firsthand about their local communities' values, traditions, and cultural nuances. Specific to mental health, I came to realize the breadth of attitudes toward mental health support and prevention techniques, and these perspectives ultimately challenged my prior beliefs developed from my lived experiences as a Southern Californian.

Reflecting on the Summer, I am filled with gratitude for all of the compassionate and dedicated individuals whom we met and worked with across Japan. Our ability to work both in person and virtually allowed the originally outreach-focused project to extend into research that we are continuing to work on during the academic year. This experience has instilled in me a deep sense of empathy and a commitment to placing values of accessibility and equity at the forefront of my future endeavors. Additionally, it pushed me to keep an open mind and listen to people's stories, both professionally as an aspiring researcher and clinical neuropsychologist, and as a person.



MADISON HUBBARD

Law, '26

Hometown: Saugatuck, MI

Project Location: The Hague, Netherlands

Madison was a Research Fellow at the Asser Institute in The Hague, Netherlands.

My journey into international law has been driven by a deep-rooted passion for understanding how legal frameworks shape global governance and address cross-border challenges. This passion has been nurtured through academic and professional experiences, culminating in my research tenure at the Asser Institute in The Hague, Netherlands. There, I had the privilege of contributing to a technical advice report on establishing a tribunal to address issues stemming from the conflict in Ukraine.

The report will explore two primary modalities: a bilateral agreement between Ukraine and the Council of Europe, and a multilateral agreement among willing states. My role focused on analyzing the intricacies of tribunals established through bilateral agreements. I conducted a comprehensive examination of existing tribunals, scrutinizing their founding treaties, applicable legal frameworks, jurisdictional scope, and the mechanisms for securing financial and political support. My research aimed to inform the most effective and legally sound approach for the proposed tribunal.

This experience at the Asser Institute built upon a strong foundation of academic and extracurricular pursuits in international law. Before embarking on this internship, I spent a transformative summer at the Vanderbilt in Venice program, where I immersed myself in courses on counterterrorism, international arbitration, and transnational litigation. These courses provided me with a deep understanding of the legal principles involved in addressing global security threats, resolving cross-border disputes, and navigating the complexities of international legal processes. The rigorous academic environment in Venice solidified my commitment to pursuing a career in international law.

My academic journey has also been complemented by my role as President of the International Law Society at my university. In this capacity, I have worked to foster a community of students passionate about global legal issues, organizing events, lectures, and workshops that explore various facets of international law. This leadership role has deepened my understanding of the

field and allowed me to inspire and guide others in their exploration of international legal topics.

At the Asser Institute, my research on bilateral agreement-based tribunals provided a nuanced understanding of how such legal instruments are crafted and implemented. I explored the political considerations that drive states to enter these agreements, the strategic importance of these tribunals in the broader context of international law, and the challenges in securing the necessary financial resources and political will to sustain them. This work sharpened my analytical skills and enhanced my ability to think critically about the implications of different legal frameworks.

The experience of working at the Asser Institute was transformative on both a professional and personal level. Immersed in the intellectually stimulating environment of The Hague, I was surrounded by leading experts in international law and policy. This exposure broadened my perspective on global issues and instilled in me a greater sense of responsibility towards contributing to the development of international law.

Perhaps most importantly, this experience reinforced the value of independent thinking. In international law, where precedents and established norms often guide decision-making, the ability to think creatively and propose innovative solutions is invaluable. My research at the Asser Institute allowed me to explore new approaches, challenge conventional wisdom, and contribute original insights to the discourse on international tribunals.

In retrospect, my time in the Netherlands was more than just an academic endeavor; it was a period of significant personal growth. I emerged from the experience with a deeper understanding of international law and a strengthened sense of confidence in my abilities as a researcher and professional. The skills and knowledge I gained have equipped me to tackle complex legal challenges with a balanced approach that combines rigorous analysis with practical considerations.

This transformative journey has reaffirmed my commitment to pursuing a career in international law, where I hope to continue contributing to the development of legal frameworks that promote justice and accountability on a global scale. The lessons I learned at the Asser Institute, along with my experiences in Venice and my leadership in the International Law Society, will undoubtedly guide me as I navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in my professional journey.



HUNDAOL HULUKA

Biomedical Engineering, '26

Hometown: Alemgena, Sebeta, Ethiopia

Project Location: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Hundaol volunteered at an Ethiopian orphanage for children with diabetes. She developed meal plans, arranged for winter clothing, and donated exercise equipment to the orphanage.

With the generous support of the Nicholas Humanitarian Fund, I had the opportunity to collaborate with the Alemgena Clinic and Alemgena Orphanage, a center dedicated to supporting orphans with diabetes. Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes among children in Ethiopia is escalating at an alarming rate. Exacerbated by a 28% inflation rate, many children struggle to adhere to recommended lifestyle changes, such as regular exercise and a proper diet. This challenge is particularly evident among the approximately 30 children residing in the Alemgena Orphanage who have been diagnosed with diabetes.

I was particularly drawn to working with children with diabetes due to my research experience at the Division of Diabetes, Endocrinology, and Metabolism in Dr. Ray Blind's lab. Until this summer, I had never interacted with children who have diabetes. I was eager to learn more about their lives and see how current research might be helping them.

Before starting the project, I was in continuous communication with the Alemgena Clinic and Orphanage. During our initial discussions, I proposed providing exercise equipment for the children, which they were happy to accept, mentioning that they could use all the help they could get.

However, after traveling to Ethiopia in May and being physically present at the site, I realized that what I thought they needed was different from what they actually needed. Providing exercise materials seemed inappropriate when there were more pressing needs, such as balanced food, clothing, and medication. This experience taught me an important lesson: always listen first. I learned that whenever I plan to volunteer and address a community's needs, I should keep an open mind and listen to their stories instead of assuming what they need.

After assessing the situation more closely, I decided to focus on what I believed were the most urgent needs: balanced food, clothing for the coming winter, and exercise materials. I conducted market research on affordable, nutritious food options. In collaboration with the financial

manager of the orphanage, we developed a meal plan to optimize the available budget for providing a balanced diet.

Although Ethiopia is near the equator, its high-altitude regions can experience temperatures dropping to 40 degrees Fahrenheit in winter. My next step was to provide winter clothing, which I successfully arranged for the children.

Finally, I decided to provide exercise equipment. With the support of the Nicholas Humanitarian Fund, I was able to supply the children with jump ropes, hula hoops, bicycles, a volleyball net and volleyball, and a soccer net and ball. By providing these items, I aimed to improve the children's mental and physical well-being through fun activities. I am confident that they will continue to use this equipment throughout their time at the orphanage.

One observation I made was that children above the age of six were monitoring their glucose levels using the finger-stick method by themselves. Although they are more than capable of doing this, I believe they shouldn't. Insulin patches were introduced in the US almost 10 years ago, yet no hospital in Ethiopia currently has them. This made me question the impact of my research and whether it will truly contribute to the well-being of my community. I feel a deep responsibility to give back to the community that has played such a significant role in allowing me to receive a world-class education. If I have the chance to work with them again, my primary focus will be introducing insulin patches to the orphanage. The thought of how am I contributing to my community at home is something I will continue to reflect on moving forward.



RINCON JAGARLAMUDI

Biochemistry & Chemical Biology, '25

Hometown: St. Louis, MO

Project Location: Nashville, TN

Rincon taught health education classes at Nashville summer camps.

This summer, I taught health education lessons at free or subsidized summer camps in the Nashville area. These lessons were created with the support of Hip Hop Public Health (HHPH), a non-profit I have been involved with for the last six years. During my freshman year, I launched the flagship site for HHPH's national ambassador program. We purposefully use hip-hop culture and music in lessons to resonate with the students we teach. To accomplish this, HHPH partners with musical artists like Doug E. Fresh, DMC, and Ashanti to create songs and music videos centered around important health habits and topics. For the past year, I have been working with the national HHPH team to design brand-new lesson toolkits that incorporate music videos, dance, and games. Many of our students come from communities of color that have been historically mistreated in medicine. In response, our educational process is centered on fostering trust. By dancing and singing along with students in classes, I aim to address the typical power imbalances in healthcare.

This summer, I hosted five different lessons at the Sevier Park Community Center and AAOC Camps for Youth Development. Through the two age categories at these camps, I reached 70 students in total. Our lessons cover topics like healthy eating, sugar consumption, diabetes, and even stroke recognition. We used several interactive activities to share this information. Instead of dull name games, the class followed a pattern of claps, pats, or snaps, creating a rhythm to learn each child's name. Instead of simply teaching how a stroke forms, students acted out the process—some were red blood cells, others represented the "clot buster drug." To introduce the concept of eating fruits and vegetables from all colors across the rainbow, we used a game of musical bingo where students were up and dancing.

The stipend provided through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund was vital to my efforts in educating the students in these programs. Part of the funding covered the cost of rideshare trips to the community centers. Additionally, the funds helped me purchase new audiovisual equipment like a projector system and speakers. This is incredibly helpful because some of our partner organizations and schools lack these resources.

Empowering students with crucial health information this past summer has opened my eyes to the health accessibility challenges these communities face. Through my conversations, I could authentically learn about their social determinants of health. These interactions provided me with a strong appreciation for community health efforts like food banks, hygiene cabinets, and community health workers. This perspective will certainly factor into my future career as a physician who intends to practice in community health centers.

My firsthand experiences with Hip Hop Public Health (HHPH) revealed the remarkable impact of authentically engaging with people directly in their communities. These experiences have made me a strong advocate of healthcare models like mobile health clinics and community health worker programs. Such initiatives can bring top-tier medical care directly to marginalized communities. To effectively champion community-based care, I intend to study healthcare policy and my medical training. This educational background will prepare me to utilize policy to become a physician advocate for underserved communities in healthcare.

I have created a student organization for Hip Hop Public Health at Vanderbilt that will continue the work I did this past summer. I am currently working with our executive board team to ensure everyone is prepared to continue leading these lessons in our Nashville partner schools. Also, I intend to create a new ambassador chapter for Hip Hop Public Health at my future medical school. I believe it is important for our future doctors to have opportunities to genuinely connect with their communities and its youth.



ANKIT JANAMANCHI

Applied Math, '26

Hometown: Canton, GA

Project Location: Japan

Ankit studied access to nutritious food in Japan by volunteering with Second Harvest Japan.

This past summer, I had the amazing opportunity to travel to Japan and immerse myself in the nation's rich culture. This was all made possible thanks to the generosity of the Nichols donors. Because of their gift, I was able to travel halfway across the world to work with one of the most innovative food banks in the world and gain a firsthand understanding of Japan's food culture.

My first day in the country held a myriad of new experiences for me. This was my first time flying internationally alone, as well as the first time I had ever checked into a hotel alone. I had given myself an extra day to recover from jetlag, but since I was feeling okay I instead set out into the city. My goal was to seek out a staple of modern Japanese food culture: the convenience store.

The hostel I was staying in was situated in the heart of Shibuya, one of Tokyo's busiest wards, so naturally I encountered a Family Mart immediately after stepping onto the street. Japan boasts one of the lowest obesity rates in the world among OCED countries, with Time Magazine reporting it as merely 4.5% earlier this year, compared to the US's 43%. Moreover, Japan's life expectancy eclipses the US's by over 8 years. Moreover, Japan holds one of the lowest food insecurity rates in the world, at around 3.4%, even despite an overall poverty rate of 15.4%.

I believe these statistics directly result from a rich food culture and affordable access to nutrition. That is where the convenience store comes into play. From my time wandering around Tokyo and Kyoto, I noticed a severe lack of fast food options or establishments. Instead, it seemed convenience stores such as 7/11 or Family Mart formed the backbone of supplying ready-to-eat food to Japan's vast working population. Although the foods in the store may not have been the healthiest, they were options with significantly less sugary and fatty than anything you may find in an American convenience store. However, this selection is complimented by a robust selection of more meal-esque options, such as various nigiris, cuts of fresh fish, and noodle/rice based bowls. These options offer quick access to vital nutrients, such as omega 3 fatty acids, crucial for maintaining heart health. Overall, the average 7/11 displays a wide sample of staple Japanese foods, all at very affordable prices (even adjusting for local wages).

While volunteering with Second Harvest, Tokyo's largest foodbank, I gained an even more in depth understanding of where Japan's food institutions still tend to fall short. Through conversations with the food bank's staff as well as one of my fellow volunteers, I learned about how one area of nutrition that is harder to come by are fruits and vegetables. This felt inline with my own experiences, as I had recalled seeing how much more expensive fresh fruit and vegetables had been compared to everything else at the grocery stores I had visited. Also volunteering at Second Harvest was another student from Northeastern University on a similar type of trip to Japan. She explained how although overall food insecurity statistics are low, they do not capture how certain subgroups of the population are disproportionately hit harder. A key example of this would be single mothers, of which a whopping 51% reportedly struggle with poverty. Many other groups outside of the normative family structure tend to also struggle with putting food on the table.

My experiences in Japan gave my an unparalleled insight into the institutions that govern food culture in one of the most important countries in the world. My trip has provided me with a new perspective on how my personal approach to food ought to be while also leaving me with more questions as to how the US can learn from Japan. Equitable access to nutritional food may be one of the central issues of our time and solving it leads to better social outcomes across the board. As a result of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I was equipped with the resources to take action on this issue and educate myself on the practices of a different culture.



FERHAN JEMAL

Engineering Science, '26

Hometown: Alexandria, VA

Project Location: Nashville, TN

Ferhan gave wheelchairs and blankets to the homeless in Nashville.

This summer, I took on a service learning project that turned out to be both challenging and incredibly fulfilling. My initial plan was to distribute electric wheelchairs to people in my community who have mobility issues. However, I quickly realized that transporting and maintaining these wheelchairs was more difficult than I had anticipated. So, I decided to shift my focus to providing manual wheelchairs instead, which allowed me to reach more people and make a more immediate impact. I spent most of my time walking around the community, directly interacting with homeless individuals who have visible walking disabilities. Along with the wheelchairs, I also handed out blankets for the cold nights and provided \$150 to help with their immediate needs.

Receiving the stipend this summer was crucial in broadening my perspective. The financial support meant I could fully focus on the project without worrying about expenses, and it also showed me the importance of direct, hands-on work. Before this project, I understood issues like homelessness and disability from a more theoretical standpoint, but this experience brought those issues to life for me in a much more personal way. I came to realize the unique challenges these individuals face and how important it is to focus on community-based solutions.

One of the most meaningful parts of this experience was the mutual learning that happened between me and the people I was serving. Each interaction was a chance to exchange knowledge and experiences. I learned a lot about their struggles, hopes, and how they ended up in their current situations. Their stories of resilience really moved me and gave me a new appreciation for the complexities of living with poverty and disability. In return, I was able to offer more than just material support—I provided emotional support and practical advice based on my own experiences. I made a conscious effort to listen more than I talked, which helped me understand their needs better and respond in ways that actually made a difference. For example, I provided two other individuals with wheelchairs, but they didn't want to be pictured, which made me more aware of respecting people's privacy and dignity.

As the project went on, I saw a lot of growth in my own goals and skills. At first, I was mainly focused on delivering material aid, but I soon realized that building relationships and understanding the broader context of each person's life was just as important. My communication skills improved as I learned to connect with people from vastly different backgrounds. I also became better at problem-solving on the spot, whether it was finding additional resources or adjusting my approach to better serve the individuals I was helping.

Looking ahead, I'm planning to continue this work beyond the summer. The relationships I've built and the impact I've seen have really motivated me to keep supporting my community. I'm currently looking into partnering with local organizations to make sure the work I started can continue and grow. By working with community centers and other groups, I hope to create a network of support that not only provides wheelchairs and blankets but also connects people to other essential services like healthcare and housing assistance. If, for some reason, I can't continue this work directly, I'm committed to making sure these connections and resources remain available to those who need them.

Reflecting on the experience, there are a few things I would do differently if I could plan the project again. While I'm glad I made the switch to manual wheelchairs, I wish I had recognized the need earlier so I could have started more efficiently. I also would have sought out partnerships with local organizations right from the start, instead of waiting until later in the project. This would have helped me reach more people sooner and provided a stronger support system for those I was helping. However, I would definitely keep the focus on building personal connections. The time I spent sitting down with individuals, listening to their stories, and treating them with dignity and respect was, without a doubt, the most impactful part of the project.

In conclusion, this summer's service learning project has been a life-changing experience for me. The Nichols Humanitarian Fund made this work possible and also helped me grow as a person. I've gained a deeper understanding of global issues, developed new skills, and formed meaningful connections within my community. As I move forward, I'm committed to continuing this work and making a lasting impact on the lives of those who need it most.



GRACE JONES

Engineering Science, Chemistry, and Mathematics, '25

Hometown: Knoxville, TN

Project Location: Cochabamba, Bolivia

Grace volunteered with an NGO that provides medical supplies to poor communities in Bolivia.

This summer I had the incredible opportunity to work with Mano a Mano International (MaM) in Cochabamba, Bolivia. MaM is one of five counterpart organizations devoted to improving health and well-being across Bolivia through its three main components: the Center for Ecological Agriculture (CEA) for teaching sustainable agricultural practices, physical therapy primarily for youth with physical disabilities, and a medical supplies warehouse redistributing excess US medical supplies to medical centers across Bolivia. My work sought to further what I built out last year at MaM through the Ingram Scholars Program.

My first week focused on more direct service among MaM's three components, particularly with medical supply donations. From there, my work mainly centered around:

- Developing weekly bulletins to inform MaM constituents of important weekly updates in an engaging manner. Distributed weekly on MaM's social media, website, and emails to stakeholders with videos receiving up to 1.6k views.
- Filming and producing a 14 video series summarizing workshops at the CEA—7 videos in Spanish and 7 in Quechua—from organic fungicides to Bokashi composting.
- Interviewing and writing articles on 2 CEA interns who became employees for publication on MaM's website.
- Filming and putting English subtitles to 6 video interviews with various MaM staff and volunteers at MaM for website and social media publication.
- Further developing a data management system developed last year to facilitate better documentation of important events at MaM.
- Creating an outline of a booklet for distributing information on MaM's medical supply donations for future development.

Sustainability was a large focus. Firstly, I revisited my work from last year to update a brochure and put English subtitles to several videos I produced last year to allow for broader sharing. Though there remain areas for improvement, it was immensely encouraging to see much of the

work I did last year still in place. Beyond brochures I made being hung up in the main office, the data tracking system I developed last year—the component I was most concerned about sustaining—had been developed for much wider use. The nature of my work should encourage sustainability with the videos having continued applicability in the future. I further created documents that compiled links to all relevant other materials. My final day the director hired someone for an inaugural marketing position, which will allow continued development of my work with all templates and past materials editable in shared repositories. Another change was being in closer contact with MaM's US counterpart. This allowed me to tailor my work to the most useful tasks and ensure that the method of organizing and sharing materials will best support MaM in the long term.

My final in-person conversation with my supervisor made me reflect strongly on my global perspective change and skill development. I have such a great respect, admiration, and appreciation for Bolivian culture that has been so graciously shared with me. I am further returning with immense gratitude for opportunities that surround me, particularly at Vanderbilt, and a responsibility to continually reflect on how to maximize opportunities and pursue work with such a meaningful impact. My entire project was based upon reciprocal learning with the community as I absolutely could not have done this project without their investment and trust in me. Each person I interviewed was an expert in his/her area, and I merely served as a vehicle to share that more broadly while learning directly from each person's expertise. Moreover, I learned a significant amount exchanging perspectives with various individuals in Cochabamba from friends to many whom I consider mentors. I saw various skills evolve from confidence navigating trufis/micros (public transportation) to finding a system that best worked with CEA staff for recording and producing videos among much more.

I have very few—if any—regrets about how I spent my time throughout my project. I feel I maximized the time I could be at MaM, and I tried to maximize my impact at the organization. The only things I may change would be initially setting out additional ideas for tasks that could help MaM. Though I don't know if there would have been time, there is a possibility that I could have further developed the medical supplies booklet beyond ideation alongside other smaller tasks mentioned in my final week.

As everyone gathered for my send-off on my final day, my supervisor shared that of the up to 200-300+ volunteers MaM has received in the last 10+ years, he believes me to be "the best" volunteer and that the impact of my work will continue for a long time. This is not being shared as a source of bragging in any sense, but rather as a piece of gratitude for the Nichols Fund to permit me to contribute to such meaningful work in what I truly hope will have a long-term impact at this incredible organization.



KAI KELTNER

Math and Public Policy, '26

Hometown: Davis, CA; Kyoto, Japan

Project Location: Japan

Kai volunteered with an NGO that provides mental health and suicide prevention services to Japan's international community.

This Summer, my project partner, Lily, and I traveled to Japan to collaborate with the Tokyo English Life Life (TELL Japan), a nonprofit organization that provides a suite of mental health support resources and counseling services to the international community in Japan. As someone who grew up in a multiracial household in Japan for ten years, I was eager to provide my cultural background and youth-oriented perspectives to support this dynamic organization.

We initially began our project partnership with a goal of spreading awareness about TELL's breadth of services and advocacy efforts to university students. Lily and I compiled a comprehensive leads list of student organizations to contact at over 40 universities, with a focus on reaching out to psychology, mental health advocacy, and affinity groups. We then conducted in-person visits to college campuses and held virtual meetings with these student leaders, pitching TELL's organizational activities and building the foundation for partnerships with TELL for the following semester. Our visits enabled us to reach hundreds of Japanese and international students at universities across the country, from Waseda University in the heart of Tokyo to Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University on the southern island of Kyushu. We were overwhelmed by the amount of interest and support for TELL that we received from the members of these organizations. Following these initiatives, TELL Japan recently hired a full-time outreach intern to continue building on the foundation we began.

While speaking and interacting with TELL's team members throughout the duration of our project, we gained a deeper understanding of the status quo of mental health support and legislation in Japan. Having grown up in Japan, I was well aware of the high rates of suicide, stigma surrounding mental health treatment, and the challenges associated with the country's unique corporate work culture. As we developed a deeper understanding of the country's recent responses to mental health support, a member of the TELL board asked for us to conduct some primary source research to find government grants used to fund psychological services organizations. This ultimately led to the start of a research project in collaboration with TELL and faculty from the Asian Studies Department at Vanderbilt University. This project aims to analyze

the outcomes of various government ministries' policy responses to growing mental health awareness and advocacy efforts. Our goal is to compile a comprehensive systematic review of the mental health policy landscape in Japan, and share our findings with other psychological services nonprofits, government ministries, and academic policy circles.

Although I have spent half of my life in Japan, the Nichols Humanitarian Fund award also enabled us to explore far-flung corners of the country and its distinct regional cultures. My prior trips around Japan had mostly consisted of visiting famous tourist sites or the hometowns of family friends, but our visits to various universities took us to smaller cities and neighborhoods that I had never traveled to before. Interacting with students at these universities and getting to know their local environments further enabled me to see firsthand the unique lifestyles, values, and traditions of my fellow Japanese peers living in different regions of the country, as well as the lifestyles of my fellow multiracial and multilingual peers. These invaluable experiences broadened my understanding and appreciation of the diverse populations that exist in Japan today.

Looking back on this experience, I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to work with such a dedicated organization and to have met so many compassionate, like-minded peers from all across the country. Working with an organization at the grassroots level solidified my commitment to empathy, community building, and impact-driven action in my future endeavors. Meeting so many of my peers and engaging with primary Japanese texts also helped to further reconnect me with my home country and its communities. I hope to continue to work with TELL for the coming months and continue to build on the incredible relationships that were formed.



SRIDATTA KODAVATIGANTI

Economics; Human & Organizational Development, '26
Hometown: Frisco, TX
Project Location: Mysore, India

Sridatta volunteered with an NGO that preserves the beauty and heritage of Mysore, India.

This summer, I had the privilege of embarking on a service learning project in Mysore, India, supported by a stipend from the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. My main focus was on environmental sustainability initiatives, particularly the seed bomb project aimed at reforesting the local hills with figs, guava, and custard apple trees. This effort was in collaboration with Natureal, the environmental restoration arm of partnered with Namma Mysore Foundation, my partner organization. Our goal was not only to enhance the local ecosystem but also to engage the community in sustainable practices.

Receiving the stipend significantly broadened my global perspective. Before my arrival in Mysore, my understanding of environmental challenges was largely theoretical, confined to classroom discussions and academic literature. Immersing myself in the local environment, where the impacts of deforestation and environmental neglect are visible, transformed my abstract knowledge into a reality. This firsthand experience underscored the global interconnectedness of environmental issues and reinforced the urgency of community-based sustainability efforts.

Throughout the project, there was a constant exchange of knowledge and ideas between myself and the local community. I introduced more structured project management techniques and the concept of data-driven decision-making to monitor the growth and success of the planted seed bombs. Conversely, I learned from the community about local planting techniques and the local ecology, which are crucial for the sustainability of the reforestation efforts. This mutual learning ensured that the project was culturally respectful and environmentally appropriate.

Personally, my goals and skills underwent significant transformation. Initially, my objective was to apply my academic knowledge in a real-world context. However, as the project progressed, I realized the importance of flexibility and cultural sensitivity in leadership. Leading a diverse team, especially one that included members older than myself, honed my leadership skills and taught me the value of humility and adaptability. These skills proved vital not only in navigating the challenges of the project but also in fostering an environment of mutual respect and collaboration.

Looking forward, I am committed to continuing the work that began this summer. I plan to maintain contact with the local team in Mysore and offer remote support. Additionally, I aim to use this experience to advocate for more such sustainable practices in other regions through workshops and presentations in the future in the Karnataka region. For the Mysore project, I have prepared detailed documentation and training materials for the local team to ensure the sustainability of the initiatives we started.

If I were to plan my project again, one of the main things I would change is the initial scope. I would include a more comprehensive analysis of potential weather-related disruptions to better prepare for unforeseen challenges. However, I would keep the collaborative approach intact, as it was crucial in blending external innovations with local knowledge, ensuring the project's success and relevance.

This experience has not only been transformative for my personal and professional growth but has also solidified my commitment to humanitarian work. It has reshaped my understanding of the impact one individual can have and has ignited a lifelong passion for service and environmental stewardship.



ELIZABETH LAMB

English and Secondary Education, '27

Hometown: Roswell, GA

Project Location: Agadir, Morocco

Elizabeth taught English to French and Arabic speaking middle school students in Morocco.

I had the absolute honor and blessing of spending 3 weeks in Agadir, Morocco teaching middle school students English in an English immersion summer camp. I pursued this trip through ELIC (English Language Institute China), which is an organization that partners with schools and educational programs to provide native English speakers to teach non-speakers. This organization had ties with The International University of Agadir, through which the summer camp program was hosted. In this program, there were three classes that each held a different level of English speakers. I taught the middle level class, which included students with ranging levels of English proficiency. In my classroom, I had the help of an intern, who was a French and Arabic speaking university student.

Overall, this experience was incredibly culturally enriching, and it altered the way that I view my way of life as well as the ways that others experience their reality. This trip exposed to me to culture that was vastly different from my own, which gave me new appreciation for my own freedoms especially. In Morocco, the male-female dynamics and interactions are significantly different from what they are in the United States, and women are treated as much inferior to men. The patriarchy is much more dominant in their culture, which leaves women more oppressed than they are in the US. Witnessing this enabled me to gain a deeper appreciation for the rights and freedoms that I have here. Not only this, but spending time in this culture exposed me to ways of life and qualities of life that differ from my own, which broadened my cultural understanding.

One of the most significant and impactful parts of my trip was the relationships that I formed not only with my students, but also with my intern. Working with my intern was an incredible experience, and she taught me so much about Moroccan culture, values, and ways of life. Not only this, but her work ethic was both impressive and incredibly inspiring as well. In addition to my intern, my students taught me a lot about Moroccan culture as well. We had enriching conversations about Moroccan customs and traditions and the values that Morocco operates on. It is my sincere hope that I not only taught them English skills that they can apply to their

speaking and comprehension, but I also hope that my lessons broadened their understanding of American culture and traditions.

From this trip I gained many valuable skills and insights. As someone who is currently studying secondary education and English, this experience only heightened my excitement and desire to teach. I also learned how to effectively lesson plan, and I improved my teaching skills as well. However, it confirmed for me that teaching middle school students is not where my calling lies.

If I could plan my project again, there are few things that I would change, as I felt like the experience overall was near perfect, and the imperfections made it memorable. While there were many uncertainties in the beginning, they were quickly ironed out, and by the second or third day of camp, I felt comfortable with teaching and most of the uncertainties were resolved. One aspect that I would keep the same would be the team that I worked with in teaching and lesson planning. They were such incredible people, and I was able to form really special relationships with them. One thing that I would change would be to create more opportunities to get to know my intern at the beginning of the project. I feel like I developed a meaningful bond with my intern, but this did not occur until the final days of my project, so I think spending more time with her early on would have been valuable.

Seeing as my trip was so impactful for me in terms of the experience, learning, and memories that I made, I sincerely hope to pursue another similar project in the near future. The influence that I had on my students also fuels my desire to continue serving in this capacity. On the last day of camp, my students told me that I was “the best teacher ever” and that they would miss me very much. While I am not able to invest in the project that I completed anymore, it is my hope that I will be able to serve in a similar capacity, perhaps in a different location, in the future.



AARON LI

Mathematics; Computer Science, '26

Hometown: Portland, OR

Project Location: Brooklyn, NY

Aaron created an online learning portal for New York City students.

This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to work with Building Beats, a hip-hop-based education non-profit in New York City. My role involved developing a web portal that connects students to Building Beats' online courses, enabling them to learn asynchronously. Working from May 6 to June 28, 2024, I was deeply immersed in this project, collaborating closely with the organization to create a user-friendly and sustainable platform.

At Building Beats, I focused on building a web portal that could seamlessly connect students with various online music production courses. This required me to design the site using Figma, conduct user interviews to gather branding and design insights, and develop the portal with a sustainable architecture. The portal features advanced filtering and search capabilities, making it easier for students to find courses that suit their interests and skill levels. Additionally, I created detailed documentation to ensure that the staff could maintain and update the site without requiring extensive technical expertise.

Throughout the project, I engaged in collaborative learning with the Building Beats community. By conducting user interviews and focus groups, I gained valuable insights into the students' needs and preferences. This iterative feedback process not only improved the portal's design but also deepened my understanding of the community's challenges and aspirations. In turn, I shared my technical knowledge with the staff, empowering them to manage the web portal independently. This exchange of knowledge fostered a collaborative environment where both parties learned and grew together.

Receiving the Nichols Humanitarian Fund stipend was instrumental in broadening my global perspective. Working with a diverse group of students and educators in New York City exposed me to the power of music and technology in bridging cultural and social gaps. I witnessed firsthand how access to educational resources can transform lives, providing students with skills that extend beyond the classroom and into their future careers. This experience underscored the importance of creating inclusive and accessible learning opportunities, a lesson that I will carry with me in my future endeavors.

My goals and skills evolved significantly over the course of the summer. Initially, my primary objective was to develop a functional and user-friendly web portal. However, as I delved deeper into the project, I realized the importance of sustainability and scalability in technology solutions. I learned to design with the future in mind, ensuring that the portal could adapt to changes in learning management systems and continue to serve the community effectively.

Moreover, the project enhanced my technical skills, particularly in web development and user-centered design. I also honed my communication and teamwork abilities, as I regularly engaged with Building Beats staff and students to gather feedback and make iterative improvements. This collaborative approach not only improved the final product but also strengthened my ability to work effectively in diverse and dynamic environments.

Looking ahead, I plan to continue supporting Building Beats by staying connected with the organization and offering volunteer support when possible. I believe that ongoing engagement is crucial for the sustained success of the project. Additionally, I have prepared the community to maintain the work by providing comprehensive documentation and training sessions. This ensures that the staff can independently manage the portal and make necessary updates, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment within the organization.

If I could plan the project again, I would maintain the focus on user-centered design and sustainability. However, I would allocate more time for broader testing and feedback sessions to identify potential issues early on. This would involve engaging a larger group of users to ensure that the portal meets the diverse needs of the entire community. Additionally, I would explore opportunities for integrating the portal with other educational tools and platforms, enhancing its functionality and reach.

In conclusion, my experience with Building Beats, supported by the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, has been transformative. It has enriched my global perspective, fostered personal and professional growth, and reinforced the importance of creating sustainable and inclusive educational solutions. I am grateful for this opportunity and look forward to continuing my journey in making a positive impact through technology and education.



DANIEL LIU

Biomedical Engineering, '26

Hometown: Hometown, IN

Project Location: Nashville, TN

Daniel created an organization that provides free transportation for Vanderbilt students to visit hospice patients.

Over the summer, I stayed in Nashville, Tennessee, to create and launch an organization called Vanderbilt Peace of Mind, which I intend to continue year-round. The organization aims to address the chronic shortage of hospice workers by coordinating with AliveHospice, a nonprofit that sends volunteers to thousands of patient homes and assisted living facilities. As part of this effort, I established a RideShare program that offers free Uber rides to Vanderbilt students volunteering at these sites, making it easier for them to participate any day of the week.

Even with the smaller population of Vanderbilt students on campus over the summer, the program made a significant impact. I tracked over 20 rides to and from volunteering sites, totaling more than 50 hours of service, with many students volunteering on a regular weekly basis. Collectively, we covered over 150 miles, and impressively, these activities used only about 10% of our budget. By the end of the year, I anticipate the program will generate over 500 hours of volunteer time, not including my own contributions.

Personally, I volunteered over 100 hours during the summer, visiting six different patients. My responsibilities included light cleaning, organizing, small repairs, and playing music. However, the most important role I played was simply engaging in long conversations with patients, showing a genuine interest in hearing their life stories. During these visits, I had the privilege of meeting Holocaust survivors, Korean War veterans, former musicians, athletes, art collectors, and more. These encounters revealed a beautiful tapestry of life experiences and allowed me to connect deeply with individuals through our shared humanity.

Another significant aspect of our service is the sense of relief we provide to the families of hospice patients. Often, family members who are primary caregivers neglect their own needs while caring for their loved ones. I've received multiple letters and texts from families who were able to take time for themselves—whether to run errands, get groceries, or even visit a spa—knowing that a kind volunteer was keeping their loved one company. This indirect support for families is a vital part of our mission and reinforces the importance of the work we're doing.

Looking ahead, I am committed to sustaining and expanding this organization. I plan to utilize the remaining NHF budget and apply for Vanderbilt Club Funding to ensure the program continues once those funds are depleted. Additionally, the volunteer director team at AliveHospice has asked me to train another student to manage the club after I graduate, ensuring its continuity for years to come.

One area I plan to improve is the tracking of our volunteering statistics. Currently, volunteers fill out a Google form indicating their travel distance and volunteer hours. I want to expand this system to include additional metrics, such as the time it takes for a volunteer to accept a patient case after it's requested. This data will help measure how much our free transportation program is reducing hospice response times in the Davidson County area, which is a critical indicator of our program's success. I am committed to implementing this system to further enhance the impact of Vanderbilt Peace of Mind.



SOPHIA LOPEZ

Climate Studies; Human & Organizational Development, '25

Hometown: Tucson, AZ

Project Location: Livingstone, Zambia

Sophia worked to reduce the amount and negative impact of plastic waste in Livingstone, Zambia.

This summer, I had the opportunity to volunteer with African Impact on their Waste Reduction project in Livingstone, Zambia. There is no waste management system in place there, and as a result, people often resort to burying trash, burning it in large piles, or simply leaving it on the streets. This leads to a noticeable buildup of waste in public spaces and schools. A key focus of the project was reducing waste accumulation at schools.

The waste reduction program tackles plastic pollution in Livingstone primarily through Ecobricking, a sustainable building method that involves filling plastic bottles with other plastic waste to create durable “bricks.” This reduces the need for traditional cement bricks and also helps remove plastic from the environment. To make an ecobrick, you tightly pack plastic waste into a bottle using a stick and then use these bottles as building blocks for various structures. Ecobricking impressed me as an innovative and eco-friendly solution to plastic pollution. During my volunteering, I helped build tree rings and benches at schools. The benches were my favorite project because once they were completed, the kids would come out and sit on them, play games, and have a new spot to chat with friends. It was rewarding to see our ecobrick construction put to practical use.

Another major aspect of the program, which I hadn’t anticipated, was teaching. After spending 3-4 hours ecobricking in the mornings, I would head back to the schools to teach students of various ages, depending on the teachers’ needs. At many of the schools we visited, I was the first white person many of the children had ever seen, which made them naturally curious and eager to learn about me and what I had to say. The teachers were always gracious and expressed how much it meant for the children to have new people come in and teach. Knowing that I was contributing to their education, even in a small way, gave me a new perspective on the impact of volunteers.

Although I was the “teacher” in the classroom, I learned far more from the students and the community than I could have ever taught them. Living in Zambia immersed me in a culture with a fundamentally different worldview. In the schools where I spent my time, most students faced

significant economic hardships—unreliable access to food and even water on some days. Yet, despite these challenges, the children were some of the most joyful, respectful, and eager-to-learn individuals I've ever met. What struck me most was how their sense of happiness and community wasn't tied to material wealth, which is often the lens through which fulfillment is measured in the West.

This experience showed me how transformative cultural immersion can be. It allows us to step outside our own worldview and understand that other perspectives are just as valid, even if they challenge what we've internalized. From the Zambians I lived and worked with, I learned that contentment comes from relationships, resilience, and a deep connection to community. Being surrounded by people with this mindset was invaluable because it made me reconsider my own ideas about happiness. It's why intercultural exchange is so powerful—it helps us rethink what we believe to be true and opens our minds to new ways of understanding the world.

To the Nichols family, thank you so much for your generous support. You allowed me to have an unforgettable experience that has broadened my perspective and deepened my understanding of global issues. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to gain new insights and grow in ways I never imagined.

I'd like to end by sharing a story that I quite enjoy telling. One day, I visited a kindergarten class during recess. The children were shy, and since English is typically learned at a later age in Zambia, many of the kindergartners couldn't verbally communicate with me. So, I began playing games with them, and they especially loved it when I made circles with my hands and put them over my eyes like binoculars. The next day, I was building with ecobricks outside a kindergarten class. When about 50 kids came out as school ended, they quickly noticed me and waved and smiled. Remembering how much the kids enjoyed the binocular gesture, I did it again. When I removed my hands, I saw 50 kindergartners all doing the same thing, smiling, pointing, and laughing right back at me. This moment showed me that joy transcends language barriers, and it is a reminder that connection is universal. We often think words are needed to create understanding, but sometimes it's the shared, wordless gestures that have the most lasting impact. That simple interaction will always remind me of the power of human connection, regardless of where we come from or what language we speak.



AYUSH MADHAR

BME and MHS, '26

Hometown: Fort Myers, FL

Project Location: Japan

Ayush worked with local volunteers to make repairs and improvements to a school in Japan.

This summer, I focused on reconstruction work at a school in Japan. I worked with local volunteers and other international participants to build cabinets, book stands, and various other items to enhance the learning environment for the students. The premises of the project were to create a more organized and welcoming space for the children to learn and grow. On top of the already rewarding construction work, I had the opportunity to interact with many of the school children, doing things like playing sports or just talking to them. These interactions were particularly meaningful and enjoyable for me as they allowed me to see firsthand the impact of my work. Like many activities in Japan, the workdays started later in the afternoon and often continued into the night.

My global perspective was impacted by receiving this summer stipend. It allowed me to travel and experience the world beyond my immediate surroundings, allowing me to realize how vast and interconnected the world is. In addition to this I learned what a privilege it is to have been born in and lived in the U.S. as the value of the U.S. dollar became especially clear during my travels. This only further highlighted the economic disparities throughout the world and lack of resources around the world only furthering my motivation to help people that need it.

One experience that stood out to me is the length of the journey to Japan. The cheapest flight option was supposed to take 20 hours and involved two connections; however, due to unexpected circumstances, I had to make an overnight layover, making the trip take over 40 hours. This layover forced me to stay in the airport overnight, as no hotel was provided. That in itself was an experience that made me feel bad for the hundreds of people that have to do it every day. Also, during this time, I observed countless people from all areas of life, which really put into perspective just how large the world is and how small my role is within it. This among other things has led my perspective to shift. In my everyday life it's easy to have a strong sense of control circumstances, whether it's getting a Starbucks order fixed or managing daily tasks. This sense of control can create an illusion of importance. However, my travel experience helped me to realize how on a global scale, I am just one individual among many and my individual

significance is much smaller than it often feels. This has motivated me to aspire to be a greater influence and significance, knowing that each small action can feel like a big one to others just as I felt as a big part of the world.

There was a lot of collaborative learning and between me and the community I served in Japan. One of the most valuable lessons I learned from them was the importance of respect in daily interactions. In Japan I observed how small gestures like holding the door for someone or expressing gratitude are not just common courtesies but big parts of the culture. These simple acts which require little effort have a significant and impact on those who receive them. This was a powerful reminder of how respect and kindness can lead to a positive and welcoming environment. On the other hand, the community learned from me about Western culture. Many of the children and other volunteers were curious about whether certain stereotypes they had heard were true. I enjoyed sharing insights and clearing up misconceptions. These exchanges allowed for a deeper understanding on both sides, enlightening differences and similarities between our cultures leading to a greater appreciation of both cultures.

While my skills and goals didn't change too much during my service trip the experience played a big role in not only reinforcing but also motivating my commitment to my existing goals. One of my primary goals has always been to help people and make the world a better place through even one action at a time. This trip reaffirmed the importance of this mission for me and strengthened my resolve to continue pursuing my goal.

If I could plan my project again, I would keep almost everything the same, as many aspects of the project were successful and impactful. The one thing I would change is my flight. While the indirect flight I took served as a valuable learning experience, it was very draining. A direct flight would have been much shorter, around 13 hours instead of 20 hours and would have been more convenient. This small change would have helped me maximize my effectiveness during the project.



BAILEY MCCALLISTER

Human and Organizational Development, '25

Hometown: Maple Valley, WA

Project Location: Ollantaytambo, Peru

Bailey helped women artisans in rural Peru market their textile products and utilize responsible cultural tourism to benefit their businesses.

My time volunteering with Awamaki in Ollantaytambo, Peru was nothing short of transformative and pivotal to my personal and professional development. The generous stipend from the Nichols family allowed me to learn and grow in a culturally rich environment that I otherwise would not have been able to experience. This experience broadened my horizons and deepened my appreciation for the rich tapestry of human cultures and the importance of preserving them.

Nestled in the heart of Ollantaytambo, Awamaki partners with eight women-led, rural, Andean artisan cooperatives to provide training and market access. At its core, the purpose of our work is to create sustainable economic opportunities for Indigenous women artisans in Peru and to support their financial independence, so they have the resources they need to invest in themselves and their families' wellness. This mission resonated deeply with me, and I felt honored to contribute to such a noble cause.

As a sustainable tourism volunteer, I was allowed to collaborate with local female artisans, community leaders, and other volunteers. My primary role involved learning and helping to preserve traditional weaving techniques, which are critical to the cultural heritage of Indigenous tribes in the Andes. These weaving techniques are not just a means of creating beautiful textiles; they are a vital link to the history, identity, and survival of these communities. Through this work, I gained a profound understanding of the intricate patterns and the stories they tell, reflecting centuries of tradition and wisdom passed down through generations.

Practicing my Spanish in a variety of environments was another significant aspect of my volunteer work. Engaging in daily conversations with artisans, community members, and fellow volunteers allowed me to improve my language skills and gain confidence in my ability to communicate effectively. More importantly, I had the opportunity to learn how to speak basic Quechua, a language spoken by the indigenous tribes in the Andes. Quechua is not just a means of communication; it is a vital part of the cultural identity and heritage of the Andean people.

Learning this language was a humbling experience, as it allowed me to connect more deeply with the communities I was working with and to appreciate the richness of their linguistic heritage.

In addition to enhancing my Spanish and Quechua vocabulary, I also worked 1-2 shifts per week at the Awamaki storefront. This experience was invaluable in teaching me how to navigate language and cultural barriers while marketing handwoven products. Each interaction with customers provided an opportunity to share the stories behind the products and the artisans who created them. My original goal when arriving in Ollantaytambo was to immerse myself in as many cultural environments as possible, and this was easy to achieve given I was living in the center of town, working at a storefront, and visiting multiple indigenous communities around the greater Cusco area. Each day brought new experiences and learning opportunities, from participating in local festivals to visiting remote villages and witnessing firsthand the daily lives of the artisans.

Aside from working at the Awamaki storefront, I was also assisting with Marketing and Communications responsibilities, including creating the 2024 Awamaki Lookbook. This comprehensive catalog outlines all the products and services that can be purchased from wholesalers. It was fascinating to dive deeper into the business side of a nonprofit organization and to understand the strategies involved in promoting and sustaining such initiatives. Working on the Lookbook was an impactful project that will be of help to Awamaki for the remainder of the year. It provided me with practical skills in marketing, design, and communication, and gave me a sense of accomplishment knowing that my work would have a lasting impact.

Reflecting on my time with Awamaki, I realize how much I have grown both personally and professionally. The experience taught me the value of cultural preservation, the importance of sustainable economic development, and the power of language in bridging cultural divides. It also reinforced my commitment to supporting initiatives that empower marginalized communities and promote social justice. The skills and insights I gained during my volunteer work will undoubtedly shape my future endeavors, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have been a part of such a meaningful project.



MADELINE O'KEEFE

Engineering Science, '26

Hometown: Mill Valley, CA

Project Location: Iceland

Madeline made a documentary about how climate change is affecting Iceland.

This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to participate in a multifaceted service learning project in Iceland, generously supported by the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. Alongside a fellow Vanderbilt student, we captured footage for a short documentary on the local impacts of climate change and the clean energy transition in Iceland. I witnessed remarkable community resilience and innovative solutions to various challenges, ranging from the aftermath of a community's volcanic eruption-driven evacuation to the economic struggles in remote regions. Fully immersed in Icelandic life, this deeply enriching and fulfilling experience broadened my perspective on addressing global environmental and humanitarian issues equitably and efficiently.

Throughout the project, my goals expanded from understanding the impacts of climate change and clean energy practices on local communities to considering how I can apply the insights gained from this immersion to my work on the clean energy transition in the US. I began to see how these practices intersect with social, economic, and environmental factors, reshaping my view of global environmental issues and the importance of community-centered approaches. My filmmaking skills improved significantly, particularly in conducting interviews and capturing the essence of a story. I also developed a greater sensitivity to the nuances of cultural exchange, learning to approach each interaction with a deeper respect for the community's knowledge and experiences.

I began my service in Grindavík, a small coastal fishing town in Southern Iceland known for its fishing industry and proximity to the Blue Lagoon. In this area, a lagoon containing about 1.5 million gallons of geothermal seawater attracts a population of tourists three times that of Iceland, a striking statistic that puts Iceland's high dependency on the travel industry into perspective. I learned about the impacts of a nearby volcanic eruption, volcano Þorbjörn. The local community was completely evacuated, and I learned about their tenacity in the face of this extraordinary and devastating natural event. The resilience of communities facing volcanic and climatic challenges underscored the complex ways these natural events shape and test local adaptability.

Next, I went to Hafnar Haus, a dynamic creative hub in Reykjavík, where I encountered a thriving ecosystem of over 250 innovators. I explored different entrepreneurial ventures aimed at benefiting local and rural communities in Iceland, as well as sustainable start-ups. Namely, I interviewed

organizations East of Moon and Melta. East of Moon focuses on community-centered innovation, aiming to address societal challenges through creativity and collaborative efforts. Inspired by Comte de Lautréamont's philosophy, the organization values collective creativity and impactful change over individual success. Their labs work on mission-oriented innovation, rural and remote development, creativity as work, and artistic production. Their projects range from fostering rural innovation ecosystems and developing software for community-driven solutions to creating platforms for Arctic communities and producing documentaries and podcasts on creativity and collaboration. Melta offers a circular solution for waste management in rural areas by transforming food waste into nutrient-rich fertilizer, Meltan. Addressing the high waste management costs faced by rural communities and the issue of soil degradation, Melta combines efficient collection with a user-friendly sorting system and local fermentation in micro-breweries. Their approach reduces costs and emissions by 70% while providing a cleaner, safer, and odorless way to process waste.

While these companies and organizations approached social and environmental issues with different specific missions, they all shared a commitment to prioritizing local voices and crafting solutions specifically tailored to address micro-challenges. This approach stood in stark contrast to the more centralized, broad-stroke innovation strategies I have seen in the United States. Overall, the Hafnar Haus is more than just a workspace; it is a microcosm of Iceland's broader commitment to localized humanitarian efforts, sustainable development, and creative entrepreneurship.

I also visited the Hellisheiði Geothermal Plant and the Fljótsdalur Power Station, witnessing Iceland's advanced energy infrastructure firsthand. The Hellisheiði plant, a major player in Iceland's energy landscape, utilizes cutting-edge technology, including the Orca carbon capture and storage project, capturing CO₂ from the air and storing it underground. This innovative approach is a testament to Iceland's leadership in the global clean energy transition. Furthermore, I visited the Fljótsdalur Power Station, Iceland's largest underground hydropower plant, and had the opportunity to interview Yngvi Gudmundsson, Chief Engineer at HS Orka, enriching my understanding of Iceland's geothermal energy. Gudmundsson's insights into geothermal plant optimization and process flow analysis highlighted why Iceland is exceptionally suited for geothermal energy production.

Iceland's unique geological and climatic conditions make it exceptionally well-suited for geothermal and hydroelectric energy. Situated atop the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates meet, Iceland experiences significant volcanic activity that generates ample geothermal resources. This heat is harnessed for a variety of applications, from heating homes to generating electricity, thanks to the advanced technology used in power plants like those at Hellisheiði and Fljótsdalur. Additionally, Iceland's mountainous terrain and abundant glaciers, rivers, and waterfalls provide a steady flow of water, making it ideal for hydroelectric power generation. The Fljótsdalur Power Station, for example, utilizes these water resources to generate substantial electricity. The combination of geothermal and hydroelectric power enables Iceland to maintain a predominantly renewable energy grid, supporting its energy needs while aligning with its commitment to sustainability and reducing carbon emissions.

I stayed at a nearly century-old farm in Fljótsdalshreppur, getting a glimpse into the Icelandic way of life

that has remained relatively unchanged for generations. The simplicity and ruggedness of rural Icelandic life offered a stark contrast to the more modern and bustling environments I had visited earlier. Locals told me about the negative impact of a nearby hydroelectric dam on the local reindeer population, shining a new light on the energy transition. It was eye-opening to see firsthand how large-scale infrastructure projects, even those aimed at producing clean energy, can have significant and sometimes unintended consequences on wildlife and local ecosystems and economies. Overall, I learned that there is such a delicate balance between progress and preservation.

One particularly memorable experience was crossing the Jökulsá í Fljótssdal River on a pulley-operated suspension bridge, a method dating back to the 1600s. Installed in 2014 by Ásgeir Jónasson with support from the Icelandic Wilderness Center, this cable ferry connects the farms of Glúmsstaðasel and Kleif. The experience showcased the resourcefulness and resilience of Icelandic life, especially in remote areas.

I explored diverse farmlands and rural areas throughout Iceland, gaining a deeper understanding of local life and uncovering insights into Iceland's architectural heritage and rural landscape. This journey also revealed the country's history of financial hardship and the ongoing humanitarian challenges in its remote regions. I went to the Hofskirkja Turf Church, one of the last remaining turf churches built in the 1880s, and a mid-20th-century abandoned boarding school. This stipend allowed me to fully immerse myself in Iceland's environmental and cultural landscape, deepening my understanding of the complex relationship between sustainability practices and their impacts on local communities and ecosystems. I learned from the community's resilience, resourcefulness, and innovative approaches to addressing the challenges posed by Iceland's harsh environment. They shared their knowledge of traditional practices and their views on modern sustainability efforts, which added layers of context to my research. In return, I contributed by sharing insights on global environmental trends and by documenting their stories in the documentary, which helped them see their practices from an outsider's perspective and recognize the global significance of their local efforts.

I am currently working to meticulously assemble and edit the footage into a cohesive film. This process involves not only piecing together various segments of footage but also refining the narrative to effectively convey the project's themes and messages. Originally, we anticipated completing this phase of the project by the end of summer; however, due to the complexity of the editing process and the need for a thorough review, we will now finalize the film at a later date. This extended timeline will ensure that we achieve the highest quality in both the visual presentation and storytelling aspects of the documentary.

Reflecting on this experience, I am committed to applying the lessons learned about community engagement and sustainability to my future projects. The insights gained from this project will inform my work as I commence my career in engineering, enhancing my approach to helping lead the clean energy transition in the most equitable way possible. If I were to plan this project again, I would aim to stay at more than one homestay throughout the country. Although these opportunities can be difficult to find, staying with various hosts would offer a broader perspective on Icelandic life and culture. The Nichols Humanitarian Fund enabled me to deeply engage with Iceland's environmental and cultural landscape, shaping my approach to sustainability and advocacy, and I simply cannot put my profound level of gratitude into words.



BEATRIZ OLIVEIRA ANTUNES

Biochemistry, '27

Hometown: Olathe, KS

Project Location: Honduras

Beatriz volunteered with Global Brigades and worked in medical clinics in rural Honduras.

Ever since moving from Brazil to the United States and observing the vast differences in infrastructure and resources between the two countries, I have been interested in global health. Therefore, when I attended Vanderbilt University's Organization Fair during my first week of freshman year, I knew that I wanted to be a part of Vanderbilt's chapter of Global Brigades. I was one of the first students to sign up in October and was eagerly awaiting the trip throughout the year. The only obstacle that remained was meeting the fundraising goal. In order to volunteer in the brigade, Global Brigades asks for a donation so that they can purchase supplies to assist the community. Thanks to the charitable assistance of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I was able to meet this donation deadline and partake in this life-changing experience.

Although this was my first international trip alone, I was not scared. I had been looking forward to this opportunity for months, and I knew that I was ready to help. When we arrived at the lodging facility, we immediately got to work on making personal hygiene kits for adults and children as well as educational posters for the kids that visited the clinic. During the first official day, I was stationed at triage and charla, where we gave short lessons to the kids on how to brush their teeth, wash their hands, and eat healthy meals. Both of these stations were extremely fast paced, and I was able to interact with dozens of patients. However, among all of these patients two of them stood out to me.

Two older women came to the clinic during the early morning hours for vision concerns. To protect their privacy, I will refer to them as Maria and Isabela. Maria was assisting Isabela, who has intellectual disabilities and is mostly non-verbal. Isabela presented with an infected abscess and had been searching for a doctor close to the community for days. Her story broke my heart, but it demonstrated the urgent need for clinics like this. Due to the remote location of the Santa María community, many of its members do not have the time or financial resources to visit doctors, which are mainly present in established cities. This issue became increasingly evident as I volunteered in different stations like dentistry, ophthalmology, nutrition, and pharmacy. But everything came full circle when I saw Isabela and Maria on my last day at the clinic.

After seeing over 200 patients over four clinic days, on the last clinic day, Isabela returned to the clinic for a follow up. I was able to shadow the physician consulting on her case and aid in bandaging her wound to keep it safe from further infection. Isabela was my patient from the time she checked-in to the time she received the care she desperately needed. This special case brought me a feeling of fulfillment and joy that I will remember for the rest of my life.

Healthcare is my driving passion, and thanks to Global Brigades and the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I was able to use my passion to help a vulnerable community in Honduras. Although their healthcare system is vastly different from America's and they lack many of the necessary resources, both the doctors and patients were unwaveringly kind. I only spent one week in Honduras, but I learned invaluable lessons about patient care from the doctors and optimism from the community members. In the future, I hope to return to Santa María and continue being one of the many volunteers striving to empower the community to reach its full potential.



GRACE PARK

Human & Organizational Development; Climate Studies, '26
Hometown: Carbondale, IL
Project Location: O'ahu, HI

Grace volunteered with the Kōkua Hawaii Foundation. KHF supports environmental education in Hawaiian schools and communities.

As a Vanderbilt student majoring in Human & Organizational Development and Climate Studies, I've had the immense privilege of refining my critical thinking and theoretical capabilities through stimulating classes, research opportunities, and campus involvement. Yet, I often felt a gap between what I was learning and the tangible actions needed to align with my personal mission—fostering positive human-environment interactions amid the climate crisis.

Driven to create real, actionable impact, I found a welcoming community at the Kōkua Hawai'i Foundation in Hale'iwa Town. This non-profit organization supports environmental education in Hawai'i through a three-pronged approach: promoting local and healthy food awareness, production, and consumption; empowering viable waste reduction practices and systems; and fostering 'Āina and place-based respect, understanding, and practice. Their dynamic programming—including the 3Rs School Program, Plastic Free Hawai'i, 'ĀINA in Schools, Field Trip Grants, and the Kōkua Learning Farm—has made significant strides, engaging over 15,000 students in environmental stewardship curricula, raising more than \$1 million for educational field trips, and involving 86% of Hawai'i's public schools.

During my three weeks volunteering with the foundation, I engaged in a variety of programs, including:

Earth Fest at Kaiser High School: Alongside Sam ('ĀINA in Schools Coordinator) & Carolyn (Kōkua Learning Farm Coordinator), I attended the 10th Annual Earth Fest in East Honolulu. As Kōkua representatives, we brought the Plastic Free Hawai'i water station and a flower observation and seeding activity featuring two native flower plants – Akiohala (*Hibiscus furcellatus*) and 'A'ali'i (*Dodonaea viscosa*). At this event, I had the enriching experience of speaking with UH Mānoa marine biologists, Sierra Club activists, and plant-based cheese connoisseurs. Despite their diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise, I noticed a unifying thread: a shared passion and dedication to celebrating the 'Āina.

Kaiaka Beach Park Huaka'i Job Corp Workday: I began the second week with a KHF Staff & Board Huaka'i to explore the Waialua moku and the ahupua'a of Hale'iwa. This enriching experience, led by Kona Au, a PhD candidate at UH Mānoa specializing in Indigenous Politics, provided profound insights into the region's heritage. Observing the ancestral fishing grounds and the balancing rock, I learned how the ahupua'a system facilitated a self-sustaining community, granting residents access to diverse resources such as freshwater, fertile land for agriculture, and abundant fishing grounds.

3Rs Drive at Ilima Intermediate: At this 3Rs Drive, the students and I collaborated with 5 recycling partners to collect HI-5 cans, electronics, clothing, and household items. Initiatives like these serve two critical purposes: (1) provide convenient recycling opportunities for local communities, encouraging responsible waste management. (2) actively engage students in adopting behavioral changes towards sustainable practices, fostering a sense of environmental stewardship.

Throughout meaningful experiences like these, I discovered three key lessons that widely expanded my perspective:

1. **Volunteering is a Reciprocal Exchange:** Over the summer, I found myself grappling with feelings of uncertainty about my direction. Initially, I approached this as a volunteer project expecting to make a clear, measurable, and impressive impact by providing my ideas and work. However, as time progressed, it came to my understanding that impact is not solely defined by the service I provide, but also by the growth I undergo. While the term “volunteering” is typically associated with the act of giving, I now perceive it equally to receiving and learning.
2. **Do Not Underestimate Education:** I was no different from the elementary students who visited the farm on field trips. Sitting alongside second graders during vermicast lessons and engaging in orchard scavenger hunts allowed me to experience environmental education through the eyes of a learner – a transformative experience in fostering a genuine connection with the natural world.
3. **Solving the Climate Crisis Requires Listening from Grassroots Communities:** One of the most significant lessons I learned came from everyday conversations with local aunties, uncles, and schoolchildren. I discovered that the Native Hawaiian worldview of ecocentrism, deeply rooted in ancestral practices, has remained resilient despite centuries of change. This expanded my sociocultural awareness and reinforced the understanding that addressing the climate crisis requires more than just technological, policy, or business solutions—it demands harmony between humans and nature and a willingness to learn humbly from diverse communities.

This opportunity, made possible by the Nichols Humanitarian Fund support, represents a pivotal step in bridging the gap between knowledge and action. I plan to carry every lesson, conversation, and memory back to my community, continuing to grow as a student, teacher, and advocate for environmental stewardship.



CHRISTIN ANN SANCHEZ

Computer Science, '26

Hometown: Tinley Park, IL

Project Location: Guimaras, Philippines

Christin tutored and mentored students on the island of Guimaras in the Philippines.

After one of the school days, I walked with my cousin through tall stalks of grass to climb stone formations that crowned some very high hills. Standing atop the largest rock I've ever seen (and trust me I've seen some pretty big rocks), I wanted to savor every bit of the moment. The view of the ocean's endless expanse in the distance. The yellowing farmland below us. The sun's heat soaking right into my skin.

The Nichols Humanitarian Fund experience granted me the opportunity to do community work on the island of Guimaras in the Philippines. I split my time working between local elementary schools, community church gatherings, and learning about sustainable farming techniques.

I caught the tail-end of the school year when I arrived after 4 different flights and a ferry ride. I assisted in graduation practice ceremonies, but I primarily helped in English and Mathematics lessons. With each interaction, I lit up being able to help the students with grammatical structures, and at the same time, they helped me build on my Tagalog and Ilongo skills as well. Using the funding, I helped assemble and distribute school supply kits with treats for each of the children.

The heat there was oppressive. The island itself was facing a drought, and those around me kept telling me it's usually more green than this. The sweat on my skin was evaporating from the temperatures, and the humidity made each breath feel like it needed conscious effort. When I got there, I thought maybe I was just weak because I wasn't used to these temperatures, but I was told stories of how kids were passing out from heat stroke and exhaustion during the school day. In fact, the whole school day had to be restructured in response to this. Because the schools lacked infrastructure like any central cooling, students only went to in-person class from 7- 10 AM then completed workbooks at home. Previously, students attended from 7 - 11 AM, went home from 11 - 1 PM, then returned from 1 - 5 PM. It was eye-opening witnessing firsthand how climate change was significantly reducing the students' class time.

The pace of life was different. You become more conscious of what you consume when you purchase water by the bucketful, and life is so intertwined with the natural resources around you. It was also a great deep dive into my own relationship with my culture. Guimaras is the island in which my mother grew up on, and it's been 12 years since I've been. When she grew up, there were only 3 municipalities and now there are 5. It was fulfilling being able to return to my grandfather's farm and hear him talk about how they turned the forests into fruit trees and made no waste of every resource of the land.

Returning to campus, I aim to refine my engineering skills and expand my involvement in sustainability initiatives at Vanderbilt as to explore how I can make more impactful changes in these places. My brain brimmed with questions on understanding different things like how do you bring technical solutions to places with a lack of infrastructure. How do you build solutions for long-term success?

Looking to my future, I hope I can maintain those relationships and continue helping those students. I hope to have a Balikbayan box drive to send snacks to the Philippines. I also want to work on projects working on more technical solutions to helping them with the heating and water collection in the schools. If I were to return, I would be more strategic about taking more detailed notes about the systems in place at the school and bring more items to donate to the kids. Many of them would benefit from a strong pair of shoes that people just throw away.

As I enter my next year of school here at Vanderbilt, my tan has faded, but the memories from this experience remain permanently etched in my brain. On the ferry ride back, I watched the waters of the Pacific Ocean rock the boat back and forth. The ocean seemed to continue on forever, reaching into so many corners of this vast vast world. I want to take a moment to really thank the Nichols Family for this lovely opportunity they've granted me. For this brief moment in time, I've been able to connect with my familial roots, make use of the resources at Vanderbilt globally, and as I ride the waves of life, I'm optimistic that I'll be able to take the skills from this experience anywhere. The sun at my back and my face to the future, the water can take me anywhere, but each wave is bringing me forward.



ANIKA SHAH

Medicine, Health and Society, '26

Hometown: Tampa, FL

Project Location: San Jose, Costa Rica

Anika volunteered with a mobile health clinic in San Jose, Costa Rica.

For a week, I volunteered with a mobile clinic providing free healthcare to vulnerable communities in the heart of San José, Costa Rica. Our primary focus was on families of Nicaraguan refugees who fled their country due to political violence and poverty. I partnered with MedLife, which is an organization that hosts mobile clinics all over South America. The stipend I received from the Nichols Fund was crucial, enabling me to participate in this trip and experience a unique aspect of healthcare in a different cultural context, greatly shaping my global perspective.

These families, living in one-room houses with a single bed and stove, earned only 2-6 dollars per day and had little to no access to regular healthcare, except in emergencies. The need for healthcare in this area was profound; for many, this clinic visit was their first healthcare encounter, and for some, it would be the only check-up they received all year. My responsibilities included taking vitals, recording medical information, and dispensing medication. I also shadowed patient-doctor interactions and observed OB-GYN procedures. In total, we served 154 adult patients and 54 children.

Despite being in a foreign country, I was struck by the similarities among vulnerable populations in Costa Rica and the United States. Many of the patients I served have fallen through the cracks of government protection, similar to the United States. For patients who were disabled and unable to attend the clinic, I traveled with the physician house-to-house to provide care. On the last day, my fellow volunteers and I helped construct a new road and cleared trash to prepare a grassy area for the installation of a playground.

One of the most significant challenges I encountered was the language barrier. My limited Spanish, coupled with the fact that many of the children and adults spoke little to no English, required me to rely heavily on non-verbal communication - body language, facial expressions, and gestures became my primary tools for connecting with patients. This experience revealed to me that healthcare is truly a universal language, one that transcends cultural and linguistic

boundaries. As I navigated these interactions, I not only sharpened my Spanish skills but gained a profound understanding of how empathy, compassion, and human connection can bridge those gaps that language alone cannot.

Before my trip, I was particularly interested in the potential for telemedicine implementation to help expand access to healthcare in remote areas, empowering individuals to take a more active role in their health. However, I quickly realized a significant challenge: the lack of sustainable infrastructure to support such initiatives. The camp had only two electrical lines for their entire camp, with electricity rationed for basic needs like lighting and devices. Given these limitations, phones and computers capable of supporting telemedicine would be both computationally demanding and financially out of reach for communities already struggling to afford basic necessities. To implement such a project, external support would be necessary to build the required infrastructure. A top-down approach would be required, involving close cooperation between the Costa Rican government and third-party authorities.

During this trip, I gained valuable insights into the Costa Rican national healthcare system, which is regarded as one of the best in Central and South America. All Costa Rican citizens benefit from free, universal healthcare. Yet, healthcare is expensive for those that are not citizens. This system faces challenges, particularly a shortage of doctors due to the limited number of public school seats for medical students. I also observed the strong cultural emphasis on health that is evident in Costa Rica, where a positive attitude toward well-being is deeply ingrained. The country is one of five places in the world with "Blue Zones" (in Nicoya, Costa Rica) where a high density of people often live well beyond the average lifespan, frequently reaching 90 to 100 years old. The longevity is attributed to a lifestyle centered around healthy eating, daily exercise and calcium-rich water, which I experienced firsthand. In my free time, I had the opportunity to immerse myself in the breathtaking natural beauty of Costa Rica.

Volunteering in Costa Rica provided a tangible opportunity to address healthcare disparities and connect with diverse communities. I'm deeply grateful to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for this experience, which deepened my understanding of global health equity and reinforced my belief that healthcare is a fundamental human right and a stepping stone for lifelong success. Achieving true health equity requires ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, has the opportunity to reach their full potential in health and well being. This experience has helped me grow into a more connected and compassionate global citizen, solidifying my commitment to a career in medicine focused on patient-centered care for underserved and vulnerable populations. Moving forward, I will continue advocating for accessible healthcare by sharing my experiences and supporting vulnerable populations in the United States.



ROJIN SHARMA

Physics and Computer Science, '26

Hometown: Lalitpur, Nepal

Project Location: Nepal

Rojin volunteered with an NGO that seeks to improve the lives of marginalized people in Nepal.

Rojin completed his project but was unable to submit his report in time for this publication. It is anticipated that his report will be posted later.



PEGGY SHEMA

Biomedical Engineering, '26

Hometown: Kigali, Rwanda

Project Location: Rwanda

Peggy worked to end malaria in the Rwamagana district of Rwanda.

Reflecting on my experience with the Zero Malaria Project, I am struck by how much can change from the planning stages to the actual implementation of a service learning project. Initially, the project was intended to be carried out in Bugesera District, Rwanda, a region known for its high malaria burden. The original plan was to provide insecticide-treated mosquito nets and health insurance to 300 families, focusing on those most vulnerable to malaria, such as pregnant women and children under five. However, as the project unfolded, changes had to be made to address pressing needs in another community. This shift highlighted the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in service-based projects.

The decision to move the project to the Mutamwa sector in Rwamagana District came after identifying an urgent need for health insurance and mosquito nets in that area. Unlike Bugesera, where the initial focus was, Mutamwa had a higher immediate demand for these resources, particularly among children under five. The increased costs associated with relocating the project meant that we could only assist 45 families instead of the originally planned 300. While this adjustment was challenging, it reinforced the importance of adapting to meet the most pressing needs of the community.

Despite the changes, the core mission of the Zero Malaria Project remained the same: to reduce the prevalence of malaria and support vulnerable populations. Collaborating with the Rwanda Biomedical Center (RBC) and the Nicholas Humanitarian Fund, we were able to ensure that these 45 families received the necessary health insurance and insecticide-treated mosquito nets. The impact of these interventions was immediate and tangible, as families expressed deep gratitude for the protection and security these resources provided.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this project was seeing the direct impact of our efforts on the families in Mutamwa. Many of the parents expressed relief, knowing that their children would be protected during the rainy season when malaria transmission is at its peak. This experience has shown me that even when a project does not go exactly as planned, the

outcomes can still be profoundly meaningful. The adaptability required in this situation allowed us to address an urgent need in a different community, ultimately leading to a successful outcome.

Working closely with Dr. Aimable Mbituyumuremyi, the manager of the Malaria, Neglected Tropical Diseases, and Other Parasitic Diseases Division at the RBC, was an invaluable learning experience. His expertise and guidance were crucial in navigating the challenges we faced during the project. Through this collaboration, I gained a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in public health initiatives and the importance of building strong partnerships to achieve common goals.

As the project draws to a close, I am filled with gratitude for the support and funding provided by the Nicholas Humanitarian Fund. Their commitment to this cause made it possible to implement the Zero Malaria Project, even in the face of unforeseen challenges and changes. The success of this project is a testament to the power of community collaboration and the importance of staying adaptable and focused on the ultimate goal: improving the lives of those most at risk of malaria.

In conclusion, my experience with the Zero Malaria Project has been both challenging and rewarding. The shift from Bugesera District to Mutamwa sector in Rwamagana District taught me the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in service projects. Although we helped fewer families than initially planned, the impact we made in Mutamwa was significant. The collaboration with the Rwanda Biomedical Center and the Nicholas Humanitarian Fund was instrumental in this success, and I am deeply grateful for their support. This project has reinforced my commitment to public health and my belief in the power of community-driven initiatives to bring about meaningful change.



SKYLER SHIPP

Secondary Education; History, '25

Hometown: Boulder Creek, CA

Project Location: Siem Reap, Cambodia

Skyler taught English to elementary school students in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

When I first showed up at the ECC English school in Siem Reap, I thought I was in the wrong place. I had turned down a small dirt road and found myself by buildings that just looked like houses. A bunch of dogs ran out and started barking as I tried to figure out where I was. But as I looked around I noticed some outdoor classrooms, and as I walked I was greeted with smiles and told that I was, in fact, in the right place.

In the mornings and afternoons, we volunteered at a public school down the road from ECC and we taught classes in the evening on-site for students who were unable to attend the public school. I can't lie, at first, I was intimidated by going into the classroom, but the other volunteers quickly showed me how things were done, and soon, I found myself leading many of the classes.

The students seemed to enjoy having us there and would ask questions, play games, and tell jokes to us during recess. Sometimes the classes would get out of control and it would be difficult to get the lesson back on track, but, most of the time, the students were eager to learn. I got good practice using visuals and songs to help students who may struggle with taking notes since every class had a wide range of abilities. Some students already spoke excellent English, while others spoke none at all.

In the evenings I taught the advanced English class. Most of the evening students were not at the public school because they had to work for their parents or could not afford the uniforms and supplies. Some would bike for miles on muddy dirt roads for class. I mostly taught this class by myself, and it taught me valuable lessons about keeping students engaged. I would always prepare by printing worksheets, games, or planning other activities since many of the students did not have books. After several students told me they didn't have a pencil, I went to the store and bought notebooks, pens, pencils, and pencil sharpeners for my whole class. My students taught me the importance of being flexible and adapting to students' needs. Even though my classroom was only a tin roof with a whiteboard and some worn wooden desks underneath, I

understood that this was painstakingly built from the ground up, and would not be here without the determination and kindness of all of the staff at the school.

I am a secondary education major, and I am in my professional year where I begin student teaching. Volunteering in Siem Reap gave me valuable experience teaching in a different setting and will give me more confidence and knowledge as I start student teaching. It also showed me the importance of education as a way to give students new opportunities. Cambodia is a beautiful country, but it has a tragic history and is still rife with poverty. Learning English can open many new jobs for students both inside and outside the country and can often become a pathway out of poverty.

One of the other volunteers did not enjoy his experience as much as I did and went to another ECC school in Thailand which he said was far more organized. I saw the pictures he posted and noticed that the classroom was cleaner, and the experience appeared much more orderly. He told me I should have volunteered there as I would have had a better time. Perhaps I would have. But the question lingered in the back of my mind: where was I needed more? There are few other places where I feel like I could have made such a significant difference in the lives of everyday people. Moreover, though it may seem negative at first, the lack of structure gave me practice planning classes, which I would not have gotten by simply using prescribed lessons. My heart will always be with Cambodia. I have never been greeted so warmly and I can't think of anywhere else quite like it. It is one of my favorite places in the world and I hope to return someday. My trip inspired me to learn Khmer (the Cambodian language) since I think it will open many more opportunities when I return. If I teach in Cambodia again, it will certainly make me a more effective educator.



RAYLEE SIPPLE

Law History and Society; French, '27

Hometown: Logan, WV

Project Location: Lisbon, Portugal

Raylee tutored and mentored students in Lisbon, Portugal.

Upon arrival in Lisbon, Portugal, I was placed with a local youth center by the name of Ludoteca de Galiza. This specific center was acting as a summer school/after school program for local community children and teens. I was placed, alongside one other volunteer, on a 9-1 schedule Monday through Friday. The first two weeks of the program were spent working with teens from the age of 10 to 14, in which we were set to prepare them for the weeks coming, in which they would act as mentors and guides for the younger children.

We worked on a set schedule. We would attend the beach on Mondays and Wednesdays to teach the kids about marine life and how to keep the younger children safe in the waters. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we would hike to the local forest and participate in local efforts of nature preservation, working to clear the areas to support wildlife and plantlife. On Fridays, we would spend time at the center, working on teamwork exercises through fun games and other activities.

Within the first two weeks, I learned a lot about Portuguese cultures in relation to youth support and what it looks like to be a youth in the area. I got to spend time with the kids, helping them to develop their English in a conversational way while also being taught some Portuguese myself. It was exciting to see the difference between American teens and Portuguese teens in terms of interactions with others. I learned that this community fosters a very inclusive environment for all kids. In the time I was there, I never experienced a child feeling left out or shy. Regardless of age group and status, all kids were welcome to the activities of others without reluctance. Experiencing something like this led me to want to better understand the interactions between the kids and foster the same kind of environment here in the US, even at Vanderbilt.

Throughout the second two weeks, I had become accustomed to the teens and began to form relationships with a few of them that I felt was beneficial to mine and their experiences. At this time, I was able to communicate with most of the children through developing methods. Most had a basic knowledge of the English language which was helpful in communication, but there were still some barriers. However, with mutual efforts we found ways to communicate.

This point is when the younger children were introduced into the program. Our daily schedule stayed the same; however, we were now doing more with the children. On separate occasions, we attended the local fire department and police station to teach the kids the importance of safety in unfortunate circumstances. Other times, we toured local fast food restaurants to inform the kids about the working class and the benefits of having jobs while still furthering one's education.

Adding the second group of children was definitely a challenge at first. Having double the kids of a younger age meant more precision and focus, but it turned out to be extremely rewarding. I came to care for all the children through interactions I had with them, and although I was there to support them and teach them, I feel as if I received just as much from them in return. Seeing them develop and flourish in just four short weeks was incredible and I hope that if the opportunity arises, I will be able to do it again.



ANNA SMITH

Law, '26

Hometown: Atlanta, GA

Project Location: London, England

Anna interned with a specialist group of international, criminal, and human rights lawyers in London, England.

This summer I worked with Guernica 37 Group which consists of a London-based barrister's chambers and a "centre" focused on human rights violations. I worked with some of the barristers in person in London in addition to various attorneys across the globe virtually.

The stipend helped me pay for housing in London which enabled me to work in person with Guernica 37. This allowed me to gain pivotal in person experiences such as attending court proceedings and interviewing clients. Though I learned countless things across my summer, a major take-away is never forgetting that the cases involve real people and real events. In law school I think it is easy to focus on the doctrine and legal analysis, but when working on these projects at Guernica 37 I had to confront the reality of the situation. On the one hand, it made me more motivated to do my best to help the team and the case. But admittedly, it also made things harder to compartmentalize because I had a personal relationship with the case facts. Even with this added challenge, I am very grateful for this exposure as it serves as a good reminder of why I am in law school in the first place: to do good and help others.

My time at Guernica 37 consisted of highly substantive, complex legal work which most 1Ls do not have the opportunity to do. This summer has already made a massive impact in my personal, academic, and professional development and I know it will only continue to show the effects over time.

Guernica 37 is a very freelance sort of system in which getting involved requires taking initiative but everyone is constantly helping each other. Though I had two main projects throughout my time there, I was also able to work on many others in smaller capacities. This allowed me to gain more exposure and also pivotal feedback for my professional development.

My legal writing and research skills significantly improved thanks to conducting extensive case law research and writing memos/briefs/complaints. Additionally, I developed key communication skills due to having to manage various time zones, language barriers, and professional backgrounds.

Lastly, like most professional experiences, I sharpened my time management skills as I had a high volume of work to complete for Guernica 37 on top of various other responsibilities for law school

The two main cases I worked on are on-going and will be continuing in the ensuing months. I will not be working on them, but I will be remaining in touch to hear how the cases progress. More specifically, to see if one of them is in fact filed by the end of this year while seeing if the other one leads to a settlement or not.



COLIN VESS

History; Cinema and Media Arts, '26

Hometown: Greensboro, NC

Project Location: Neltume, Chile

Colin did archaeological surveys of the Huilo Huilo Biological Reserve in southern Chile to gain a deeper understanding of the indigenous cultures.

This Summer, I spent my time in the wilderness of Southern Chile doing research with the Huilo-Lanin Environmental Anthropology Project. Here I worked with my professor, Dr. Jacob Sauer, and various other Chilean scholars and project members employed by the Huilo Huilo Foundation, an ecological preserve located around the Huilo and Lanin volcanos. Each day, we would venture out into the park in order to survey land in preparation and in search of potential areas of interest, hold archaeological digs, identify locations of water sources and take samples of them, and complete general park maintenance tasks, like taking care of brush and feeding endangered Huemul and Guanaco, which are being reintroduced to the area by the Foundation.

This stipend from the Nichols Fund is what made all of this work possible for me. Without it I wouldn't have been able to have the necessary equipment required to brave this wilderness and harsh weather, much less the flight and transportation required to get there. Being in an entirely new part of the world due to this stipend opened my eyes to lives of others as I was able to fully immerse myself in Chilean culture, but also the past experiences of its Indigenous community, who I worked and lived alongside of. Now I am able to include these new perspectives into my archaeological toolbox and use them during my career when I am working in the field and creating conclusions.

Being within this community, the Mapuche, I came to deeply appreciate their outlook, history, and lifestyle. I fell completely in love with their food and was warmly received into their homes and celebrations. In particular, I loved their chili powders and their retention of their fighting spirit, the one that allowed them to be the only Chilean group to fully resist colonization by the Spanish for hundreds of years. I like to think too, that our work benefitted them in many ways as well. Perhaps it gave them the aid to further tangibly connect to their past, and to utilize their historical disaster mitigation strategies to navigate changes in our world and environment today, many of them due to climate change.

This project also helped me to further grow and complete my person. I gained valuable field

experiences that I will need during my career and was able to completely immerse myself in a new language, offering vital practice for using it fluently. I also was given a once in a lifetime opportunity to live and work in a country so far from home and much different from what I am used to, which I think really helped me to mature and provided formative experience I can use to base my life and personhood around.

I absolutely hope that one day I will be able to return to Neltume and Huilo Huilo to visit the many wonderful people I met on my journey and see the beautiful sights and locations I called home during my experience. I truly would love to continue my work here at another time, seeing as our work laid the foundations for further archaeological processes and identified many other points of interest, making it possible for other young scholars such as myself to have a similar experience to mine. I hope that the student that my professor brings next year to continue this work has as formative an experience as I had!



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