



# VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

## Nichols Humanitarian Fund





To the Nichols Scholars,

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.

Fifty-two Nichols Scholars were selected in 2025 to work on humanitarian projects during the summer academic break in eleven U.S. states and twenty foreign countries.

The projects are in California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Missouri, New Jersey, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Australia, Cameroon, Chile, Costa Rica, Egypt, England, Ethiopia, Fiji, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malta, Nepal, Pakistan, Panama, South Korea, and Ukraine.

The projects include researching a unique mutational signature in renal cell carcinoma prevalent in Japanese patients; launching a digital learning lab in rural Pakistan that will help out-of-school girls go back to school; running a children's camp and doing other volunteer work in Ukraine; providing wigs and head accessories to children with cancer; conducting STEM education workshops for disadvantaged Nashville high school students; establishing a pharmacy and mobile medical units in rural Pakistan; sending new physics and chemistry lab equipment to an underfunded high school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and teaching the students how to use it; working to end the practice of chhaupadi in Nepal; creating a Generative AI curriculum for underfunded schools in Indonesia; teaching low-income students in St. Louis 3D printing; creating a nonprofit organization that empowers the less fortunate in Nashville and beyond to manage their physical, social, and mental well-being; procuring and shipping wound care items to a war zone in Ukraine and first aid kits to underserved communities in Chicago; donating laptop computers to low-income Cameroon students; exploring how traditional weaving and craftsmanship are preserved in Japan to apply these insights to cultural preservation efforts in Ghana; and much more.

Nichols Scholars and projects can change after they are announced. The final Nichols Scholars and projects for the year after all changes are found in the Reflection Reports and may differ from those originally posted.





## SHAF A ABBAS

Psychology; Public Policy Studies, '26

Hometown: Lawrenceville, GA

Project Location: Athens, GA

*Shafa served with a community kitchen that helps the homeless and less fortunate.*

This summer, I had the privilege of volunteering at Our Daily Bread, a soup kitchen that is part of Downtown Ministries, through the generous support of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. The experience was both humbling and eye-opening, providing me with a deeper understanding of how community-based organizations function, the logistics required to serve large groups of people, and the human connections that lie at the heart of humanitarian work. My role was varied day to day and consisted of helping with setup, assisting during meal service, and participating in cleanup afterward. Though many of my tasks were simple, through them I learned how much intentionality, structure, and care go into sustaining a welcoming space for those in need.

From my first day, I was struck by the organization of the staff and interns. I was given a tour upon arrival and immediately noticed how meticulously maintained the facilities were. The kitchen, pantries, and dining areas were spotless and neatly labeled, which reflected not only efficiency but also respect for the people being served. Each intern rotated through tasks using laminated checklists, ensuring fairness and accountability in the daily workflow. My initial assignments included wiping down door handles, rolling silverware, and preparing water for distribution. During the lunch service that day, I passed out drinks to guests while others served food, and afterward, I joined the cleanup team to vacuum and sanitize tables. Though seemingly routine, I quickly realized that every step, from filling water pitchers to lining up chairs, was essential in creating a smooth and dignified experience for the guests.

Service itself was not without challenges. Some guests preferred to take their meals to go, which required adjustments in line management, while others grew frustrated with waiting times. These moments taught me that even the best systems encounter friction, and what mattered most was responding with patience and empathy. I admired how the staff balanced enforcing rules, such as allowing only five people in the dining area at once, with kindness and fairness. Roughly 150 people were served that first day, which goes to show the scope of need in the Athens community.

On my second day, I participated in the breakfast shift, which differed in pace and atmosphere. I helped unload a car full of pantry donations, swept storage areas, and sanitized surfaces before the meal began. During service, I was stationed at the coffee table, which turned out to be surprisingly hectic. Guests had strong preferences about cream and sugar, and the demand was high. Managing this station required attentiveness and flexibility, but I enjoyed the direct interaction it gave me with community members.

What stood out most across my shifts, however, was not just the food service itself but the culture of community that surrounded it. Meals were accompanied by music and conversation, and there was a sense that guests left not only nourished physically but also uplifted socially. I learned that the organization sometimes hosts trivia games and other activities, signaling that their mission extends beyond filling plates to fostering belonging. I also observed staff assisting guests with job applications, SNAP requirements, and other forms of support.

On a personal level, the experience was deeply formative. I went in expecting to “help,” but I quickly realized that service is as much about humility and consistency as it is about large gestures. Rolling silverware, pouring coffee, or wiping down a table may not seem consequential on their own, yet when done with care, these actions contribute to an environment of dignity. I also gained appreciation for the behind-the-scenes structure that sustains humanitarian work. From cleaning protocols to donor partnerships that provide food each week, Our Daily Bread’s success rests on careful planning and teamwork.

Most importantly, I learned about the value of presence. Greeting people at the door, making eye contact while serving water, or sharing a short conversation in line reminded me that humanitarian service is not only about material aid but also about recognition and respect. Many of the individuals who came for meals were experiencing homelessness, yet in that dining hall they were seen, heard, and cared for. I left each day with a renewed sense of gratitude and perspective, aware of how much I often take for granted.

My summer with Our Daily Bread taught me that humanitarian work is both simple and profound. It is about showing up, doing small tasks with intention, and creating a space where people feel valued. Thanks to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I was able to witness firsthand the impact of this work on a local scale and reflect on how I can continue to contribute to building compassionate, organized, and community-centered initiatives in the future.



## SHREETI AMIT

Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: Crestview, FL

Project Location: Tokyo, Japan

*Shreeti researched a unique mutational signature in renal cell carcinoma in Japanese patients.*

This summer, funded by the generous support of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I embarked on a profound journey to the intersection of cutting-edge science and global public health. I worked as a research intern with the National Cancer Center Research Institute in Tokyo, Japan, in partnership with the International Cancer Genome Consortium. My project aimed to unravel a unique mutational signature found in Japanese Renal Cell Carcinoma (RCC) cases, and its potential interplay with the immune system. While my daily work was situated in a laboratory, the ultimate goal was deeply humanitarian—to understand a cancer disparity and translate that knowledge into prevention and care for the community.

My specific role involved assisting in the collection and genomic analysis of RCC tumor samples, followed by conducting metabolic assays on isolated Th17 immune cells. We hypothesized that the unknown environmental mutagen responsible for the genetic signature might also be crippling the very immune cells tasked with fighting the tumor. By studying their glutamine metabolism and function, I sought to connect a genomic anomaly to a tangible immune deficiency. Beyond the bench, a critical component of my work was engaging in community outreach initiatives with the NCC, helping to translate our complex findings into accessible information on RCC risk factors and preventative measures for the public.

Receiving the Nichols stipend was transformative, as it redefined my understanding of "global perspective." Previously, my view of global health was shaped by disparities in infectious diseases or access to care. This experience illuminated that genomic disparities—variations in cancer drivers specific to a population—are an equally critical frontier. The stipend allowed me to fully immerse myself in this unique scientific and cultural environment, moving beyond a tourist's view to understand the why behind the research. I was not just studying Japanese cancer samples; I was learning why this particular signature might be prevalent in Japan, considering diet, environment, and lifestyle. My perspective shifted from seeing science as a universal, homogenous endeavor to appreciating it as a deeply contextual one, where local problems require global collaboration but locally-attuned solutions. Completing this experience, I now see



a humanitarian imperative in addressing these specific, population-level health challenges, ensuring that genomic medicine benefits all people, not just those in whose populations most research is conducted.

The collaborative learning was the most enriching part of the experience. I entered the project with skills in molecular biology, but my Japanese colleagues taught me the immense value of keigo (respectful language) and meticulous, consensus-driven approach in the lab, which fostered an environment of incredible precision and mutual trust. I learned from them not just techniques, but a philosophy of careful, deliberate science. In return, I was able to contribute my own fresh perspectives and computational skills from my training at Vanderbilt, helping to streamline some of our data analysis pipelines. During community outreach events, the learning was even more direct. I listened to community members' concerns and observed their dietary habits, which provided real-world context that no dataset could. In turn, by explaining our research in simple terms, I helped them understand their health in a new way, empowering them with knowledge. This two-way exchange of knowledge—between me and the lab, and between our team and the community—was the true engine of discovery.

This experience fundamentally altered my professional goals and skills. I solidified my technical skills in genomics and immunology, but more importantly, I developed the ability to communicate complex science to diverse audiences. My goal is no longer simply to be a scientist, but to be a physician-scientist who can bridge the gap between the laboratory and the patient's bedside. This project was a perfect microcosm of that ideal: we started with patient samples, moved to fundamental biological investigation, and circled back to community education. The humanitarian focus of the Nichols Fund compelled me to constantly ask, "Who does this help?" — a question that will guide my career forever.

While my formal internship in Japan has concluded, the work continues. I am maintaining my collaboration with the NCC team, assisting remotely with the final stages of data analysis and the drafting of a manuscript for publication. Furthermore, I am working with my Vanderbilt mentors to integrate the lessons learned about Th17 cell metabolism into a related project here in Nashville. Most importantly, I have helped prepare the community for sustainability by contributing to the NCC's repository of bilingual educational materials on RCC, which will be used for years to come.

If I could plan the project again, I would keep the core scientific and outreach structure, which proved to be a powerful combination. I would, however, strive to learn more Japanese before my arrival. While the science was conducted in English, a greater proficiency in the local language would have deepened my community interactions and allowed me to connect with patients on a more personal level during outreach events.



# ANEESH BATCHU

Comm of Science & Technology; Neuroscience, '26  
Hometown: Chesterfield, MO  
Project Location: Seoul, South Korea

*Aneesh volunteered at a hospital in South Korea to gain firsthand insight into global variations in healthcare systems.*

This Summer, I volunteered at the Seoul National University Hospital in South Korea. Working alongside physicians in one of the country's most prestigious teaching hospitals, I witnessed the challenges and innovations that define modern Korean healthcare. The experience was rooted in observing medicine in its different context and in understanding how history continues to shape the delivery of care in a unique manner.

Korea's rapid economic development led to an equally rapid expansion of its healthcare system. At the same time, its legacy of war, colonization, and rebuilding left behind a sense of urgency to provide universal access. This has resulted in a system that emphasizes efficiency, accessibility, and centralized care. However, it also has its own struggles with overburdened providers and a disproportionate rural-urban distribution of services. Situating its healthcare in a historical lens, I learned to see medicine more as a reflection of a country's memories.

Before traveling to Seoul, I thought of global health in terms of measurable indicators, but spending time immersed in a new system, I began to appreciate the subtle ways culture and history define care systems. This reiterated the lesson that healthcare is never practiced in a vacuum, but is influenced by the stories of the past. Global health isn't a set of problems to solve, but a diverse array of perspectives to learn from.

Although my role was limited as a volunteer, I learned from conversations with Korean medical students about the differences in our training and career expectations. Thinking about the mindsets of approaching patient communication, I learned how cultural norms impact transparency and the role of families in decision making. This dialogue was a window into a new mindset that grounded our learnings in concrete examples.

I entered the summer eager to learn about healthcare in a new cultural context but developed this goal in a different way than I expected to. I hope to continue to study how diverse

healthcare models develop in response to history, examine their impacts, and extract the lessons that can be drawn across these systems. I also further developed my skills in cross-cultural communication, listening carefully to perspectives shaped by experiences unique from my own. These universal skills will continue to serve a vital role in my path as a physician in the future.

While I may not be continuing to volunteer at SNUH again, the experience gave me a roadmap for the future. I hope to further my study of global healthcare systems, probing deeper into the mechanisms of their development. The diversity of these systems promises powerful insights that can be used to improve healthcare globally. If I were planning the project again, I would aim to spend more time in different settings outside the hospital, learning about rural care, community-based health initiatives, and public health efforts. While the hospital setting offered insights into advanced medicine, community level work would have provided an even fuller picture of how policies and history intersect.

Healthcare systems are mosaics built from history, policy, and culture. Being an effective physician requires an openness to learning from each of these, and this experience reinforced my commitment to approaching medicine as a practice of communication across boundaries, whether between the doctor and patient, between cultures, or between the past and present.





# ISAAC BEVIN BOAKYE

Architecture and the Built Environment, '26

Hometown: Accra, Ghana

Project Location: Kyoto, Japan

*Isaac explored how traditional weaving and craftsmanship are preserved in Japan to apply these insights to cultural preservation efforts in Ghana.*

I traveled to Kyoto, Japan, during the summer to study cultural preservation in terms of traditional textile heritage, with the support of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. I collaborated with Orisho Kitamura, an organization known for its dedication to maintaining antique Japanese weaving techniques. The plan was to not only learn from them but also find similarities between Japanese and Ghanaian textile cultures especially in process, communal value, and symbolic storytelling inherent within both cultures.

My experience in Kyoto was extremely immersive. Through observing weavers and participating in studio workshops, I came to see how Japanese weavers preserve history not just in method but in the closely guarded preservation of space, discipline, and ritual. Each strand seemed not just to hold color but intent, and I was taken by the manner in which preservation here was not merely passive acts of craft but active, embodied, sacred practice. I was particularly excited about the manner in which Orisho Kitamura bridges ancient knowledge with contemporary relevance, something that has always been my aspiration in my own artworks.

The project originated from the desire to shed light upon and conserve intangible heritage in Japan and Ghana. I discovered rather abruptly that this was not about fabric or art but about continuity. And it's an emergency. All of Ghana's cultural cloth arts, such as kente weaving, are threatened by modernization, generational loss, and down-grading. That is why the recent global accreditation in October of kente as a Geographical Indication (GI) of Ghana was so meaningful. It authenticated the global importance of these activities and added extra weight to the effort I had just completed.

My project's phase two is going to be in Ghana this December. My plan is to take the learning from Japan to local weavers' collectives and start a cultural exchange between two textile-rich countries. I will be working with artisan groups and media personalities to amplify the voice of Ghanaian weavers and document the process of cultural exchange. There, I felt like a temple student studying under people who didn't see their work as drudgery, but as legacy.

That made me question the artisans in my native country, many of whom are never applauded beyond souvenir stalls or craft festivals. My hope is to alter that by creating platforms that acknowledge their role as cultural archivists.

The Nichols Humanitarian Fund made this feasible. Their support allowed me to move from curiosity into practice. As someone who often works at the nexus of design, heritage, and community, I am grateful not only for the support but also for the authority this opportunity lent me. It served as a reminder that cultural work is humanitarian work and that art is a means of justice, dignity, and kinship.

What I most eagerly anticipate in the future is creating a visual and verbal archive that documents the conversation between Japan and Ghana. I believe that when two worlds meet to learn from and appreciate each other, and not to appropriate, something is formed which will endure. This work has reaffirmed my belief that preservation must be international, shared, and respectful. And it has made me more determined than ever to protect the textures of identity that too often get lost in the heat of development. I hope to share what I have learned and to continue this work through exhibitions, collaborations, and further scholarship. For now, I hold on to the lessons, the conversations, and the promise that this is just the beginning.



# MARIA CARDENAS

Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: Miami, FL

Project Location: Okeechobee, Fort Pierce, and West Palm Beach, Florida

*Maria served underserved communities across South Florida as a dental assistant and Spanish interpreter.*

This summer, I had the honor of serving diverse underserved communities across South Florida by delivering essential dental care as both a dental assistant and a Spanish interpreter through my service experience funded by the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. Over the course of three weeks, I immersed myself in working alongside dentists and other volunteers to provide fillings, extractions, dental cleanings, oral education, and interpretation to members of my community who otherwise could not afford such services. The unit, which is a dental mobile bus equipped with all the necessary instrumentation, traveled to West Palm Beach, Sunrise, and Homestead, where we spent one week in each location treating patients from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

During the missions, my role involved assisting dentists during procedures, providing chairside support to patients, and breaking language barriers by interpreting between English-speaking dentists and Spanish-speaking patients. I also educated individuals on preventive oral care and distributed “care kits” containing toothpaste, toothbrushes, floss, and a contact list of community programs to help them maintain their oral health year-round, since these missions only occur once a year. Our team of 28 volunteer dentists and 59 general volunteers provided excellent care to 179 patients, completing 110 fillings, 74 extractions, and delivering \$115,540 worth of dental services to the community. Receiving the stipend allowed me to reach more families across my home state, Florida, compared to previous summers when I could only stay in local areas. This experience broadened my perspective on global healthcare and the social determinants of health, inspiring me to pursue international dental missions and seek solutions to issues such as the unaffordability of dental care. Witnessing these inequalities firsthand strengthened my determination to continue to advocate for underserved populations and approach dentistry with cultural awareness and empathy.

The opportunity to contribute my time and skills to such a meaningful cause was truly life changing. I had the privilege of learning from dentists every day, asking questions about the profession, and deepening my connection with my community through healthcare. Although



many patients were nervous at the start of their appointments, by working with empathy, we not only addressed the financial and language barriers that contributed to their oral health challenges but also built trust and provided relief from their pain. One particularly special aspect of my experience was the cultural exchange, while I interpreted in Spanish for most of the patients, I also had the chance to learn a few words in Creole. One of the interpreters kindly taught me basic phrases, which allowed me to greet patients and collect information while waiting for the doctor, which was definitely a one-of-a-kind experience. Another memorable moment was when our mission was featured on local news during our first week, which was an unexpected but exciting recognition of our work. In the clinical side, this service journey strengthened my patient interaction skills and reinforced my goal of becoming a missionary dentist. It also gave me a deeper appreciation for the humanity behind healthcare professionals and the passion that motivates them to continue serving the community that surrounds them.

Although my project concluded at the end of the summer, my commitment to helping underserved communities access the dental care they deserve is stronger than ever. As an aspiring Latina in dental medicine, I plan to continue contributing my skills to similar efforts and hope to return to these missions as a dentist in the future. To ensure sustainability, we provided patients with oral hygiene kits and education so they can maintain their dental health beyond the mission. This service project held a special place in my undergraduate career because it allowed me to use my bilingual and clinical skills to bridge language gaps and ensure every patient received quality care. I am deeply grateful to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for making such a transformative experience possible, and I believe that we created a positive change by improving oral health and bringing hope to the communities we served.



## MICHAEL CARROLL

Engineering Science; English, '26

Hometown: Vallejo, CA

Project Location: Benicia, CA

*Michael volunteered as a literacy tutor and teaching assistant, helping adult learners from around the world improve their English Skills.*

This summer, I spent ten weeks volunteering as a literacy tutor and teaching assistant at the Benicia Public Library in my hometown of Benicia, California. Thanks to support from the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I was able to fully commit myself to this opportunity, covering transportation and housing costs while working in the community I grew up in. As someone who has always been passionate about literacy and the power of language, both as an English major and someone who loves to read, this experience was especially meaningful to me.

My work began with certification through the California Library Literacy Services to become an adult literacy tutor. In this program, there was a huge need for English as a Second Language (ESL) support, so I shifted my goals from being a general literacy tutor to specializing in ESL. After completing my training, I supported the Benicia Public Library's ESL program by assisting in classroom instruction three days a week and tutoring two students one-on-one for two hours each week. My responsibilities included helping plan lessons, working individually with students during class, and creating activities aligned with each learner's personal goals. As I learned throughout the summer, adult literacy education is intensely student-focused; thus, many of our sessions were centered on real-life scenarios like grocery shopping, navigating daily conversations, or preparing for citizenship and driving exams.

During class, I met people from across the globe. I had students from Taiwan, Russia, Iran, India, China, Afghanistan, and Poland many of whom had relocated to the United States later in life. I was able to help our students improve their English, however, I think they taught me more. During our sessions I learned about their home countries, communities they have found in the U.S., and the daily challenges they face. Our students brought unique perspectives, languages, and cultural backgrounds into the classroom, transforming our small-town library into an unlikely global hub.

One of the most impactful relationships I formed was with Margaret, a student from Poland in her 70s who had moved to the United States just two years ago. Despite being new to English,

she was determined to improve her conversational skills and gain more independence in her new home. At first, I was nervous to tutor Margaret due to our age gap. However, we built a relationship based on trust, patience, and respect which allowed us to build a great foundation for learning. We worked through *White Fang* together, as she is a Jack London fan and has read many of his books in Polish. Through our sessions, we not only strengthened her reading skills, but also worked on conversational skills and improving the speed at which she processes the English language.

Another student I worked with privately was Mindy, a young woman from China who was just beginning to learn English. Our tutoring sessions focused entirely on driving vocabulary and comprehension so she could pass her road test and understand instructions from her examiner. Together, we created picture-word associations, practiced key commands, and role-played test scenarios. Her determination and rapid progress were a powerful reminder of how essential language can be to mobility, autonomy, and opportunity.

Throughout the summer, I worked closely with Bette Bogart, the library's literacy director and ESL instructor, who served as a mentor to me. Under her guidance, I learned to adapt lesson plans, meet students where they are, and respond to a wide range of learning needs. Many of our students were older adults, and I developed greater patience and flexibility when working with learners who had vastly different educational and linguistic backgrounds. This understanding, that no two students are the same, and that effective teaching must be personalized, has deeply informed my desire to pursue education and communications work in the future.

This summer expanded my global perspective by bringing the world to my hometown. One of the most valuable aspects of this experience was the deep relationships I formed with individual learners, something I could only have done by staying in one place and showing up consistently. That being said, if I were to plan this project again, I would consider expanding it to serve multiple cities or libraries longer term in order to reach more students.

Ultimately, this summer has solidified my belief in the power of language as a tool for connection and equity. I plan to continue pursuing this kind of work in the future, and I'm incredibly grateful to the Nichols Humanitarian Program for helping me discover this path.





## LAASYA CHALLA

Molecular & Cellular Biology; Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: Ooltewah, TN

Project Location: Mysore, Karnataka, India

*Laasya interned with the Public Health Research Institute of India to conduct community-based research and educational outreach on women's health.*

This summer I worked with the Public Health Research Institute of India (PHRII) in Mysore, Karnataka, joining a team of women who bring research and care to the very doorsteps of those most often left out of India's healthcare system. Alongside interns from across India and the U.S., I participated in mobile cervical cancer screening camps, shadowed qualitative interviews with breast cancer survivors, and contributed to research on mental health correlates among women facing the dual burden of illness and stigma. My colleagues welcomed me with warmth and coffee, but more importantly, with the invitation to join a movement that braids scientific rigor with community trust.

Receiving the stipend that supported my summer was not simply an act of financial assistance; it was the scaffolding that allowed me to sit in living rooms in rural villages, to witness how women weigh health decisions in the shadow of social hierarchies, to ask questions about why hysterectomies are disproportionately common, and to grasp the ways structural inequities imprint themselves on the body. The experience expanded my understanding of global health far beyond the pages of textbooks. It reminded me that inequities are never abstract — they are stitched into who eats first in a household, who walks miles to reach a clinic, and who feels permitted to speak in public.

My perspective has shifted from curiosity to accountability. I entered Mysore hoping to learn, and I leave carrying the responsibility to apply this learning in future work. I once thought of global health as primarily about delivering care where resources are scarce. Now I see it as listening to the wisdom already embedded in communities, dismantling the systems that restrict access, and advocating for approaches that honor dignity as much as they improve outcomes.

The learning was reciprocal. From the women of the villages, I learned resilience disguised as routine: the way they spoke of hardship with composure, the way they offered advice to neighbors after surviving breast cancer, and the way they carved out space for joy in children's laughter, even when resources were scarce. From my colleagues at PHRII, I learned the art of

translation: how to carry complex concepts of cancer prevention into conversations shaped by caste, gender, and generational beliefs. In return, I shared research skills, supported data analysis, and offered a perspective on methodological approaches, but perhaps more importantly, I gave witness. Sometimes what people need is not only resources but recognition — the affirmation that their struggles matter in a global conversation.

My goals grew as my surroundings tested them. I came with an interest in public health research; I left with a commitment to health equity as a lifelong pursuit. I honed practical skills in qualitative interviewing, survey development, and data analysis. Still, more profoundly, I sharpened the capacity to sit with discomfort — to acknowledge when interventions were resisted, when mistrust ran deep, and when my outsider status required humility over assertion.

I plan to continue this work by developing an abstract for the Consortium of Universities for Global Health conference, hoping to share our findings on depression among breast cancer survivors. Beyond publication, I am envisioning future projects that bridge my training with community-based participatory research, where the voices of women themselves guide every step. Should I not return immediately, I know the PHRII team is prepared to sustain the work; their infrastructure, their networks of ASHA workers, and their lived commitment are what made my presence even possible.

If I could design the project again, I would keep intact the immersion: the chai-fueled mornings, the long walks home through lakeside streets, the balance of research and fieldwork, and the Zumba in the office that softened the edges of hard days. What I would change is my preparedness to navigate conversations about hysterectomies and menstruation, topics laced with cultural nuance and personal pain. I wish I had arrived with more tools for addressing the entanglement of health, patriarchy, and religion. Yet perhaps that gap itself is part of the education: that cultural humility must always precede intervention, and that service is as much about rethinking one's assumptions as it is about giving one's time.

This summer was not a checklist of projects completed; it was an apprenticeship in seeing. Seeing the woman who refused screening not because she did not care, but because her husband's word mattered more. Seeing the children who called me akka, sister, as they placed a ring in my hand. Seeing how inequities root themselves not only in policy but in daily life. And in all this seeing, I learned to witness not as a tourist or an outsider, but as an ally in the ongoing work of justice.



# ABDOULAYE CHARLES

Political Science, '27

Hometown: Antioch, TN

Project Location: Nashville, TN

*Abdoulaye launched a STEM-focused nonprofit in Nashville for middle school students.*

Over the course of the Summer, I have learned a great deal about what it means to have a life that exceeds your means. A life in which the smiles of other people hold more value than the materialistic things that we emphasize in our daily lives. It was something I was given the chance to do; thanks to the funding from the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I was able to make a bunch of children smile. Over the course of this year, I felt an urge to create, develop, and execute something that would have a lasting impact within the Nashville community. This time around, I wanted to introduce something to the younger generation that had also helped me gain access to the opportunities I have today. Within this reflection, I want to highlight the duration of the planning, the communications, and the foreseeable future of what the funding has done for us.

In the initial phases of our project, we were conflicted about the dates of our program, as students had just finished school and we wanted to ensure that enough students would be able to participate in this program. During this time, however, we ensured that the goal was clear: we wanted to reintroduce STEM back into a community that had been neglected. I emphasize this because, in my community of Antioch, we are severely uneducated and lack the skills needed actually to engage with STEM. We'd see robots and other fascinating machinery, but we don't have the skills required to even make use of what we are exposed to. I remember when I first came to Vanderbilt, I had zero clue about what physics, calculus, and geometry were, because, once again, my school did not offer them. I was very interested in robotics growing up and wanted to do a lot with it when I got to college. Though, I had to give up on those dreams because I did not have the necessary knowledge to complete it, although I wanted to ensure that I would be the last student from my community to neglect their dreams due to being in an underprivileged setting.

During the early weeks of August, I hosted a program at the Nashville Public Library in Antioch, where a group of middle school KIPP students used our Sphero Robots that we had provided to create a contraption that allowed them to travel from point A to point B. The end goal was to see

who could get the farthest, and with the materials we provided. This was one of our inaugural moments as a new nonprofit, where we observed how the students behaved with our workshop and identified areas for improvement. Therefore, with the funding we received from the Nichols family, I am using it for a greater purpose.

With the money I was given, I wanted to create something that would last, not just a one-time investment followed by neglect. I have decided to take on a new project, and with the funding provided by the Nichols Fund, I am actively working on creating a new nonprofit. I am collaborating with the Nashville Public Library and KIPP to create a weekly STEM workshop that will teach middle schoolers about the fields of research once a week. I am making this organization because I want these children to challenge their thinking and apply what they learn in their curricula to a culminating project that they will complete at the end of every quarter. This is important because education is often used to measure students qualitatively, but I wanted them instead to take what they've learned and apply it to something that interests them.

Thanks to the support of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I've been able to bring a new project to life, one that sheds light on dying dreams. I'm truly thankful for this experience and the opportunities.





## LAUREN CHUNG

Human & Organizational Development, '26

Hometown: Palo Alto, CA

Project Location: Naxxar, Malta

*Lauren served as a teaching assistant in Malta, supporting children with intellectual disabilities and autism by designing and implementing lessons.*

This summer, I spent four weeks in Malta, working with Inspire Malta's STEP Beyond program, which serves children with intellectual disabilities and autism. As a Teaching Assistant, I supported students aged 10 to 13 years old, assisted educators in the classroom, and designed two evidence-based lesson plans focused on emotional intelligence. My goal was to help students better identify their emotions and learn strategies for regulating them which are skills especially challenging for children on the autism spectrum. In my first week, I observed classrooms and built relationships with students and staff. During the second week, I introduced basic concepts about emotions through interactive visuals, stories, and games. In the third week, I implemented a lesson plan on helping students recognize how their feelings influence behavior, and in the fourth week, I introduced regulation strategies like mindfulness and calm-down tools. This experience profoundly shaped my global perspective. Before arriving, I knew Malta faced a shortage of special education resources and trained teachers, but working directly with students and educators gave me a deeper understanding of how these systemic gaps affect children's development. One of the most meaningful aspects of this project was the mutual learning that took place. I learned from the students' resilience and adaptability, and from the educators' creativity in working with limited resources. Together, we co-created lesson plans that were both practical and culturally relevant. On a personal level, this experience strengthened my confidence as an educator and taught me to be more flexible, patient, and present. It deepened my passion for supporting students with autism and reaffirmed my long-term goal of pursuing a career in special education administration. Looking forward, I plan to continue supporting Inspire Malta by collaborating with faculty on future lesson plans and sharing additional strategies I learn at Vanderbilt. Thanks to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I had the opportunity to build meaningful connections, contribute to sustainable change, and grow as both a learner and educator.



# KATHRINE CORRENTI

Human & Organizational Development; Political Science, '26

Hometown: Nashville, TN

Project Location: Sydney, Australia

*Kathrine volunteered at a food bank, gaining hands-on experience addressing food insecurity.*

As I reflect on my weeks in Sydney I am deeply grateful to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for making this experience possible and to Foodbank for welcoming me into their work. I have spent much of my professional experience in settings working with children. From summer camps to school programming, I have been lucky enough to impact the lives of children all over the country and world. Many of my students have touched my heart in their own ways but they all fill me with passion to make the world a better place. It's easy to look at the world and feel hopeless but their innocence, joy, and creativity revives me. There are many challenges I wish I could solve for them—including bullying, divorce, poverty, and cancer. All of these problems feel so complex but hunger seems to have a relatively simple, albeit dumbed-down, immediate solution. There is more than enough food in the world, yet so many children still have to worry about where their next meal will come from.

Food insecurity is a pressing global issue, especially for young people. Inconsistent access to nutritious, filling food can be harmful to health and education. Hunger often leads to behavioral and social challenges, difficulty succeeding in school, and physical health problems that disrupt development.

While there's obviously no simple fix to an issue that plagues societies across the globe, there are wonderful organizations doing the work to solve the issue as they mitigate the devastating consequences. In Nashville, I've occasionally partnered with the Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee, and in Sydney I found a similar mission at Foodbank NSW. Seeing these efforts on opposite sides of the world reinforced for me that while hunger is a global challenge, communities everywhere are finding ways to respond with compassion and action.

My work with Foodbank NSW was the perfect intersection of my academic and personal interests. I had exposure to policy work, practical action putting food where it is most needed, and organization design research in action. My favorite program that Foodbank runs is for school

breakfasts in the region. I also really enjoyed getting to meet the long term volunteers and getting to know more about volunteer culture in Australia. It's the dedication of these volunteers that has allowed Foodbank to source food for over 92 million meals in the past year. This food is distributed to 2,844 frontline charities and 3,379 school breakfast programs.

I learned so much about myself on this trip, got to explore a beautiful part of the world, and am walking away with a deeper understanding about how volunteer culture can impact operation and mission success. Foodbank's work is clearly community-driven, highly organized, and focused on dignity and access. It was inspiring to see the impact that individuals can have when working toward a shared mission of food security. I am taking the things I learned through this experience, especially the dedication of my fellow volunteers, home to apply to my own life and work.



## ERIN DAVIS

Molecular and Cellular Biology, '27

Hometown: Plainfield, IL

Project Location: Hawaii and Costa Rica

*Erin explored healthcare and the social determinants of health in Hawaii and Costa Rica, observing how culture, community, and resource limitations shape patient care.*

Words are not sufficient to express my gratitude for the experience. Through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I was able to begin the process of exploring what it truly means to be a healthcare provider around the world. A prominent theme within my research, volunteer work, and career goals is the social determinants of health. This can be understood as the intersection of extrinsic factors and how they affect accessibility and quality of healthcare for patients. In this instance, being able to explore cities within the United States and Latin America made me realize that denotations of culture don't sufficiently describe its repercussions and consequences on community. It is a multifaceted term with several implications on lifestyle, joy, and social cohesion. All factors that are integral to our understanding of social determinants of health. In the days living, walking and interacting with people in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii and San Jose, Costa Rica I realized that culture wasn't simply a shirt woven intricately, nor a dish served on special holidays, but rather a sense of belonging and how much those feelings were valued.

In Kona for instance, through interacting with native populations, I realized that there was a strong sense of altruism. Greetings alone were met with long conversations and warm long hugs. Compassion and generosity from strangers often transcended beyond physical. This was a noticeable remedy for low-income families that lacked the means to buy food, medical supplies, or housing repairs.

Because culture often augments different communities, the displacement of and loss of indigenous culture has been a growing concern. Concurrently, I learned that it is shifting the dynamic within the island. Talking to families and unhoused communities allowed me to learn that the growing presence of short-term rentals and Airbnb properties has displaced many native families, gradually, reshaping the cultural fabric of the community and limiting opportunities for younger generations to remain rooted in heritage. A heritage that is so important for the maintenance and preservation of lifestyles, health, and wellness. This tension between strong cultural bonds and external economic pressures deepened my understanding of socio-politics is inseparable with healthcare and questions of equity, land, and belonging.

This differed in many ways living in San Jose for over two weeks. Initially, being perceived through another language muddled my understanding of the realities of living in Latin America. While I am an intermediate student learning Spanish, it was a natural barrier to overcome, realizing that I will not fully conceptualize Costa Rican culture as a foreigner. Despite this, interactions with locals minimized this gap as they were welcoming, kind, and willing to learn as much as they were willing to teach. This strong sense of altruism was noticeably different than American culture. Locals framed their problems as something temporary, often prioritizing gratitude for their own opportunities. This is reflected in a popular phrase 'pura vida', akin to the phrase "no problem". Issues were minimized and successes were celebrated. Being a volunteer at La Casa de La Virgen Obras Sociales, I quickly realized this as the staff were mostly voluntary clinicians, physicians, nurses, and dentists that have been participating in the program for years. From 7 am to 11 am, and sometimes 12 pm, healthcare providers lead their job with commitment and dedication. I remember shadowing for a general physician, a patient had left the consultation with a sense of relief knowing there would be a solution for their chest and back pain. In these instances, the doctor will explore a variety of options such as medication, forwarded their paperwork to "doctors without borders", or scheduling a follow-up checkup. This is because many of the physicians and surgeons understand that their patients are often refugees or immigrants from other Latin American countries that lack insurance, or homeless communities that don't have the means to afford insurance. In both instances, doctors may not have the means to find a permanent solution but can provide the best alternative.

Seeing healthcare providers lead with kindness, compassion, and a genuine desire for solutions helped me discern the merits of being a doctor. That is way more than just administering medicine or doing checkups, it's in a sense, committing yourself to your patient. This is a compassion universal to the field, but especially unique because of Costa Rica's rich communal culture. Thus, during my time there, I began to understand healthcare as more than a system of treatments, but a collective responsibility, deeply interwoven within community values. The resilience of both providers and patients revealed to me that health is not only about clinical outcomes but also about fostering dignity, trust, and hope. Witnessing physicians serve those without resources, often going beyond what was required, reshaped my perspective of what it means to "practice medicine." It is not solely a profession, but a vocation grounded in service and empathy.





## KATHERINE DIAZ

Neuroscience, '27

Hometown: Austin, MN

Project Location: Panama City, Panama

*Katherine provided medical aid in rural Panama, assisting with patient care and Spanish interpretation.*

This summer, I took part in the Global Brigades program outside of Panama City, Panama. As part of the program, I worked with a variety of medical professionals, such as local doctors, dentists, and other professionals working in the clinic. In addition, I was surrounded with a variety of Vanderbilt undergraduates and a few other undergraduates from various other US schools. Receiving the stipend was essential to my ability to attend the trip; it was a huge blessing for me and allowed me to see a very authentic subsection of Latin America. Being from a Latin-American background, I am very familiar with some of the common cultural norms that can be seen in rural areas; however, being able to get an in-person view of the need for medical care in Panama was eye opening. This scholarship has granted me the ability to continue to be fortunate for what I have been given, and I took away a new appreciation for the impact of being able to give essential medical care.

One of the most impactful parts of the trip for me was being one of the few bilingual students and getting to interpret medical Spanish for the other Vanderbilt students. Just as I was able to learn more about the need for medical care in rural parts of Panama, others around me also participated in collaborative learning by engaging in conversations in Spanish, even when they might not be as familiar with the language as I am. In addition, the communities that I visited were incredibly impactful for me to see, as I got to learn more about common medical procedures from the local doctors and families in the community. One example of this was getting to work with a dentist to shadow teeth extraction. Although I am not interested in going into dentistry, being able to communicate to the locals in Spanish made the experience much more seamless.

One of my goals that I have been driven to accomplish at Vanderbilt has been to take advantage of being bilingual in Spanish to drive change in areas where medical care might not be as prevalent. This trip reaffirmed my reasoning for my class choices in university and taught me numerous new words and phrases with respect to medical terminology in both English and

Spanish! To continue learning what I did in Panama, I decided to become a medical interpreter at a local clinic in Nashville. I believe that being a medical interpreter here in Nashville will keep up my medical Spanish skills as well as be a way to give back.

If I could plan my project again, I would stay in a country in Latin America. However, I would like the experience of visiting more diverse communities during the brigade. Due to time constraints, this was not possible on my trip. I wish to return to Panama or a different area of Latin America on another Brigades trip as this was one of the most impactful clinical experiences I have done during my college career.



## NAHUM ENDALE

Biochemistry; Medicine, Health, & Society, '27

Hometown: Murfreesboro, TN

Project Location: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

*Nahum provided new chemistry lab equipment to an underfunded high school in Ethiopia, teaching students how to use it and guiding them through lab procedures.*

My Nichols Humanitarian Fund project involved purchasing high school chemistry lab equipment for a local school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and assisting in a two-week training session for the local high school teachers.

My mentor for this project, Dr. Daniel Erenso from Middle Tennessee State University, notified me about the poor educational environment that students in Ethiopia are facing and planned to donate materials to a local high school. After hearing about this, I then received a letter from the director of Ayer Tena High School in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, describing the lack of chemistry equipment and the abysmal conditions of the school. Ayer Tena is a public high school that has struggled to receive updated resources due to the economic hardships that Ethiopia has faced. I felt motivated to help in any way I could, which led me to apply for the Nichols Humanitarian Fund and contribute to this project.

After getting the funds, I purchased chemistry lab equipment such as graduated cylinders, beakers, spectrometers, scales with weighing paper, and other basic materials that are commonly used in American high school chemistry classes. A goal of the project was to educate the local high school teachers on how to utilize the equipment and incorporate them whenever they teach their students. Another NHF recipient, Yonatan Tariku, and I selected chemistry lessons that made good use of the equipment and importantly did not require any chemicals that would be hard to get. The school does not have any ventilation system and there is not a fume hood installed, meaning that harsh chemicals could not be used in the lessons. Also, we did not want to burden the teachers to purchase any outside materials in order to encourage them to use the equipment when they teach their students.

The two-week training session was held from May 12 to May 23 at the Col. John C. Robinson American Corner at St. Mary's University. The students were preparing for their end-of-year exams at Ayer Tena, so the event was held at a space sponsored by the American Embassy. Dr. Erenso, Yonatan, and I were able to bring over thousands of dollars' worth of physics and

chemistry lab equipment for Ayer Tena High School because of the NHF grant and other organizations that also sponsored the event, such as the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia, Cruise School in Addis Ababa, the Ayer Tena Alumni Association, and Middle Tennessee State University. During the first week of the training, Dr. Erenso taught the teachers how to use a variety of physics equipment. The second week was devoted to chemistry lessons, where Yonatan and I were able to demonstrate exercises about Boyle's Law, absorbance and transmittance, conductivity of different solvents, and other primary chemistry standards. The teachers were able to try the lessons on their own, and at the end of the training we provided them with copies of the lecture so that they could replicate the experiments at Ayer Tena High School.

Outside of the training, I had a great time in Addis Ababa. A lot of my family lives in Ethiopia, so being able to see my grandmother and my aunts and uncles was a memorable experience. The country was filled with beautiful scenery such as the forestry in Entoto Park and the water show at Friendship Park. The people were very welcoming as well, with the American Corner staff helping us out with scheduling and setting up the classroom each morning. I learned a lot about the stark differences between American high schools and Ethiopian classrooms and the resources gap that affects the quality of the education. We were able to tour Ayer Tena High School during the conclusion ceremony, and seeing the conditions of the school made me glad I was able to contribute to improving the educational quality for the students.



# HALE ANNA ESPINOZA

Law, '26

Hometown: Phoenix, AZ

Project Location: Portland, OR

*Anna worked as a Certified Law Student intern, representing indigent clients in misdemeanor cases and managing all aspects of their defense, from investigation to courtroom advocacy.*

This summer I worked as a Certified Law Student intern (“CLS”) at the Metropolitan Public Defender’s Office in downtown Portland, Oregon (“MPD”). In a 1963 case called *Gideon*, the United States Supreme Court held that in criminal prosecutions, the Sixth Amendment to the United State Constitution guarantees the right to the assistance of counsel and requires courts to provide counsel for accused people who cannot pay for a lawyer. MPD was born out of this case.

Oregon permits law students to represent clients in court as long as they meet specific educational requirements and practice under the supervision of a licensed attorney. As a CLS, I had my own misdemeanor caseload and I was responsible for directing investigation as well as handling all other aspects of my cases, including negotiating with prosecutors, researching legal issues and writing motions, building relationships with clients, appearing in court, and preparing for trial. I also served as co-chair on additional misdemeanor cases at the request of some of the attorneys in my office.

Receiving the stipend from the Nichols Humanitarian Fund allowed me to work for a longer period of time, meaning I was able to hone skills needed to serve indigent clients in Multnomah County and give those clients the most effective representation I could. Most law students work for 10 weeks during their summers. I worked for 12 weeks, two of which included a Trial Boot Camp where MPD attorneys drilled us on every aspect of a trial, including jury selection, opening, direct and cross examination, evidentiary objections, motions for judgment of acquittal, closing argument, and sentencing arguments. The feedback we got from attorneys was amazing — they went so far as to film each of us arguing in an actual courtroom and review the tapes individually with us to teach us how we could improve our advocacy.

Each of the clients I had the pleasure of working with was extremely engaged in their case. I felt that I was quickly learning more about what it meant to be a client-centered public defender. It’s important to ask the client to visualize their desired outcome for their case so that your strategic decisions as an advocate align with their goals. Respecting and honoring client decisions makes



the job easier in many ways. I was anxious to show my clients that I was invested in their cases and grateful when they trusted me to push hard for their desired outcomes. Their trust in me is what allowed me to leave the office with an extensive and undefeated record of litigation. One of the best moments of the summer was arguing and winning a motion to dismiss and getting to see the look on my client's face and shake their hand afterwards.

I gain a lot of energy when I'm around public defenders and other people who believe in the mission of public defense. My coworkers were exceptionally skilled and great at celebrating the many wins we all achieved for our clients, as well as supporting each other through sad times. I plan to challenge myself to improve in several key areas in the near future: my ability to advocate for racial justice as a future public defender and my research and writing skills. I'm looking forward to several opportunities for growth in these areas in the next year, including attending the National Association for Public Defense Racial Justice Conference, completing another public defense externship, and obtaining a postgraduate judicial clerkship.



## SHAYAAN ESSANI

Medicine, Health, & Society; Psychology, '26

Hometown: Hoover, AL

Project Location: Nashville, TN

*Shayaan and Ahmed Imami created a nonprofit organization that empowers the less fortunate in Nashville and beyond to manage their physical, social, and mental well-being.*

This summer, I used my Nichols stipend to power my nonprofit, The L.I.F.E. Ahead (Lifelong Improvement through Fitness and Exercise) to improve access to physical and mental health for underserved populations in Nashville, TN Karachi, Pakistan. I partnered with a number of local nonprofits locally, like the Room in the Inn, Fifty Forward, and Dismas House, and internationally with The Citizens Foundation college. I taught lessons on lifestyle medicine at each of these organizations, offering knowledge on physical exercises like resistance band stretching and mental exercises like mindful breathing. These lessons were accompanied by wellness kits to enrich each person's wellness routines, like stress balls, resistance stretching bands, aromatherapy oils, and more.

Receiving this stipend is the only reason I was able to impact so many people, locally and globally. My perspective became much broader as I began to realize how hard it can be to orchestrate a service project, even as mine was one of a smaller magnitude. There are many financial and logistical concerns. Without the stipend that allowed me to dream of sending wellness kits to Pakistan, I would not have gained experience of collaborating with an international nonprofit, budgeting costs for wellness kits, and preparing the best ways to teach these kids who are thousands of miles away.

A majority of my service involved teaching, and as someone interested in education, I was happy to do that. In a more fulfilling way, the people I served also educated me. For example, even right here in Nashville, I learned about the 'bubble' I live in at Vanderbilt. Just a few miles away are the homeless shelters like the Room in the Inn and reentry programs like Dismas House, where people are fighting to survive. Hearing their stories, learning about their livelihood, and using my Nichols project to understand their needs has broadened my perspective and inspires me to prioritize serving the underserved during a future career in medicine.

I am certainly focused on ensuring the impact of The L.I.F.E. Ahead is sustainable here in Nashville, and that its mission is felt in similar cities facing poor health outcomes for those who

cannot access healthcare. Wherever I go to medical school, I aspire to collaborate with my future classmates and institution to initiate a chapter of The L.I.F.E. Ahead there. I am also working on earning student organization status at Vanderbilt, so that Vanderbilt undergraduates can continue the partnerships I've begun with local nonprofits.

Finally, as I reflect on my project, there are a couple of things I wish I had done differently. I wanted to create a video education platform with my curriculum which would include tutorials of the lessons I teach. With this, I could translate the lessons into different languages and distribute the curriculum with more international partners. Another, similar goal was to teach my lesson at schools. I would try to spend more time planning and developing my project earlier in the summer so I could have met these goals. I underestimated the amount of time it would take to communicate with new partners, send proposals, and figure out logistics, and I would change these outcomes with more proactive thinking.

I will always be grateful to the Nichols family for giving myself and other Vanderbilt students this invaluable experience. Thank you to everyone on the grant team as well. It has been a pleasure working with you all.



# PRAVEENA ESWARAN

Human & Organizational Development, '27

Hometown: Highlands Ranch, CO

Project Location: Denver, CO

*Praveena volunteered with Meliora Charity in Denver, supporting outreach, partnerships, and programs for young adults experiencing chemotherapy-induced hair loss.*

This summer, I had the privilege of dedicating my time to Meliora Charity, an organization based in Colorado that is committed to providing wigs and head accessories to young adults facing hair loss due to medical treatments and conditions. My work focused on expanding the charity's reach through strategic partnerships, comprehensive research, and grant application support. I collaborated closely with community leaders, healthcare professionals, volunteer coordinators, and board members to gain a deeper understanding of the scope of need and develop sustainable solutions for addressing this often-overlooked aspect of medical care.

Receiving the Nichols Humanitarian Fund stipend was transformative in allowing me to pursue this passion project with the dedication it deserved. By reducing financial pressure, I could immerse myself fully in humanitarian work that had been calling to me for years. The stipend enabled me to conduct thorough research, revealing that approximately 800 young adults in Colorado alone may need wigs and head accessories due to cancer treatments and other medical conditions causing hair loss. This number represents a fraction of the global need, highlighting how small, focused charitable efforts like Meliora's have the potential to scale into larger organizations that serve communities worldwide. This shift in perspective from local to global impact has fundamentally changed how I view social change, understanding that meaningful transformation often begins with targeted, community-based solutions that can eventually expand their reach.

The collaborative learning that occurred throughout my service was perhaps the most valuable aspect of the experience. Working with diverse stakeholders – from doctors who understood the medical necessity of our services to volunteer coordinators who were familiar with the logistics of community engagement – taught me the critical importance of tailoring communication to different audiences. I learned to present the same core mission in various ways, emphasizing different benefits and approaches depending on whether I was speaking with healthcare professionals, potential community partners, or grant reviewers. Each stakeholder brought

unique insights that enriched my understanding of nonprofit work and the complex ecosystem required to create lasting change.

From community leaders, I learned about the cultural sensitivities surrounding appearance and self-esteem in different populations. Healthcare professionals taught me about the medical realities behind hair loss and the psychological impact on patients. Board members shared their expertise in organizational sustainability and strategic planning. In return, I brought fresh research perspectives, energy for partnership development, and skills in grant writing that helped articulate the organization's impact in new ways. Through developing case studies with the support of doctors, I helped create evidence-based documentation that could strengthen future funding applications.

This service experience solidified my interest in social impact work as a career path. The combination of strategic thinking, community engagement, and measurable outcomes in nonprofit work resonated deeply with my personal values and professional aspirations. I developed both soft and hard skills that will serve me throughout my career. Learning to communicate persuasively and clearly across diverse audiences has enhanced my presentation skills, while mastering the grant writing process and case study methodology has provided me with concrete tools for articulating organizational missions and demonstrating impact. These skills have broadened my understanding of how to clearly communicate an organization's potential reach to funders and supporters.

My commitment to this work extends beyond the summer experience. I plan to continue collaborating with Meliora Charity remotely from school, maintaining relationships with community leaders and organizing fundraising events to support the organization's growth. The partnerships I helped establish with local schools and community organizations provide a foundation for ongoing engagement, and I'm excited to see how these relationships develop over time.

Reflecting on the experience, I maintain most elements of my approach while implementing more structured project management. Rather than working on grant writing, community outreach, and partnership maintenance simultaneously, I would benefit from dedicating focused weeks to specific projects. This would allow for deeper dives into each area and potentially more polished outcomes in each domain.

This summer reinforced my belief that meaningful change happens through sustained, thoughtful engagement with communities. The Nichols Humanitarian Fund didn't just provide financial support; it offered the freedom to discover how individual passion can align with community needs to create a lasting impact.





## KATELYN GREENFIELD

Special Education; Child Development, '26

Hometown: Centennial, CO

Project Location: Kathmandu, Nepal

*Katelyn volunteered with a Kathmandu-based organization that provides care and support for children with intellectual disabilities.*

This summer, thanks to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I had the opportunity to travel to Kathmandu, Nepal and volunteer at the Association for the Welfare of the Intellectually Handicapped (AWIH) through International Volunteer HQ. My friend and special education cohort member, Allison Starkey, joined me on this adventure, and together we spent a month working with children and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Each day looked a little different, but much of our time was spent helping with English instruction, practicing fine and gross motor skills, and assisting with daily routines and basic PT/OT exercises. Just as importantly, though, we spent time playing, laughing, and building relationships with the students and staff who welcomed us so warmly.

Going into this experience, I thought I knew what to expect: teach some English, do some activities, and learn about education in another culture. But being at AWIH quickly shifted my perspective. In Nepal, there are far fewer resources available for students with disabilities compared to what I've seen in the United States. The classrooms were simple, the materials were limited, and the staff were doing so much with so little. At first, I wasn't sure how effective we could be without the structured lessons, technology, or adaptive tools I usually rely on. But that challenge ended up being one of the best parts of the experience. It pushed me to get creative, to slow down, and to focus on what really matters — connection, patience, and meeting each student where they were.

I came to see that good teaching doesn't always need to look polished or complicated. Sometimes it's singing the same song repeatedly until a student joins in with a smile. Sometimes it's practicing hand-over-hand to help with a motor skill, or celebrating a small success that feels huge in the moment. These bare-bones moments taught me that inclusion isn't about fancy resources — it's about care, consistency, and holding high expectations for every student, no matter the setting.

What stood out the most to me was how much we were learning, not just teaching. The staff at AWIH showed us resilience and creativity every day. They modeled how to adapt with limited resources and reminded us that passion and dedication go farther than any tool. The students taught us about persistence, humor, and joy. They reminded us not to take small victories for granted. While Allison and I tried to share new strategies and encouragement, the exchange was mutual — the learning went both ways, and it made the experience so much richer.

On a personal level, my month in Nepal stretched me as both a future educator and as a person. I left feeling more confident in my ability to adapt in new situations and more committed to making special education both inclusive and equitable. I also realized how much I love working at the intersection of education and advocacy. My time at AWIH made me want to keep thinking about disability in a global context and how I can be a voice for equity no matter where I'm teaching.

If I could plan the project again, I would keep almost everything the same. My placement at AWIH was the perfect fit. The only thing I might change is preparing ahead by bringing simple, adaptable teaching tools we could have left behind for the staff. Sustainability is so important, and I would want to make sure that some of the activities we introduced could continue after we left.

Looking back, this experience was truly transformative. It reminded me why I chose this path and gave me a deeper sense of purpose as I continue my studies in special education. Most of all, it showed me that inclusion looks different everywhere, but the values of compassion, patience, and community are universal. I am so thankful to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for making this opportunity possible. It gave me the chance to grow, to learn from incredible people, and to take one more step toward becoming the kind of educator I hope to be.



## HANA HAILU

Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: Mount Juliet, TN

Project Location: Sigatoka, Fiji

*Hana taught kindergarten students through the IVHQ program, where she collaborated with local teachers, engaged in cultural exchange, and developed cultural humility.*

This summer, I was fortunate to travel to Sigatoka, Fiji, through the IVHQ program in partnership with a local organization called Green Lion. I had spent two weeks there, and it was a time I will never forget. During my stay, I had the opportunity to teach at Sigatoka Kindergarten, where I worked alongside their teacher to lead lessons in math, English, health science, and social science. Each day, I was welcomed by smiling little faces, eager to learn and also teach me about Fiji. Although incredibly shy and reserved at first, the class quickly became more than just a learning space...it had become a place of laughter, cultural exchange, and connection for me.

Receiving the Nichols Humanitarian Fund/stipend is what made this experience possible for me, as I wouldn't have been able to alone, and it is what helped me broaden my global perspective and be able to be immersed in a new culture. Before traveling, I had a general idea of global education inequalities and how culturally different it could also be, but being able to witness it firsthand was actually transformative in a way. Teaching in Sigatoka showed me that learning does indeed look different across different cultures, but the value of curiosity, kindness, and effort to learn is something that is oppositely universal. Even with limited/run-down resources, these students' enthusiasm and eagerness to learn never wavered. This ability they possess to make the most of what they have constantly reminded me during my stay that education isn't just about what material or even technology that one may have, but is also about the connection and effort between the teachers and the students in the classroom.

Living and working in Fiji has also helped me understand the power of community and kindness. Outside the classroom, I was immersed in Fijian culture through food, traditional ceremonies (for example like a Kava ceremony I had partaken in), and unsaid but understood Fijian rules in small rural towns, among many other things. I learned how to prepare traditional foods like cassava (really good by the way) and fish stew, and in the process gained a deep appreciation for how the Fijian community values kindness/hospitality and togetherness. In turn, I was also able to share details about my own background and how it was living here in the U.S. (which the kids were more than excited to hear/ask about). One thing I vividly remember was

playing music from my phone during their recess, which they found very intriguing. This kind of back-and-forth kind of learning was very rewarding for me and my experience, and reminded me that service isn't always just about one side having to give and the other just receiving, but is rather about being able to both connect somehow and grow through shared curiosity and also respect (especially for any differences, whether it be culture, looks, rules, etc).

My goals that I had at the beginning of the summer before leaving for Fiji were able to be accomplished throughout this trip. I had entered Fiji hoping to make a difference, even if it was a little, but left not only feeling like I had done little but also left with a greater sense of adaptability (especially because of living conditions!), cultural humility, and more. Teaching young children and volunteering in a different cultural context has made me think creatively about different ways of communication, sometimes even using just smiles and gestures, when words weren't enough. It also taught me how important sometimes to slow down and just listen is, to value connections over than just simply doing a task, and to see progress not only in the academic realm, but just in the joy of learning in itself. These lessons I was able to learn will undoubtedly influence how I approach future volunteering opportunities, whether it be in education, service, or global immersion.

Even though my time in Fiji was short, I have continued to reflect on my time there and on how to continue the impact of what I have started there. I am also happy to say I have stayed in touch with the other volunteers I met at the Green Lion house, and the people I had met there were also very diverse, with some volunteers from Australia, some from London, and even some were from here in the U.S., from places like Atlanta. I hope to return to Fiji to see the kids again and work on similar projects abroad in the future. For now, though, I am determined to apply what I had learned there in Fiji to other local volunteer efforts in my community. For example, I am working on a way to tackle food deserts right here in Nashville with one of the organizations I am in (NSBWM). I hope to bring the same feeling of connection and optimism that I witnessed and felt in Fiji to everything I do here in Nashville as well.

If I could plan this trip or project again, there are both things I would have changed and kept. I would have absolutely 100% kept the intimate collaboration with the local teachers and the cultural immersion experiences as a whole because it helped me feel a part of their community. However, one thing I would've changed would have been to spend more time beforehand, maybe preparing creative lesson material, because I really was only able to do so for the first couple of days there, and if I had more time, I think I would have been able to come up with may more creative lesson to teach the kids. I also would have tried to learn more Fijian phrases because I loved how happy it made the kids and other locals to put effort into trying to communicate with them. Even so, the randomness in a way and the imperfections are part of what makes the experience genuine and memorable for me.

In conclusion, looking back on the time I spent in Sigatoka wasn't just a volunteer trip for me, but was also a journey of growth, humility, AND shared humanity. I arrived hoping to teach and get immersed in the Fijian culture, but ended up learning just as much, and if not more, from the students and the community as a whole. Even though the word "thanks" isn't enough for me to express my gratitude of having such an opportunity to do so...Thanks to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for this opportunity and because of this I was able to step into a world so different from my own but leave with a renewed understanding of what to serve, to learn, and to belong means.





## ANTHONY HOANG

Neuroscience; Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: Honolulu, HI

Project Location: Honolulu, HI

*Anthony partnered with Palama Settlement to help teens from underserved backgrounds develop leadership, career exploration, and life skills through workshops, mentorship, field trips, and stipends.*

This summer, I worked with Palama Settlement, a nonprofit community organization located in Honolulu, Hawai'i. I collaborated with Executive Director Sam Aiona, Teen Center Manager Larry Sweets, and Youth Center Manager Matthew Ornelles. My responsibilities were primarily centered on support the Palama Pathways program; a free summer initiative designed for teens ages 12-18. The program's objectives were to encourage personal growth, foster career exploration, and develop leadership skills through structured workshops, field trips, mentorship, and stipends for participation.

During the program, I contributed to several areas. I assisted in designing T-shirts to promote unity and identity among the participants. I also coordinated with various community professional and organizations, including the Honolulu Police Department, respiratory therapist Debbie Dohn, Lieutenant Governor Sylvia Luke, local restaurant owners, and marine biologists. These efforts exposed students to a broad range of career pathways. Additionally, I supported the organization of Leader and Life Skills workshops, which emphasized communication, decision-making, goal-setting, and problem-solving. Complementary activities such as team competitions and mentor lunches provided opportunities for the participant to strengthen collaboration skills and build relationships with adult role models.

The stipend I received for this service experience enabled me to fully dedicate my time to working in a community that is personally significant to me. Many of the children served by Palama Settlement come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are often unaware of the resources available to them. Others required incentives to participate consistently. In response, I collaborated with Palama's board of trustees and marketing team to develop strategies to provide weekly stipends for attendance, thereby improving both engagement and accountability. This experience broadened my perspective on equity by illustrating how financial and social structure can directly influence participation and motivation in underserved communities.

As part of my contribution, I also delivered a presentation outlining my own college experience at Vanderbilt University. The intention was to demonstrate that higher education is attainable for students from similar backgrounds. Through these interactions, I learned about the aspirations and challenges of the participants, many of whom lacked consistent mentorship or parental involvement. This reinforced the importance of community-based guidance in shaping young people's confidence and long-term goals.

My own skills and objectives also developed significantly during this experience. I strengthened my public speaking ability, improved my capacity to organize multi-stakeholder initiatives, and gained experience adapting communication approaches to diverse audiences. More broadly, this work reinforced my long-term commitment to community engagement and service-oriented leadership.

Looking ahead, I intend to continue supporting the Palama Pathways Program by assisting in its expansion. Specifically, I plan to broaden recruitment efforts and develop a larger professional network to provide mentorship and career exposure for more students. If I were to redesign the project, I would prioritize improved advertising to reach a wider range of families in the community and include more service-oriented activities for the participants. These additions would not only increase enrollment but also allow the students to contribute directly to their community,

Overall, this summer experience was both valuable and transformative. It allowed me to support the development of young people in my community, contribute to the sustainability of a meaningful program, and refine my own leadership and organizational skills. The lessons learned will inform both my future academic pursuits and my continued involvement in community service initiatives.



## AHMED IMAMI

Biological Sciences; Psychology, '26

Hometown: Merritt Island, FL

Project Location: Nashville, TN

*Ahmed and Shayaan Essani created a nonprofit organization that empowers the less fortunate in Nashville and beyond to manage their physical, social, and mental well-being.*

Last year, my partner Shayaan Essani and I started a nonprofit organization, The LIFE Ahead, with the goal of bridging the gap between access to and education about mental and physical wellness resources. I fear that too many people are unable to feel empowered to take control of their health and end up being left behind with no chance to feel cared for.

We carefully created lesson plans that teach both physical and mental wellness exercises that our participants can easily take home with them. Many local nonprofit organizations, such as Room in the Inn, Dismas House, Fifty Forward, and Nashville Rescue Mission, have allowed us to lead our lessons and spread awareness about the importance of taking care of one's health. For the past year, lessons have been taught at all these community partners. However, we always wanted to help more people and leave a more sustainable solution behind.

My goal with the Nichols Humanitarian Fund was to utilize a budget to allocate money towards building an online educational platform that any user can access across the world. I did not want my program to be limited to only those in the local Nashville area. To pilot such an initiative, we needed to find a partner.

Our goal with finding a partner was to serve individuals from Pakistan – the country where my family has strong roots. I came across TCF (The Citizen's Foundation) because my mother is a chapter president and they align with our goal of empowering underserved children in both mental and physical wellbeing.

TCF's goal is to raise awareness of the lack of education access for children in Pakistan. They primarily build schools and provide resources to the majority of underserved communities across Pakistan.

With the Nichols Fund, I designed a mental wellness kit that would be sent to the children that TCF supports. It included things such as stretch bands, aromatherapy vials, stress balls, message balls, and even positive affirmation notes. Roughly 280 kits were sent to them. Alongside this resource, we carefully created and narrated educational videos that are part of our online learning platform that the students can watch at their discretion. Additionally, we are offering them live lessons for us to walk them through our lessons and provide them with the opportunity to experience our passion – the same way our local participants in Nashville would.

The second use of my Nichols Fund was to maintain my local Nashville partnerships. I brought my lessons to all my community partners: Room in the Inn, FiftyForward, Dismas House, and Nashville Rescue Mission. I took lesson plans that included both mental and physical wellness activities to teach to the individuals at each organization. With the assistance of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, my team was able to distribute our care kits as well to the individuals at each location.

The last objective of my summer project is to ensure that my organization can remain sustainable and offer resources to anyone virtually. With this fund, my team is organizing an online platform with that goal that anyone can reach virtual videos of our lessons. Shayaan and I are developing video lessons, so that anyone can view them across the world. It will allow for The LIFE Ahead to be a sustainable organization and ensure access to all!



## ZAIN IMTIAZ

Neuroscience, '27

Hometown: Valley Stream, NY

Project Location: Berlin, Germany

*Zain volunteered with the Alzheimer's Association of Germany, assisting both Alzheimer's patients and refugees.*

During the summer, I traveled to Berlin, Germany, to volunteer for the Alzheimer's Association of Germany. My duties involved helping individuals afflicted with Alzheimer's disease as well as recent refugees who were also afflicted with the disease. This experience tremendously deepened my appreciation for human vulnerability and resilience.

Having direct contact with Alzheimer's patients made me recognize the importance of empathy that transcends language or cultural barriers. The majority of the patients had memory loss, confusion, and fear, but small things, a warm smile, a familiar melody, or holding their hand, provided comfort and companionship for many of them. I recognized that compassion is a universal language that transcends words.

Beyond patient care, I helped refugees with Alzheimer's navigate Germany's health care system, which was often overwhelming in the face of language barriers and bureaucratic hurdles. Translating documents and connecting them to local support groups taught me how vital advocacy and accessibility are to humanitarian work. I realized that health care is not just treatment, it is dignity, inclusion, and compassion.

This experience challenged me to become a more involved global citizen. It made me more flexible, a more effective cross-cultural communicator, and a more patient and respectful servant of communities. Most of all, it reminded me that small actions of service can make lasting impressions in the lives of people and families who are facing unbelievable challenges. My service in Berlin reaffirmed my commitment to humanitarian efforts and encouraged me to be a voice for the voiceless.





## GABRIELLE JOSEPH

Biomedical Engineering, '27

Hometown: Longpond, PA

Project Location: Panama City, Panama

*Gabrielle helped provide medical aid and education to rural communities in Panama, identifying community needs to address healthcare disparities.*

This summer, I had the privilege of volunteering abroad in Panama with Global Brigades. I visited two rural communities with limited access to healthcare and worked alongside doctors and other volunteers to provide medical care, medications, toiletries, and education.

The summer stipend I graciously received supported this opportunity. It covered my flight to and from Panama, lodging and meals with Global Brigades, and even contributed to the purchase of medical supplies and medications for community members. This support not only made my participation possible but also directly extended its impact to the people I served.

One of the moments I am most proud of from this experience is learning to take blood pressure manually. Although I had volunteered with doctors before, I had always struggled with this skill and nearly gave up. In Panama, I slowed down, tried again, and finally succeeded. This moment taught me perseverance and gave me the confidence to keep pushing through challenges rather than abandoning them.

Before this trip, I had recently switched my major from Biomedical Engineering on the premed track to English. I felt burned out by engineering, disconnected from medicine, and unsure whether I was truly cut out for the path to becoming a doctor. But this experience reignited my passion for medicine. I loved having direct patient contact and seeing each person come into the clinic with their own unique story, like a puzzle waiting to be understood. Watching patients receive care and relief filled me with joy and reminded me why I was drawn to healthcare in the first place. This trip simplified my vision of medicine and clarified my place within it. It reminded me of my desire to help and to heal.

Although I may not return to the same communities, I plan to continue volunteering abroad in healthcare. A core mission of Global Brigades is sustainability, which is achieved by educating communities about hygiene and nutrition and supplying essential medications. Our doctors were



able to educate patients on how to manage their conditions and provide them with preventive measures in case of emergency situations. Another important element of Brigades was offering referrals to patients. In Panama it is incredibly difficult to see a physician but a doctor's referral streamlines the process. An example of sustainability is when a doctor prescribed muscle relaxers to a patient to prevent her from having a possible heart attack as a hospital was not readily accessible. These practices ensure that the impact continues beyond a single brigade.

If I were to plan my project again, I would spend more time researching the communities beforehand to better understand their specific needs and be more intentional regarding donations. I would also allocate more resources toward the more pressing local concerns. This trip gave me more than I could have asked for from the volunteers and doctors I partnered with, to the communities I served to the beauty of Panama itself. I return deeply grateful, inspired, and renewed in my commitment to medicine and service and the idea that you don't have to do everything to serve another person.



# SOPHIA KANTEJEVA

Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: North Chicago, IL

Project Location: Nashville, TN

*Sophia procured medical supplies including wound care items and shipped them to a war zone in Ukraine and made 200 first aid kits and shipped them to underserved communities in Chicago.*

This summer, I had the opportunity to begin a project rooted in public health and service: assembling and distributing medical supply kits to underserved communities in my area, including my hometown back in Round Lake, IL and across the sea in Ukraine. The work began with outreach, fundraising, and sourcing supplies. With the support of our kind donors, I was able to purchase, pack, and deliver kits containing essential items such as bandages, hygiene materials, and first aid basics. My goal was to be able to provide basic wound care kits to families who most likely cannot afford health insurance. Early in the summer, I reached out and partnered with my local food pantry, where I discussed the most needed supplies and donated 150 kits, and later expanded my passion for public health to other organizations: 50 kits to Oasis, an organization supporting LGBTQ+ youth and people facing homelessness, and \$250 worth of supplies to Project C.U.R.E., which distributes medical equipment worldwide, like those facing war in my mother's home country, Ukraine. This project was based in Nashville, Tennessee, but its impact was shaped by a broader vision of equitable access to health resources.

Receiving the Nichols Humanitarian Fund stipend allowed me to expand a project that was deeply personal to me. Having grown up in poverty and relying on the same food pantry where I later donated 150 medical kits, I was already aware of the inequities surrounding healthcare access. Those early experiences are what inspired me to pursue this work in the first place. What the stipend gave me was the ability to act on that awareness, to scale my efforts from a personal vision into a concrete initiative that could reach many families. While I came into the project knowing the barriers that underserved communities face, this summer deepened my understanding of how small, sustainable interventions can create dignity, trust, and lasting impact when rooted in lived experience.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this project was how it allowed me to come full circle with the communities I served. At Oasis, I saw how important affirming spaces are for young people facing difficult circumstances, and I witnessed how something as small as a personal

health kit could carry both practical support and emotional affirmation. At Project C.U.R.E., I learned how local donations are distributed globally, including to Ukraine, where I lost family to the war. Knowing that my contribution could help people in my homeland gave the work an added weight and urgency. Returning to my own food pantry, the same place my family relied on when I was growing up — was especially profound. Speaking with families there, I heard the same difficult trade-offs I once knew myself: choosing between rent and medication, or between groceries and hygiene supplies. In those moments, I wasn't just an organizer or donor, I was a neighbor who understood. Sharing resources and skills felt less like teaching and more like giving back to the very community that had once taught me resilience.

Personally, this project changed me in ways I did not expect, even though I entered it with lived experience of the challenges underserved communities face. At the beginning, I worried about whether I could manage the logistics: sourcing enough supplies, meeting different community needs, and communicating effectively with organizations. Over time, I grew more confident in my ability to lead, adapt, and advocate. I learned how to negotiate with suppliers for lower costs, how to plan distribution timelines, and how to tell the story of my project in ways that inspired others to contribute. Returning to the same food pantry my family once relied on, I carried both pride and humility, pride in being able to give back, and humility in recognizing how many families are still in the position I once was. Donating through Project C.U.R.E., knowing supplies would reach Ukraine where I lost family in the war, reminded me that service is also personal and global at once. My goals evolved from simply providing medical kits to building a sustainable, adaptable model of service, one that honors both the community that raised me and the people I continue to hold close, even across borders.

Looking ahead, I plan to continue this work by formalizing the project under my broader public health initiative, Movement in Medicine. I hope to expand the toolkit idea into other categories, such as mental health kits, menstrual health kits, and hydration kits. I also want to collaborate more closely with local nonprofits, schools, and hospitals to reach a larger population. Even if the project shifts in focus, I am committed to ensuring that the foundations I laid this summer, outreach relationships, distribution channels, and community trust, can be built upon for years to come.

If I could plan this project again, I would keep the strong emphasis on collaboration and community-centered design. Those conversations with families, staff members, and donors shaped the work far more than I anticipated, and I would want to preserve that. At the same time, I would adjust my planning process to build in more time for evaluation between donations. Gathering more feedback at each step would help me refine the kits and make sure they are as useful as possible. I would also start earlier with a team of volunteers, since the work of purchasing, packing, and delivering kits was more time-intensive than I had expected.

Overall, this summer reaffirmed for me that humanitarian service is not measured only by the number of supplies delivered, but by the relationships built, the stories shared, and the sense of dignity restored. Through this project, I was able to give back to the food pantry that once sustained my own family and to contribute to global efforts in Ukraine, where I have lost loved ones to war. These connections reminded me that service is both local and global, personal and communal. The Nichols Humanitarian Fund made it possible to turn a deeply personal vision into real impact, and I am profoundly grateful for the chance to begin a project that I hope will continue to grow in scale, sustainability, and reach.



## SOPHIE KAVALALI

Anthropology; Economics & History, '27

Hometown: Nashville, TN

Project Location: Neltume, Chile

*Sophie conducted archaeological fieldwork to study socioecological interactions between the Mapuche people and Northern Patagonia and the forced assimilation of indigenous communities from the 1800-1900s.*

This summer, from May 18th to June 23rd, I conducted research in Neltume, Chile under the guidance of Dr. Jacob Sauer. My project investigated the socioecological interactions between the Mapuche people and the surrounding landscapes of Northern Patagonia, with particular attention to climate mitigation, environmental history, and colonial legacies. Through lived ethnography and archaeological surveying, I came to better understand how historical institutions like colonialism have affected the way the Mapuche now interact with their land and environment.

My research allowed me to explore various fields. On the one hand, I engaged in environmental investigations. I analyzed water and clay samples to reconstruct past ecological conditions in the Choshuenco Volcano region and utilized drone LiDAR to map landscapes and identify areas of ecological change. On the other hand, my work focused on ethnography, oral history, and community engagement. Much of my time was spent building relationships with the Mapuche community through interviews, participation in cultural events, and conversations that centered on their perspectives. By bridging scientific and ethnographic methods, I sought to reconstruct both environmental histories and the lived experiences of communities affected by colonial legacies.

One of the most interesting aspects of my work was understanding the relationship between the Mapuche and Huilo-Huilo, the main hotel and employer in the area. The Mapuche people, who make up 9.1% of Chile's population, continue to face economic marginalization and limited political representation. Ecotourism, particularly in Neltume, has become a major source of income for Mapuche communities, but it is fragile and threatened both by rising ecotourism rates and by the broader effects of climate change. Through interviews and site visits, I saw firsthand how difficult this economic foundation can be for the Mapuche. At the same time, I witnessed the efforts of Huilo-Huilo to give back to the community, while also understanding the risk of ecotourism as an industry.

My time in Neltume deepened my understanding of how colonial legacies continue to shape economic and social disparities. As someone majoring in Anthropology, Economics, and History, I have long been interested in how historical institutions influence economic development. The Mapuche are a particularly compelling case study, having once secured a formal treaty of autonomy under Spanish rule, only to face assimilationist pressures after Chilean independence. Their history illustrates how colonial power structures persist long after independence, reproducing inequality across generations. Conducting fieldwork in Neltume gave me a concrete example of how these dynamics unfold on the ground, and it challenged me to think about development not only in economic terms, but also in cultural and ecological dimensions.

On a personal level, this experience was transformative. I improved my Spanish language skills, not just through formal communication but through everyday conversations. I listened to stories, songs, and ways of speaking, improving not just my Spanish but also learning Chilean slang. I also strengthened my research skills, from conducting ethnographic interviews to working with LiDAR technology. More importantly, I learned how to conduct meaningful research. This experience taught me important lessons on ethnographic surveying. By learning to work within a new community, I learned how to prioritize the voices of the community itself and build trust.

Ultimately, my time in Neltume confirmed my interest in a career in economic development. The lessons I learned will remain with me as I continue to study the intersections of anthropology, economics, and history.





## LYLA KIANI

Computer Science, '26

Hometown: Brooklyn, NY

Project Location: Okinawa, Japan

*Lyla worked at the Churaumi Aquarium, analyzing historic data on loggerhead sea turtles and engaging with local residents to understand cultural perspectives on marine conservation.*

This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to work in Okinawa, Japan, focusing on the analysis of historic data related to loggerhead sea turtles. My work combined both data-driven research and community engagement. I collaborated with local residents and staff at the Churaumi Aquarium, gathering insights from people whose lives and livelihoods are deeply connected to the ocean. These conversations helped me understand not only the ecological data but also the cultural and social context of marine conservation efforts in Japan. My research focused on analyzing a specific subsection of the migratory trajectory of loggerhead turtles that pass through Japanese waters, using both historical datasets and local perspectives to form a more holistic understanding of the species and its environment.

Receiving the Nichols Humanitarian Fund stipend allowed me to fully immerse myself in this experience. Without it, I would not have had the opportunity to travel, conduct fieldwork, and apply the skills I have gained through my studies in a real-world, cross-cultural setting. Beyond academic growth, I learned the importance of communicating beyond language—how listening, patience, and empathy can bridge cultural gaps. This experience expanded my global perspective and deepened my appreciation for how local knowledge contributes to addressing global environmental challenges.

The experience was profoundly collaborative. I learned from community members who shared generational wisdom about the ocean and the changes they've observed over time. In return, I shared methods for data analysis and visualization that could help support their ongoing conservation initiatives. This mutual exchange strengthened my understanding of communitybased science and how research can be both globally relevant and locally grounded. Through this project, I strengthened my research, communication, and cultural adaptability skills. I hope to continue contributing to marine conservation through research and outreach, building on the foundations I formed in Okinawa. If I could plan my project again, I would spend more time developing interactive workshops with local students and residents, fostering deeper collaboration and creating lasting community impact.



## CHLOE KIM

Psychology, '26

Hometown: Marietta, GA

Project Location: Sacalá, Guatemala

*Chloe worked alongside dental clinicians and students to assess current needs, create education programs, and provide dental care in a medically underserved community.*

In June 2025, I went on a medical brigade to the small rural town of Sacalá, Guatemala, where I witnessed firsthand how a lack of access to medical care affected the entire community. I was shocked to learn that a majority of the patients at our free clinic had never seen a physician or received any form of treatment. With many of our patients already struggling to support large families, patients often had to choose between paying for medical care and feeding their children, a decision no one should have to make.

My first conversation with a patient happened before she was my patient, and it was about her hand-woven bag. Its vibrant colors caught my eye while she was in line, and we began a conversation in Spanish, sharing our backgrounds, mine as a Korean American and hers as a lifelong resident of Sacalá. I even tried speaking in Kaqchikel, an indigenous Mayan language spoken in the region, managing to greet her with “utz a uch.” Through language, I hoped to connect with her and provide a welcoming space, as I saw how language often acted as a barrier for patients. She then opened up about her health concerns. I listened attentively and hoped to offer her reassurance that we would address these concerns at the clinic. By a stroke of luck and timing, she later became my patient. During her tooth extraction, I gently held her hand and assisted the dentist. Her immense relief afterward reminded me why I was there.

Interacting with more patients deepened my understanding of how systematic disparities and poverty affected the community's health. Hepatitis C and HIV, for example, often went unnoticed and untreated among the population due to stigma and misinformation. I saw the hesitancy of women to learn about these conditions without their husbands present. I helped educate those who were open to learning and administered diagnostic tests. Being able to contribute in this way to improve the health of the people I met felt incredibly meaningful but left me wanting to do more.

Working alongside physicians and medical students to offer many patients their first encounter with healthcare has solidified my commitment to continue using my education and skills to provide care for underserved communities. These experiences have reinforced how important it is to listen and advocate in medicine, particularly for people with limited or no access to medical care. As an aspiring physician, I aim to become a healthcare provider who advances health equity and uses Spanish and Korean to help expand care to non-English-speaking populations.



## NITYA KODALI

Molecular & Cellular Biology; Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: Houston, TX

Project Location: Houston, TX

*Nitya worked at an endocrinology office in Houston, where she provided diabetes education and management support for Hispanic and immigrant patients.*

This summer, thanks to the support of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I had the privilege of working in a Houston-based endocrinology office serving a diverse patient population, many of whom came from Hispanic and immigrant backgrounds. My role centered on diabetes education and management, where I assisted patients in learning how to monitor their blood sugar, count carbohydrates, administer insulin, and understand the long-term importance of consistent care.

From the first day, it was clear that this experience would be about more than just clinical skills. Many of the patients I worked with faced barriers beyond their diagnosis: financial insecurity, language differences, limited access to healthcare resources, and cultural beliefs that shaped their relationship with medicine. While I was teaching patients the mechanics of managing diabetes, I was also learning from them how culture, trust, and lived experience influence health behaviors. For example, conversations about diet often opened the door to discussions about traditional foods and family dynamics. Rather than asking patients to change their culture to fit medical advice, I learned about how to adapt recommendations in ways that respected and honored their traditions.

Receiving the Nichols Humanitarian Fund stipend gave me the freedom to fully immerse myself in this work. Without the pressure of balancing a summer job, I could spend time building meaningful relationships with patients and providers. This financial support made it possible to engage deeply with the community and observe the challenges of chronic disease management in real-world settings. It also expanded my global perspective: even though my work was in Houston, the barriers I witnessed, such as lack of access to care, limited health literacy, and cultural stigma, are the very same challenges faced by communities around the world. I left the summer with a stronger understanding that healthcare is not just a scientific practice, but also a deeply social one.

One of the most impactful parts of the experience was the exchange of learning between me and the patients. I provided education on how to properly use glucometers, adjust insulin, and track

meals, but I received just as much in return. Patients shared their struggles and strategies for navigating diabetes within the context of family, work, and cultural expectations. I learned how to communicate more effectively across language barriers, often relying on creativity, empathy, and body language when words were not enough. In turn, patients told me they appreciated learning practical, step-by-step tools they could apply immediately in their daily lives. This mutual growth reminded me that effective healthcare is not a one-way transfer of information, but a collaboration built on trust and respect.

Personally, my goals and skills grew tremendously over the course of this summer. I became more confident as an educator and communicator, developing the ability to break down complex medical information into accessible, culturally sensitive explanations. I also grew in patience and adaptability, realizing that progress in chronic disease management is not always immediate but occurs slowly, through encouragement and persistence. Most importantly, I left this summer with a renewed commitment to becoming a physician who prioritizes health equity and serves vulnerable communities.

The lessons I learned in Houston will continue to shape my path moving forward. While my direct work with the endocrinology office ended with the summer, the impact will last much longer. I have carried forward the teaching strategies I developed, the cultural awareness I gained, and the passion for community-based healthcare that deepened throughout this experience. In my future work, whether in clinics, research, or international service, I will continue to focus on making healthcare accessible, understandable, and empowering for patients of all backgrounds.

If I could plan my project again, I would keep the emphasis on patient-centered education, as it was the most rewarding part of my experience. One thing I would change is to create more structured opportunities for patients to provide feedback. While many shared their gratitude informally, I would have loved to collect more formal reflections on how the education sessions impacted their daily routines and confidence in managing diabetes. This feedback would have been invaluable for improving future programs and ensuring that interventions were as effective as possible.

Looking back, I am profoundly grateful to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for making this summer possible. The experience not only allowed me to contribute meaningfully to a community but also challenged me to grow as a leader, listener, and future physician. Most importantly, it reminded me that healthcare is not simply about treating disease. It is about building relationships, honoring culture, and walking alongside patients in their journey toward health.





## HANNA KOSTIV

European Studies; Economics & History, '26

Hometown: Kharkiv, Ukraine

Project Location: Ukraine

*Hanna traveled to Ukraine to support rebuilding efforts through education and volunteering with children, homeowners, and students to promote resilience and community recovery.*

This summer I continued what has already become a tradition for me: spending my break in Ukraine doing volunteer work. Thanks to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I was able to dedicate more time to the projects and communities that matter to me most, while also representing Vanderbilt in the places that shaped me. The support allowed me to do the work more effectively and to show how an American university can stand alongside Ukrainians in very practical ways.

Most of my weeks were spent in Kharkiv, the city where I grew up. I helped run a small children's camp organized by a local community center. We taught English, math, and arts, and spent afternoons singing and dancing in the courtyard. For me, it was a way to give back to the neighborhood that raised me. Many of the children have lived through evacuation and air-raid alarms, and yet their curiosity is endless. Their energy reminded me that rebuilding a country starts with rebuilding a sense of childhood and safety.

Later I volunteered with Brave to Rebuild, a non-profit that helps people recover after missile strikes. We worked in Kyiv clearing debris, carrying out broken glass and bricks, and helping families return to their homes. It's difficult to describe what it feels like to walk into an apartment still smelling of smoke and see family photos covered with dust. What we did was simply showing up, giving time and labor to people who had lost both. Every person we met thanked us not for fixing things, but for merely being there.

In the Zakarpattia region, I joined the Ukraine Global Scholars boot camp as a mentor. I've been volunteering with the program for four years, but this was the first time I could meet students in person. We spent long days working on personal essays, interview skills, and self-presentation. It's a strange mix of hope and responsibility, helping students imagine their futures at a time when the present is still uncertain. Their questions and honesty pushed me to think about what real educational opportunity means when your country is at war.



In Lviv, I spoke at OsvitaFest, an educational conference that brought together teachers, policymakers, and students. I shared my experience of studying in the U.S. and how international education can help Ukraine rebuild its institutions after the war. Standing on that stage, I felt the same connection that ran through all my projects this summer – the idea that learning and helping are not separate things.

What I took away from these experiences is that humanitarian work is not something distant or exceptional. It's everyday consistency: showing up, working with your hands, listening, and trying to make things slightly better than they were yesterday. The Nichols Fund helped me see how this kind of service can connect local and global perspectives. It made me realize that such institutional support from Vanderbilt reflects genuine solidarity and recognition of the importance of community-based work.

I learned from everyone I met. From the children, patience and joy. From homeowners in Kyiv, their quiet strength. From students, determination. In turn, I shared my knowledge, my energy, and the message that they are part of a much larger network of people who care about Ukraine's future.

This work also shaped how I see my own path. I plan to pursue international humanitarian and human rights law, bringing the same sense of empathy and responsibility to the legal field. The summer confirmed that law, like volunteering, is about helping people regain control over their lives and rights.

If I could redo this project, I would keep everything – the places, the people, the work itself. Maybe I would spend more time documenting stories and connecting volunteers across regions. But the essence would stay the same: acting where I am needed, and never losing the feeling of gratitude for being able to do so.

I am sincerely thankful to the Nichols family for their generosity and vision. Their support allowed me to bring Vanderbilt's spirit of service into the Ukrainian context and to continue work that strengthens both compassion and resilience in the community at home.



## CLAIRE LOI

Biochemistry & Chemical Biology, '26

Hometown: Macau, Macao

Project Location: Orlando, FL

*Claire worked to create safe spaces for women who have experienced domestic violence and their children by running workshops, serving meals, and supporting the children.*

As I was growing up, I noticed that women who had experienced domestic abuse tended to remain in their relationships primarily in order to provide a safe completed home environment for their children. Due to their financial reliance, they developed a fear of losing their source of income, which made them concerned about their capacity to support themselves and their kids on their own. Even worse, because of their long-standing social isolation, many women lack the education or experience necessary to find employment that can support their families. At the time, I was too young to do much more than feel sorry for these women. However, the Nichols Humanitarian Fund gave me the opportunity to set up projects or activities that might help address this issue.

This summer, I ended up working in Orlando, Florida, for longer than I had anticipated (from two weeks to one whole month). During this time, I collaborated with a number of nonprofits, such as Remote Area Medical (RAM), the Orlando Ronald McDonald House Charities, and the Orlando Women's Leadership Association. My main partnership was with the Orlando Women's Leadership Association, where I led workshops for women that offered science-based creative outlets, practical job readiness skills, and individualized action plans for domestic violence survivors to become financially and emotionally independent. In particular, we held three workshops: 1) Career Confidence and Resume Writing, 2) Perfume Creation/Tea Time, and 3) Financial Independence and Planning. In the first workshop. We worked on resume development, identifying transferable skills from caregiving, housework, or previous employment, even if there were gaps in employment or an informal work history. Additionally, mentors or professionals from the Women's Leadership Association led mock interviews, gave helpful criticism, and introduced participants to flexible work arrangements (eg. remote working). Our goal in the second workshop was to use my knowledge from my biochemistry background to assist women in discovering their own creativity and strength. It was exciting to make our own unique scents with safe solvents and essential oils. Participants even grew closer to one another and more at ease expressing their feelings in this contemplative setting. They

were also able to express their feelings through my perfumes; making a perfume that smells like something you feel, for instance, was our topic. In the third workshop, we taught budgeting, saving, and resource acquisition in an effort to break the cycle of financial dependency. We also taught them how to set short-term financial goals and long-term independence plans, as well as how to access public resources like food, housing, legal aid, and child care. We also helped them understand credit, debt, and financial abuse under the guidance of professionals. Meanwhile, we partnered with RAM to set up an additional tent to provide essential healthcare services to women and children in general, and with Ronald McDonald House Charities to provide dinners for women who had to care for their kids in the hospital. All of these experiences made me realize how strong women can be, and how fortunate I am to have the opportunity to serve them and help them on their journey. Seeing these women shaking my hand and giving me gifts to express their gratitude was what made me decide to stay longer. It was so exciting to see these women stepping out of their comfort zones to share their stories with me, participate in workshops, and even invite their friends to join us.



# ISHAN MAHAJAN

Medicine, Health, and Society '27

Hometown: Duluth, GA

Project Location: Athens, Greece

*Ishan worked in Greece to integrate traditional remedies into accessible healthcare for refugee communities.*

My experience working in Greece to integrate traditional remedies into accessible healthcare for refugee communities deeply shaped my commitment to advancing equitable global medicine. Engaging with displaced populations from Syria and Afghanistan revealed the human impact of systemic healthcare barriers. Many individuals lacked access to basic treatments, and witnessing their resilience despite these obstacles strengthened my belief that healthcare innovation must also be grounded in cultural understanding and sustainability.

Collaborating with local herbalists and organizations taught me how deeply traditional medicine is intertwined with identity and survival. I learned that equitable care is not simply about providing resources but about creating solutions that respect local traditions and empower communities to take charge of their health. This experience reinforced my passion for blending modern medical systems with culturally informed approaches to improve health outcomes globally.

As a student of Medicine, Health, and Society, this project helped me translate classroom theory into meaningful practice. I developed a clearer vision of how health policy, technology, and community engagement can intersect to create sustainable solutions for marginalized groups. Moving forward, I want to pursue a career that continues bridging this gap, while ensuring that every community's cultural and social context is valued. This project reaffirmed my purpose: to dedicate my career to building a healthcare system that serves people everywhere with dignity, equity, and compassion.



## MEKLIT MESFIN

Cognitive Studies; Medicine, Health, & Society, '27

Hometown: Crofton, MD

Project Location: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

*Meklit volunteered at Prodent Specialty Dental Clinic in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, assisting dentists in providing affordable oral care to primarily low-income patients.*

This summer, I volunteered for 23 hours at a dental clinic in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, through the support of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund. The clinic served a wide range of patients, but I primarily worked with individuals from low-income backgrounds. My time there allowed me to see how financial and linguistic barriers shape patients' experiences and how creativity and compassion can help bridge those divides.

During my time there, I helped with patient intake, assisted with sterilization, and observed restorative, pediatric, and preventive procedures. What stood out most was how the clinic adapted to meet patients where they were. The dentists constantly navigated between several Ethiopian languages, including Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo, depending on who was being treated. Watching them communicate across linguistic boundaries reminded me that effective care is not only about clinical skill but also cultural fluency. I realized that empathy often begins with listening: whether to a patient's story, their dialect, or even the pauses when they hesitate to ask about cost.

The clinic also offered an affordable "wellness plan," which allowed patients who couldn't pay for full treatment at once to receive care through a payment schedule. Seeing this model in action gave me a broader understanding of what equity in healthcare looks like beyond the U.S. context. In Ethiopia, where many people lack access to consistent oral care, such creative financial solutions can mean the difference between receiving treatment and enduring pain. As someone pursuing dentistry, this challenged me to think critically about how I can make care more accessible in my own future practice, especially for underserved populations.

Receiving the Nichols Humanitarian Fund stipend made this experience possible and expanded my global perspective in ways I hadn't anticipated. Before this trip, I mainly thought of dentistry in clinical terms: procedures, anatomy, and patient management. But in Ethiopia, dentistry became a lens for understanding social and cultural realities. I saw how oral health connects to

nutrition, education, and even language policy. I also noticed how community trust plays a major role: patients returned not just for dental cleanings, but because they felt understood and respected. That level of relational care reaffirmed my belief that dentistry is a form of service rooted in human connection.

The collaborative learning went both ways. While I learned from the dentists' creativity and resilience, I also shared what I knew about oral hygiene practices common in the United States, such as fluoride use and electric toothbrushes, tools that are often less available in Ethiopia. These exchanges sparked conversations about sustainability, adaptation, and the importance of tailoring care to context.

This experience also deepened my own goals. I entered the summer wanting to serve, but I left with a clearer vision of what kind of dentist I want to become, one who not only treats but advocates. In the future, I hope to return to Ethiopia to expand access to affordable dental care, particularly through preventive education and outreach programs in schools. In the meantime, I plan to continue building my clinical and cultural competency through research and local volunteer work in Nashville's underserved communities.

If I could plan my project again, I would stay longer to build stronger relationships with the staff and patients. With only 23 hours in the clinic, I often felt that I was just beginning to understand the rhythms of their work when it was time to leave. I would also prepare more intentionally by studying common Ethiopian dental terminology beforehand, which would have helped me communicate more directly with patients. Still, the experience gave me a foundation for how I want to integrate service, empathy, and global awareness into my future as a dentist.





## RIA MIRCHANDANI

Neuroscience; Medicine, Health and Society, '26

Hometown: St. Louis, MO

Project Location: St. Louis, MO

*Ria hosted and taught a series of 3D printing workshops for middle and high school students to learn how to use printing technology to produce an upper limb prosthetic device.*

Since coming to Vanderbilt, I have been introduced to a variety of design techniques including 3D printing, laser cutting, and design thinking. With these techniques, I have been able to collaborate with my peers on several projects including designing and building a holographic record player that turns music to abstract art and a fish tank that is controlled by a fish's movements. Designing, working on these projects, and teaching and learning from my peers about design have led to my most cherished memories at Vanderbilt and have shaped my career goals.

Through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, this summer I had the opportunity to develop and teach a series of 3D printing workshops to high school students at Clyde C. Miller Career Academy in St. Louis, Missouri. Many public schools in North St. Louis are under-resourced, yet have motivated students interested in design, engineering, and healthcare. Career Academies like Clyde C. Miller provide students with practical skills such that they can directly enter the workforce. My aim was two-fold: to provide the Academy with 3D-printing resources and to train a cohort of students who could, in turn, mentor future classes.

My students learned how to design prints using 3D modeling technology and to use a 3D printer to bring their ideas to life. They started by designing and printing their own baggage tags. While I guided them through this process, they also learned from one another, forging friendships over shared interests. These students came from a variety of high schools in St. Louis, so seeing them make plans to stay in touch with one another after the program ended was very meaningful.

After learning the basics of 3D printing through a series of smaller projects, the students worked together to build a prosthetic hand. Using different open-source platforms with existing designs of prosthetics, the students selected a design they liked and modified it to fit the profile of a person in need of the hand. They then printed and assembled the prosthetic. With any design project, it can take many prototypes to reach a successful final product. Seeing a print fail can be frustrating. Thus, I sought to mentor these students in seeing these challenges not as roadblocks

but as stop signs to pause at and choose their next path to take. In turn, they taught me the importance of creating lessons that are both meaningful and engaging and asked questions that allowed me to grow as a designer alongside them. I walked away with a regard of teaching as both an art and skill that I hope to continue to nurture.

In 3D printing, each layer builds upon the one below it. The support provided by the Nichols Humanitarian Fund was essential in allowing me to provide the Academy with a printer and materials so that they can continue to 3D print beyond the course of this project. Furthermore, it allowed me to lay the foundation for a free makerspace that I hope to create at the Academy where students throughout St. Louis can come to connect with one another and bring their creative visions to life.

On the last day of the workshop series, the students came in eager to put together their prosthetic hand. However, they realized that they did not have the appropriate joints to connect the pieces together. The students did not let this hinder them. They scoured the rest of the Academy looking for a replacement for the joints. One student found zip ties which the students then modified to function as joints. While the final product functioned differently than expected, the students' resilience re-affirmed to me that they had successively ingrained the skills of design and creative problem solving. I am grateful to Ed and Janice Nichols for enabling this successful project and the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with these students.



## MILIND NATRAJ MUTHIAH

Economics; Neuroscience, '26

Hometown: Brentwood, TN

Project Location: Las Minas, Panama

*Milind led a 19-person medical brigade to rural Panama, where they assisted physicians in clinics, provided patient care in Spanish, and engaged in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges.*

In August, as President of the Vanderbilt Global Brigades Chapter, I worked with Global Brigades to lead a 19-person medical brigade to rural Panama with support from the Nichol's Humanitarian Fund. On the final day of clinic, I worked in the dentistry station.

A five-year-old girl walked in with her mother for a tooth extraction. The moment she sat down, tears spilled down her cheeks. She tried to hold them back but couldn't. Her mother began to cry as well, forcing a smile when the translator consoled her.

The dentist knelt beside the girl and spoke to her for five minutes. The fear vanished from her face, replaced with relief. She had a local anesthetic and stayed awake for the extraction. With a final lighthearted joke from the dentist, she and her mother walked out smiling.

I had expected patients to come in worried and leave in pain. Instead, with this dentist, children arrived in fear and left in joy. That is the power of what a doctor can say, and on this trip, I learned about how important this skill is. Every physician I worked with had a way with words, and I saw how the confidence, reassurance, and hope they communicated through those words rippled through an entire community.

Using the Spanish I know, I tried to have a similar impact in the roles I played at clinic, intaking and triaging patients, working with the general physicians, handing out medications, and guiding children and adults through the preventative health stations. Striking up conversation and sharing laughs, I made an effort to make every patient I had the opportunity to interact with feel more at ease with the care they'd be receiving. In return, patients mirrored that same warmth back to me, asking about my studies and wishing me luck in my journey into medicine. I left those exchanges with an overwhelming sense of positivity and gratitude, cherishing every second of it.

The experience was just as impactful outside the clinic. In the afternoons, I'd speak with the

doctors and translators on the brigade. One day, I asked the physicians what one thing they would change about Panama's health system. Before answering, they turned the question back to me. I said I would try to shift care downstream. If doctors are so inaccessible in rural areas, why not establish clinics run by community health workers and nurse practitioners to ensure at least some level of care reaches everyone? They then explained that, in fact, Panama doesn't face a shortage of doctors. The real barrier lies in the government's restrictions, which make it difficult for rural clinics to operate. They said the one thing they would change is to separate healthcare from politics. Conversations like that throughout the week deepened my understanding of how closely healthcare and governance are intertwined all around the world and strengthened my resolve to keep exploring population-level health and policy.

This trip was my third international service experience and an extension of my long-standing interest in global health. As I move toward medical school and a career as a physician, I will carry this passion with me, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have deepened it through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund.



## AHMED NAWAZ

Neuroscience, '27

Hometown: Gujrat, Pakistan

Project Location: Basti Dhup Sari, Pakistan

*Ahmed led the launch of a new Digital Learning Lab to equip out-of-school girls, many of which were using a laptop for the first time, with essential digital skills.*

This summer, I traveled to Basti Dhupsari, a remote village in Multan, Punjab, Pakistan, to work with Chiraagh, a local NGO dedicated to expanding educational opportunities for rural youth. My project addressed a critical gap in their work: digital literacy. While Chiraagh had already established a school, most students had never used a computer, and uninterrupted internet access was nonexistent. Through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, I helped fund and oversee the installation of laptops and desktop computers for a newly built computer lab.

Before arriving, I expected to find a modest operation, limited by scarce resources and shaped by traditional norms. I assumed “the bare minimum” would be the reality. Instead, I found a thriving hub of education and empowerment.

The lab itself sat in an open roadside room, divided by a curtain with boys on the left and girls on the right. In a place where women’s education is rare, this simple measure reassured parents while ensuring girls could fully participate. The first day in the lab, the energy was electric. Many students knew what a laptop was, but this was their first chance to use one as a student, uninterrupted and focused. The lab did not feel out of place; it felt like the missing piece the community had been waiting for.

The village was rugged and alive, with humid summer air, no AC, and fruit flies drifting through the open windows. The smell of fertile Punjabi soil lingered everywhere, and each day I was offered the village’s pride, juicy and internationally renowned Multani mangoes. The hospitality was humbling. Even as an ethnically Pakistani visitor who spoke the language, I was struck by how deeply they embraced me and valued my presence, not just my contribution.

What impressed me most was how far beyond “bare minimum” this community was going. Chirag’s schedule ran from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. for school classes, 2 to 4 p.m. for sewing courses in a machine-equipped lab, and 5 to 8 p.m. for digital literacy classes. Religious education was also

woven into the curriculum. The mentors, some with only high school diplomas, worked full days, each with a specialty, from teaching digital skills to sewing to academic subjects. They were not driven by salaries or recognition, but by a shared mission to equip their next generation for a better future.

The most important lesson I learned was that everybody has a choice in life. These mentors could have accepted their lack of formal education as the end of their story. Instead, they chose to break cycles of illiteracy, patriarchy, and disempowerment. They were not simply teaching; they were reshaping their community's future. I arrived expecting to see limitations and left having witnessed possibility in its purest form.

The Nichols Fund stipend allowed me to make a tangible difference by helping fund the lab, but it also gave me the privilege of being present to see its immediate impact. It is one thing to talk about the digital divide, and it is another to watch a girl in a remote village type her name for the first time. The mentors told me my visit had lifted their spirits and made them feel seen. That may have been the greatest gift of all, knowing that showing up mattered as much as the resources I brought.

“Chiraagh” means “lamp,” and I have seen the NGO's efforts light the way in a place that might otherwise be overlooked. If they can send one of their own, Waqas Haider, a Vanderbilt Peabody graduate and Fulbright scholar, into the world as the first person in their village to reach that level of education, I believe they will send many more. While my time on-site was only a week, I will continue to share their story, raise awareness, and connect them with supporters. If I could change one thing, I would add a local educational trip for the children to give them even more experiences to remember.

This project showed me that with vision, dedication, and community spirit, even the most remote places can become centers of opportunity. The sound of students typing for the first time, the mentors staying late into the evening to teach, and the pride in the community's eyes will stay with me forever. These moments are proof that with the right spark, a single lamp can light countless paths.

I am deeply grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Nichols and to Vanderbilt Immersion for making this journey possible. Their generosity not only funded laptops and a lab, it gave me the chance to shed my assumptions, set aside my ego, and see how vast the world truly is. In Basti Doopsari, I witnessed how much effort ordinary people pour into building a better future, and I returned with my awareness expanded and my heart humbled. This experience will guide how I work, give, and live for years to come.





# WINSTON NFOR KANJO NDI

Mechanical Engineering, '27

Hometown: Bamenda, Cameroon

Project Location: Bamenda, Cameroon

*Winston led the summer recruitment program for Urega Scholars and covered high school tuition for the selected students.*

This summer, I had planned to travel to Cameroon to lead the Urega summer recruitment program, as I have in previous years. However, due to an impending travel ban, I transitioned to managing the program remotely in collaboration with the Urega team on the ground. In my role as the Associate Director of Scholar Experience for the Urega Foundation, I worked with the admissions team to select the next cohort of scholars from the numerous applications we received. The grant from the Nichols Humanitarian Fund (NHF) has been directed to the Urega Foundation, where it will cover the high school tuition fees for this year's Urega Scholars.

I wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the NHF team, and particularly to the Nichols family, for your generous support. Your kindness provides more than tuition for our scholars; it offers the invaluable encouragement that comes from knowing a community believes in their future. I would like to conclude with the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, which I feel perfectly captures the spirit of the NHF:

**"To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded."**

Thank you once again to the Nichols family for being a true embodiment of these words.



## BISHAL PANTHI

Computer Science, '27

Hometown: Arghakhanchi, Nepal

Project Location: Mugum Karmarong, Nepal

*Bishal led a project to challenge the harmful menstrual practice of Chhaupadi by organizing hygiene and art workshops and training women to produce eco-friendly sanitary napkins.*

This summer, I completed my Nichols Humanitarian Fund project called “SustainHer Strength, End Violence: Period” in Mugum Karmarong in Mugu District of Nepal. By collaborating with Tech Education Nepal, we involved Buddha Secondary, Guru Secondary, Jagat Mala Secondary and Mahadev Masta Secondary to confront the harmful menstrual practice called Chhaupadi. Our motive is to organize the workshops on hygiene, art and case competitions to challenge stigma, and provide women training on producing eco-friendly sanitary napkins that are made from cotton fibers.

Honestly, the Nichols humanitarian fund helped me to take this to a challenging geographic place of Nepal which is even socio-economically backward. I cannot imagine accomplishing my goals because the funding is essential for me for training materials and outreach events expenses. Furthermore, I was able to discuss the daily experiences of women in Mugu focusing on gender based violence and sustainable development. Before implementing this project, I knew about gender inequality in books or only through news. But, this project helped me reach and understand this in the raw lens of suffering. I believe the inequality in the underdeveloped region is an immediate issue that needs to be resolved through action of government and national and international organizations.

I engaged with the community in a deep fashion from which I learned how much creativity women hold despite the fact that they are suffering currently. They possess the ability to make something out of limited resources through a new dimension of knowledge. I got an opportunity to teach them technical skills like teaching sustainable napkin production with information on infection risks. One thing that I used to think is that a data driven approach can always spark change but from this experience I think storytelling and cultural involvement is more effective in remote regions like Mugu.

Personally, this project reshaped my goals and skills. As an aspiring computer scientist and entrepreneur, I had often framed my ambitions in terms of technical innovations, like my

academic focus on renewable energy and quantum dot solar cells. This summer showed me that soft skills—community collaboration, partnership-building, communication in sensitive contexts—are equally critical. I became more adaptable, learning to navigate local dialects, cultural traditions, and resource constraints. My leadership skills matured from being directive to facilitative; I learned to listen first and act second.

Likewise, I am planning to continue this project directly by raising attention through social media channels and raising the voice of women in that region. I would potentially look forward to applying to Nichols Humanitarian Award 2026 for upcoming summer and will be looking for other competitive funding awards throughout the time because getting funding to implement the toolkits back in Nepal would be a challenging aspect. But one thing, I am sure that the knowledge and awareness I implanted even within that small region would be a sparkling factor for broader impact in upcoming time.

If I had to do this project again, I would focus more on creative arts competitions among the students. Since boring lectures and teachings could have little progress and had little impact, I did understand over the course the creative arts would be a more engaging factor. Likewise, I would try to involve medical professionals in those sessions to gain better understanding and trust of the local people in those matters.

Ultimately, this experience reaffirmed my belief that humanitarian work must be grounded in sustainability, cultural sensitivity, and mutual learning. It also reinforced my academic trajectory: to integrate technology, sustainability, and human-centered design into all my pursuits. The Nichols Humanitarian Fund not only supported a project but also shaped me into a more globally conscious and empathetic leader.



# SOORAJ PUSAPATI

Neuroscience, '27

Hometown: Germantown, TN

Project Location: Las Minas, Panama

*Sooraj helped set up a clinic in rural, underserved areas of Panama to provide medical care.*

This summer, I had the wonderful opportunity to travel to the country of Panama and learn more about the medical system in a foreign country. We set up clinics and provided aid to rural communities where healthcare access was limited, and being able to help these underserved populations was an eye-opening experience for me. I was able to collaborate with a like-minded group of students similarly driven to make a difference in medicine, and the connections I made with them and the rest of the brigade staff made a profound difference in my mindset towards healthcare. The doctors that worked with us in the clinic mentored us throughout our time there and taught me many valuable technical and clinical skills. Moreover, they would tell us about their experience navigating the healthcare system in Panama, and the mindset they used to handle such a difficult profession. Though it was difficult, they emphasized the beauty and satisfaction of being able to help those in need, and how it makes the hardship worth it in the end.

The patients themselves also had a completely different attitude towards healthcare that I had never seen before. Many of them had to walk miles to get to the clinic. This was also the only health check-up of the year for many. There was one patient who just had a cavity, but because he couldn't see a dentist outside of our clinic, he chose to get the whole tooth extracted. We had one day where we went to some houses to interview the members of the community and collect information for a culminating presentation. During these interviews, although many had lower education levels, they were very conscious of herd immunity and the exact medical care that their children need to be healthy. This led me to look at all my patient interactions in a different light, especially with parents who brought their children. All of them were very grateful, and I appreciated that they trusted us although we were foreigners who didn't speak their language. It reinforced the idea that medicine is a universal language connecting the globe, and it pervades life even in corners of the world that I haven't seen.

I've been working in the U.S. as a medical assistant already, but when I returned to the job after the trip, I came back with a newfound sense of vigor. I communicated with my patients more

thoughtfully, could work up their vitals better, and found myself more excited about continuing my journey in medicine. Hopefully, I will be able to go back on a Global Brigade next year and keep exploring healthcare systems in other countries as well. I am very grateful to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for giving me the chance to explore the world and helping me mature in my path towards being a medical professional. The skills that I have learned have already manifested themselves in my life back home, and these lessons will stay with me throughout the rest of my career.



# TAWFIQ RAWNAK

Human & Organizational Development, '25

Hometown: West Palm Beach, FL

Project Location: Bali, Indonesia

*Tawfiq helped implement an AI-based education curriculum to teach students how to maximize the use of Generative AI for personal projects and innovation.*

The Bali Children's Foundation (BCF) is an organization that I felt I wasn't just a part of, but rather a place that considered me like a family. This organization is based in Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia, where the primary goal is to assist many children who are impoverished and do not have many resources for education.

From a statistical perspective, Indonesia is one of the countries across the ASEAN belt that has a lower average graduation rate in comparison to its neighbors (i.e. Singapore, Malaysia), and many children often are forced to go into the workforce. This cycle often does not prioritize the importance of education to many children. This is where the BCF aims to provide assistance to these communities to foster such impact.

My task was to help implement Generative AI (GenAI) techniques to many school systems across BCF's network in Bali and Sumba, Indonesia. This was a unique roll that I was able to pitch to BCF, not only due to my background in AI, but utilizing AI for social well-being. With many school systems left underfunded in Indonesia, a goal of mine was to find ways that GenAI can not only be an effective tool for students, but how it can be used to showcase a stable upbringing to many students who may not be able to afford a proper education in school.

This scholarship from the Nichols' family didn't just allow me to just create an impact, but it allowed me to further understand education and work dynamics in Indonesia. A key learning to cite is the collectivist culture that is present in Indonesia – meaning that many activities and aspects are based on relationships within people, not particularly merit. This was interesting to understand and fulfill, as I felt that culture is something that I have learned by my time living in Indonesia, and it is something that is worth far more than a series of lectures.

As a person, I have always been passionate to learn about the other side of cultures to understand their stories and their perspectives. This trip has allowed me to get a deeper vision



on Indonesia as a country, as well as the expected culture and upbringing of many neighboring countries within the ASEAN belt. Culture exchange is not a one-way road, but rather two-ways. I was not just able to learn and adapt to many Indonesian aspects, but also I have learned key aspects and cultures that are unique to the United States, along with many Western European countries. This brings an opportunity for discourse in a subject that is crucial to know, as not every country operates via one culture or dynamics.

Post graduation, I will be spending some time in Southeast Asia, along with other nations to accomplish a key goal of mine: Utilizing GenAI for social good purposes. With the ever-growing technology, I believe that the masses should understand its abilities and use it to benefit their lives in the way they know best. It is like the age of the computer – with the right information, one can do great good with it.

However, certain critiques that I have learned during my time in Indonesia is that culture can be both an accelerator and an inhibitor to many new technologies. With the rise of AI, many often have a negative notion towards the technology, which can make it difficult to explain the benefits. In addition, with many countries in which English is not a proficient means of communication, it is important to understand how aspects are communicated (i.e. another language, or even diagrams) to best communicate items.

Overall, this project was one that was difficult to kick start and go through, however, it is the challenges and the end result that has the best impact on one's future prospects.



## KACI A. REDID

Law, '27

Hometown: Kingston, Jamaica

Project Location: Nashville, TN

*Kaci assisted Davidson County residents with eviction and housing legal issues, helping attorneys with research, drafting documents, meeting clients, and trial preparation.*

This past summer, I interned with the Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee as a Legal Intern in the Eviction Right to Counsel program. As a 1L, this was my first real experience stepping into the practice of law, and it fundamentally reshaped my understanding of what it means to be an advocate. I entered the internship eager to see how the doctrines I had learned in my first year, from contracts, property, civil procedure and most importantly, legal writing and research would translate into the realities faced by tenants at risk of losing their homes. After 10 weeks of working alongside incredible attorneys and fellow interns, I left with a deeper appreciation for the human dimension of law and the structural barriers that make access to justice so essential.

From my first week, I was immersed in substantive legal work that stretched far beyond what I had anticipated for an early law student. I conducted legal research on topics ranging from notice requirements in landlord-tenant disputes to the standards courts apply when evaluating “good cause” for evictions. I drafted motions, pleadings, and client correspondence, often under tight deadlines. I also assisted with deposition outlines and trial preparation for cases that would determine whether families could stay in their homes. The attorneys treated me as a valued member of the team, encouraging me to analyze issues, offer arguments, and critically and think strategically about each case’s broader implications.

One of the most meaningful experiences of my internship was helping prepare for and ultimately win a case that allowed a woman to remain in her home after an accidental kitchen fire. She was not even present at her home at the time of the fire, and it’s occurrence was a genuine accident, most likely occurring because of faulty appliances rather than negligence. Her landlord had sought to evict her, arguing that the fire constituted “destruction of property.” Our team met with the client and other witnesses, gathered evidence showing that she had immediately reported the incident, paid for repairs, and that the damage was minor and accidental. I helped research precedent

regarding tenant liability for accidental damage and drafted a section of the memorandum used in our argument. When the court ruled in her favor, the relief on her face was indescribable. She tearfully told us how much our advocacy meant to her, and how she would never forget our assistance. It was a small victory in the broader fight for housing justice, but it reminded me that behind every case number is a person with a story, and that effective lawyering can change the trajectory of someone's life.

Beyond the legal skills I gained, the internship also deepened my understanding of the systemic inequities embedded in housing law. I saw firsthand how eviction proceedings disproportionately affect low-income tenants, many of whom lack counsel or even basic knowledge of their rights. I learned that something as simple as a procedural misstep or honest mistake can lead to devastating outcomes. Working with the Eviction Right to Counsel program reinforced my belief that legal representation is not just a privilege, but a necessity for preserving dignity and stability in people's lives.

Another key lesson I took away was the importance of balancing empathy with professionalism. Many clients came to Legal Aid during some of the most stressful moments of their lives. I learned how to listen carefully, communicate clearly, and manage expectations while still offering reassurance. I also became more aware of the ethical responsibilities lawyers carry such as maintaining confidentiality, avoiding overpromising, and ensuring informed consent in all legal decisions.

As a student, it was both humbling and empowering to see how the doctrines I studied in the classroom played out in real courtrooms and affected real lives. I began to understand the difference between knowing the law and knowing how to use it effectively. Watching seasoned attorneys craft arguments, negotiate settlements, and build rapport with clients provided a model for the kind of advocate I hope to become: one who is both technically skilled and deeply compassionate.

This internship solidified my commitment to pursuing a career that allows me to combine rigorous legal work with meaningful social impact. Whether I ultimately work in public interest, compliance, or private practice, I want to carry forward the lessons I learned at Legal Aid: that law is at its most powerful when used to protect the vulnerable, that access to justice must be fought for intentionally, and that empathy is not a weakness in advocacy but one of its greatest strengths.

In sum, my summer at the Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee was transformative. It gave me practical skills, exposed me to the realities of the justice system, and reaffirmed why I came to law school in the first place; to make a tangible difference in people's lives. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have served clients who trusted us with their stories and for the attorneys who guided me with patience, integrity, and passion for justice.



# ANTHONY RODAS

Law, History, & Society; Political Science, '26

Hometown: Trenton, NJ

Project Location: Trenton, NJ

*Anthony taught weekly English classes at the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund to help students be more comfortable with using English in their everyday lives.*

This summer I went to Trenton, New Jersey to work with the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund (LALDEF) as an English as a Second Language Teacher. Every Tuesday from 5:30 to 7:30, I was able to teach 25 students in the Introduction to English class. Teaching alongside me was my colleague, Jake Goodman, who also taught the class with me. We taught the class fourteen lessons ranging from topics such as food, colors, directions, and the days of the weeks and months. At the end of August, the students graduate from the course, receive a certificate of completion, and move onto the next English course.

Receiving the stipend this summer was able to contribute to my overall perspective. All of my students were adults who immigrated to the United States, and as a result had to start a whole new life here. With this experience, I was able to learn a lot of the struggles that immigrants face in the country such as language barriers or accessing resources. Now that I have completed the experience, I have a more thorough understanding of what immigrants face while being in the United States. Many of my students valued the opportunity of being able to learn English as they explained that they have been in the country for many years, but never had the opportunity to learn the language. They also hoped that through a better understanding of the language that they'll be able to better communicate at stores, with their coworkers, and have better job opportunities.

My main goal while on my service trip was to be able to teach my students English to where they would be able to use it in everyday life. Being able to know English is a valuable skill in the United States, and I want to be able to teach others the language as I can understand the difficulty of learning English as my first language is Spanish. Additionally, a second goal I had was to learn about the immigrant experience in the United States, but more specifically in Trenton, New Jersey. My parents were immigrants that came to Trenton, New Jersey, and I wanted to learn the different perspectives people had while living in the city.

I have prepared the community to sustain the work I began this summer as all of my students will continue on to the Level 1 English courses at LALDEF. While Goodman and I were able to provide the students with a basic understanding of English, there is still more to learn and these students will be able to take the next step in mastering the language. In addition, after completing the course my students were able to earn a certificate that says they have passed the Introduction to English class, allowing them to put this into their resumes. Through the certificate, they will be able to show employers that they have an understanding of English, making them desirable candidates as they will know both English and Spanish.

I was able to have an amazing experience through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund this summer with my service project, and am so grateful for the opportunity to have served my community of Trenton, New Jersey.



## SUMIRA SEHGAL

Economics; Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: Lewes, DE

Project Location: Delaware

*Sumira worked with the Delaware Department of Health to create a statewide 12-month educational calendar promoting women's health and awareness of public health issues.*

This summer I had the opportunity to work with the Delaware Department of Health on their Bureau of Health Equity (BHE) team. While my time there was short, the work I accomplished was both meaningful and impactful. Not only did I learn a lot about the public health field, but I got to give back and help the community that raised me.

Receiving this stipend allowed me to make the 50-min commute every day to the department's office and collaborate with a great team on a very special project. It also enabled me to fund and create a statewide public health educational tool designed to positively impact and empower women in Delaware. This initiative took the form of a 12-month educational calendar. Each month in the calendar focuses on different national health observances and includes resources, statistics, and infographics to help individuals make more informed health decisions.

For example, January is National Stalking Awareness Month and National Birth Defects Awareness Prevention Month (among other awarenesses). So, for these months, I collaborated with partner organizations to collect data and curate information on these conditions. I then created short, easily readable summaries giving a background and tips on how to prevent the health conditions. I remained mindful that on average, the community has a 9th grade reading level, and made sure that even those who aren't highly health literate can benefit from this tool. Through data integration, visualization, and community generated content, I developed an informative tool that will be distributed statewide. Over the course of this project, I interviewed more than 40 community members who are working to address critical, often overlooked health issues in Delaware. These conversations were deeply inspiring and allowed me to learn about their journeys, motivations, and work in the public health field.

One of the aspects I also loved about this project was the opportunity to combine public health and outreach with art. For the calendar, we invited local artists to submit poems, paintings, affirmations, or photographs that would be included to elevate the project. Most of these artists



had personal experiences with the featured health conditions, and this added a personal and emotional layer to the calendar. It was amazing to be able to give those affected a voice and a chance to be a part of a project that is aimed at spreading awareness and showcasing resources that could help others like them.

In addition to the calendar, I had the opportunity to support the BHE team on a project focused on preventing and fighting against sexual violence and rape. I reviewed the project contract and identified key community influencers that should be targeted for training sessions. The goal was to equip these individuals with knowledge and tools they could share within their communities, focusing on primary prevention to stop any violence before it occurs. Based on trend analysis and data, I recommended recruiting men's sports team coaches for training. I recognized their influence over young men, and their ability to model healthy behaviors.

I had such a great time this summer working to create a healthier, safer, more informed community. Through my NHF experience, I got to meet inspiring people and hear moving stories that I will never forget. I gained valuable insight into the administrative side of public health while contributing to projects with real impact. My work this summer showed me the urgent need to address health disparities in underserved and rural areas, where social determinants of health and systemic barriers disproportionately affect health outcomes.



# SOWMYA SENTHILKUMAR

Neuroscience, '26

Hometown: Knoxville, TN

Project Location: Panama City, Panama

*Sowmya traveled to Panama where she assisted physicians and helped set up clinics for people who have limited access to medical treatment.*

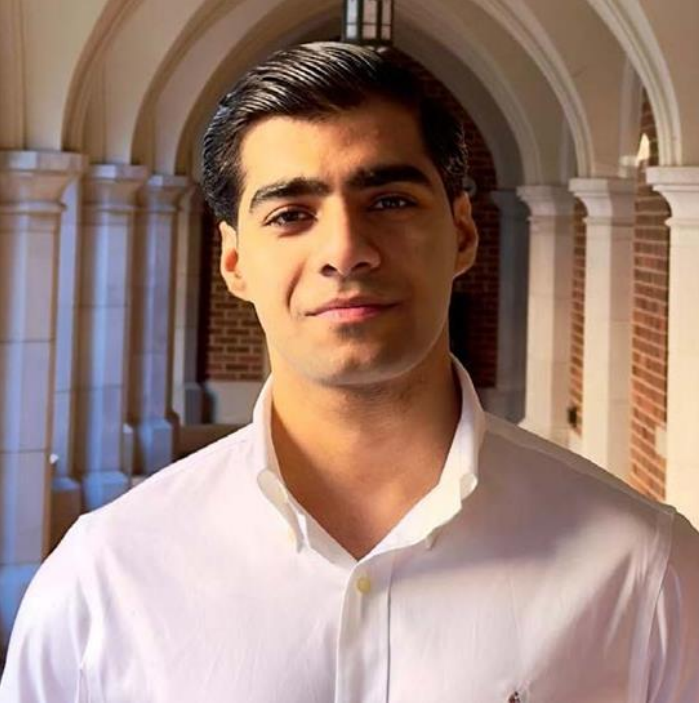
This past August, Vanderbilt Global Brigades traveled to Panama on a medical trip to provide free healthcare and set up health clinics in rural communities, helping residents gain easier access to medical treatment. This was my second trip with Vanderbilt Global Brigades as last year we went to Honduras, and I knew I had to participate again with this amazing organization. That first experience even inspired me to apply for a position on the executive board, and it was incredibly meaningful to help organize and lead the Panama trip. Being on the other side of the process like recruiting volunteers, sharing my passion for service, and then seeing it all come to life was truly rewarding.

Before describing the service work itself, I want to take a moment to talk about the people who came on the trip. Most of us were Vanderbilt students, though a few students from other universities joined as well, and it was one of the best groups I've ever been part of. Everyone got along so well, even though we came from different grades and backgrounds and had unique reasons for wanting to serve. With limited cell service, we spent our evenings playing cards, talking, and laughing and despite cold showers, bats in our cabin, and roosters waking us up at 4:30 a.m. I don't think I've ever laughed so hard in a week filled with so many challenges and unexpected moments. The empathy, warmth, and genuine friendships I found on this trip are something I'll carry with me forever.

The work itself was pure service and love in action. Each day, we traveled about three hours by bus to reach different rural towns, where we set up medical clinics in old elementary schools. On the first day, we interviewed residents and observed their living conditions- many families lived without electricity or filtered water, and most had no dryers or washing machines. Despite these challenges, I was struck by their care for one another and their commitment to health. Parents were deeply invested in their children's vaccination schedules and trusted the visiting doctors wholeheartedly. When taking vitals, we noticed several work-related health conditions that were more prevalent than what we typically see in the United States—high blood pressure being especially common. It was

incredibly meaningful to help people who sometimes walked 30 minutes to an hour just to receive basic medications like multivitamins.

I am deeply grateful to the Nichols program for making this experience possible. Their support allowed me to take part in a trip that not only reaffirmed my passion for global health and service but also strengthened my commitment to becoming a compassionate, community-minded physician. Reflecting on all the effort that went into planning and carrying out this project makes me even more appreciative of how transformative this experience has been for my growth and future career.



# MUHAMMAD SHAMEER

Medicine, Health, & Society; Molecular and Cellular Biology, '26

Hometown: Southington, CT

Project Location: Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan

*Muhammad helped establish small health units and free medical clinics that provided essential care, medications, and vaccinations to underserved mountain communities.*

This summer, I traveled to the remote valleys of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, where I worked with the ArRazzaq Foundation to establish small health units and provide free medical clinics for underserved villages. These communities, tucked away between rugged mountains, often had to travel several hours on foot or by jeep to access the nearest healthcare facilities. With the support of the Nichols Humanitarian Fund stipend, I partnered with local health workers and volunteers to set up a pharmacy and run clinics that distributed medications, administered vaccinations, and provided basic check-ups. Each day, I worked alongside local leaders and community members, bridging language differences and logistical challenges to ensure that families had access to care that had long been absent.

Receiving the stipend was transformative, not just in its practical impact, but in the way it expanded my perspective on what “global health” truly means. Before this summer, my understanding of healthcare disparities was largely shaped by my own family’s struggles in rural Punjab, Pakistan, and later by the inequities I encountered in the U.S. healthcare system. But seeing these remote villages firsthand underscored how global health inequities are not abstract concepts but lived realities: a mother walking miles to find antibiotics for her child, an elder enduring chronic pain without treatment, a farmer unsure if he could afford to take a day off work to seek care. The stipend allowed me to step beyond academic discussions of disparity and to witness, in a tangible way, the consequences of neglect and the power of small interventions.

What surprised me most was how much of this project became a collaborative act of learning and discovery. At first, I thought I would be primarily teaching, bringing medications, explaining dosages, and helping to set up infrastructure. Yet I quickly realized that listening was just as important as speaking. Community elders taught me about the herbal remedies and traditional healing practices that had sustained them for generations. Mothers showed me how they balanced caregiving with agricultural labor. Local health workers shared strategies for managing scarce resources and for earning trust in communities where outside interventions had often

failed. In turn, I was able to share knowledge about safe medication use, the importance of routine check-ups, and how to connect villagers to broader networks of care. The most meaningful lessons emerged not from what I gave, but from what we built together, relationships rooted in respect, humility, and shared purpose.

Personally, my goals and skills grew in ways I had not anticipated. Leading this project required me to mobilize resources, manage logistics across challenging terrain, and communicate across multiple languages and cultures. I learned to adapt when supplies ran low, to negotiate when expectations differed, and to remain calm in moments of uncertainty. These experiences sharpened my resilience and strengthened my conviction that medicine must extend beyond hospital walls. It is not just about diagnosing and prescribing, it is about meeting people where they are, learning their stories, and finding ways to walk alongside them in their pursuit of health.

As I left Gilgit, I felt a deep responsibility not only to celebrate what we had accomplished but to ensure sustainability. Together with the ArRazzaq Foundation, we trained local volunteers in basic health practices and secured a supply chain for essential medications. The pharmacy we established is now managed by community members, and local leaders have committed to continuing free health days. While I may not be physically present, I believe the foundation we laid empowers the community to carry forward this work.

If I were to plan this project again, there are things I would keep and things I would change. I would certainly keep the emphasis on partnership, humility, and sustainability, these were the cornerstones of our success. But I would also invest more time in pre-trip preparation, particularly in securing additional medical supplies and anticipating the unique health needs of each village. I would also recruit more volunteers fluent in the local dialects, to ease communication and deepen trust more quickly.

As I reflect on this summer, I am humbled by the gratitude of the people I served and by the resilience they demonstrated in the face of scarcity. What began as an effort to provide healthcare became a lesson in shared humanity and a reminder that small acts of service can ripple far beyond their immediate moment. This experience not only reaffirmed my commitment to medicine but also reshaped my understanding of what it means to serve. In Gilgit, I did not just witness disparity, I witnessed hope, resilience, and the extraordinary power of community.



## SHREYASH SINGH

Cognitive Studies; Mathematics, '26

Hometown: Kenner, LA

Project Location: Seoul, South Korea

*Shreyash volunteered at Seoul National University Hospital, assisting with patient intake and learning about South Korea's universal fee-for-service healthcare system.*

As I volunteered at Seoul National University Hospital in Seoul, South Korea, I helped to assist with patient intake at several entrances throughout the hospital, conversing with other healthcare professionals to learn more about the intricate balance within the healthcare system in Korea. Specifically, I found how the universal fee-for-service model promoted an accessible system for all residents, including those who weren't citizens. Sometimes, as I led various foreign nationals like myself through the hospital, I became aware how their travel to Korea was aimed to utilize this healthcare system when their home didn't allow for such services to be attainable. In Asia, I saw how Korea became almost a "safehaven" for patients with complex, long-term diseases that demanded constant care with mounting costs. In this model of healthcare, this fee gave access to a much wider range of procedures than most surrounding countries. However, after conversing with several surrounding physicians, I saw how this system was the result of significant governmental assistance with a considerable percentage of funding allocated to support this fee-for-service model. In Korea, this sense of civic responsibility was conveyed to be the driving force for this allocation of resources, which seems to be absent in countries like America. I believe that this cultural imbalance in America doesn't allow for more allocation of resources and governmental assistance to support a "new brand" of healthcare that mimics Korea's wide-range of services under a universal fee.

However, the patient population in America significantly differs from the one in Korea with a higher burden on the healthcare system for certain illnesses, especially with chronic heart diseases. This difference would introduce more complexities that could complicate the intended success of the fee-for-service model. However, as I saw how this pattern of healthcare was encouraged as a source of pride within Korea, I realized how this pride stems from the country's political history. Across various conflicts with North Korea, South Korea adopted a mindset of public service during their reconstruction to foster national resilience. Here, this healthcare system became a message of accessibility that gave South Korea triumph over North Korea.



I didn't realize how much this conflict permeated throughout each societal function of Korea. At times, it seemed that South Korea's governmental structure was just a response to North Korea's aggressive ideological mindset. In this trip, I had the chance to visit the DMZ and witnessed this ingrained tension that still was alive during my visit. Here, I saw the past war set a foundation of painful tragedies that spurred a movement against North Korea's aggressions to become influenced by an inclusive approach of collective support, not just individualistic survival, which is a crucial component for any successful model of healthcare.

Altogether, I feel grateful to have had the chance to visit this dynamic country of Korea and work within their unique style of healthcare that I realized has become and continues to be heavily influenced by their historical and political values. In Korea, I saw how their past has created a collective culture to promote this inclusive style of healthcare and become a source of immense pride amongst its citizens.



## EMMA SMITH

Cognitive Studies; Child Development, '26

Hometown: Clearwater, FL

Project Location: South Yorkshire, England

*Emma helped facilitate outreach events to foster connection and engagement within the community while also renovating community spaces and providing free meals to families.*

This summer, I had the privilege of serving in South Yorkshire, England, through the Ten2 Project with Greater Europe Mission. For ten weeks, I worked in a team of four interns in partnership with a local church and a community outreach organization that serves one of the most impoverished areas in the region. Our work was both practical and relational: we hosted youth events, organized community meals, distributed free food, and renovated the unused upstairs of the community center into a welcoming space. One of my favorite memories was our first event in that new space—a pamper night for the girls in the community. We provided haircare, skincare, and basic hygiene products, then spent the evening painting nails, doing hair, and watching a movie together. Because the upstairs room had always been storage, most of the youth had never stepped foot in it before. Seeing their excitement as they realized it was now theirs was unforgettable, and it was powerful to leave something tangible and lasting behind.

The support I received through the Nichols Humanitarian Fund made this opportunity possible. The stipend directly covered a large portion of my program fee, which otherwise would have been a barrier to participating. Because of this generosity, I was given the gift of ten weeks immersed in a culture so different from my own. The experience broadened my worldview in ways I could not have imagined. Every person we interacted with was facing struggles—addiction, abuse, or domestic violence were heartbreakingly common. It was humbling to realize how widespread these issues were, and it reminded me that while cultures differ, people everywhere carry the same deep needs for love, care, and friendship.

Collaboration was central to our experience. Our program director, a UK native, guided us through British culture, while we shared encouragement and energy with the youth. Some of the most meaningful collaboration happened in daily life with my teammates. We lived in the same apartment and cooked meals together almost every day. That rhythm of preparing and sharing food stood out to me because it contrasted so sharply with the rushed, individualistic lifestyle I knew back home. Those simple meals taught me the value of slowing down and letting community form through ordinary moments.

My goals and sense of calling also grew through this work. I have long been passionate about international experiences, but this was the first time I saw how my academic studies in cognitive studies and child development could intersect with service in another culture. As I volunteered with the outreach organization and heard stories of trauma, grief, and resilience, I realized how deeply I want to walk alongside people in those difficult places. I hope to pursue graduate study in counseling or psychology that will prepare me to serve in grief and trauma care. This summer showed me that I not only want to do that in the United States but also, in the long term, I could definitely envision myself in an international setting where I can combine cross-cultural engagement with my professional skills.

The work also continues beyond my ten weeks. I remain in touch with people I met in South Yorkshire, including a family I grew close to and a woman who first came to events through our community meals. When I message the woman I met through community meals, she often updates me on how she's doing and asks how I am too— we've developed a true friendship, not just something temporary from a summer trip. It has been encouraging to see her mental health improve as her willingness to interact with others in the community has increased. Relationships like these remind me that impact continues long after a summer ends, and I hope to return one day to volunteer again in person.

Looking back, I would not change a thing about this summer. Greater Europe Mission was a phenomenal organization to partner with, and I felt supported throughout the experience. The outcomes were tangible— we created a safe new space for youth, provided meals to families in need, and, most importantly, built relationships that brought hope and encouragement. The Nichols Humanitarian Fund made it possible for me to say yes to this opportunity, and I am deeply grateful. This summer has confirmed my calling, strengthened my skills, and broadened my perspective in ways that will stay with me for a lifetime.



## ALLISON STARKEY

Special Education, '26

Hometown: Bartlett, IL

Project Location: Kathmandu, Nepal

*Allison volunteered at the Association for the Welfare of the Intellectually Handicapped, supporting special education instruction, sharing teaching strategies, and learning from local educators.*

This summer, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity, thanks to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, to travel to Kathmandu, Nepal with my friend and special education cohort member, Katie Greenfield. Together, we volunteered for The Association for the Welfare for Handicapped Children (AWIH) through International Volunteer HQ's (IVHQ) volunteer abroad program. During the month we volunteered, we assisted teachers at AWIH with daily routines, English instruction, fine/gross motor skills, and assisting with therapy sessions. The people and children we met during our time volunteering made the entire trip for me. Both Katie and I were welcomed with open arms and made lifelong friends.

Receiving the stipend this summer contributed to expanding my global perspective. I realized how much the United States relies on resources to provide meaningful education for those with special needs. I gained such respect for the Nepali teachers' innovation and creativity in developing materials from limited resources. Things that seem simple to us, such as fidget toys, are extremely scarce in markets, so teachers had to find innovative solutions to bridge these gaps. Being able to face the challenge of adapting instruction with limited resources opened my eyes to what many international special educators face firsthand. By visiting Nepal, my worldview changed and has inspired me to further investigate how we can disseminate and educate about the evidence-based practices we use in the States to schools across the world.

I learned so much from the teachers at AWIH about the value of community, patience, and creativity in teaching. Their ability to make every student feel included and supported reminded me of the importance of relationships in education. They cooked for each other, and all worked together to come up with solutions to problems. In return, I was able to share strategies I've been studying in my program such as incorporating visuals, building predictable routines, and using interactive activities to engage learners. It felt like a genuine exchange of ideas, where both sides valued and built on each other's strengths.

Going into this experience, my goal was to broaden my perspective on special education in a different cultural context. That goal grew into something even more meaningful as I experienced what it means to connect with students and teachers across language and cultural barriers. I developed stronger skills in adaptability, collaboration, and communication, and I also grew more confident in my ability to step into a new environment and contribute in a positive way.

I hope to return to Nepal again as soon as possible. I have built many relationships with the staff members at AWIH and speak to them often to stay in touch. I hope that if anything, I have provided their community with a valuable window into our culture and with some new tools that they can use with their students. I would also love to replicate this experience in another country to broaden my worldview and overall understanding of special education.

If I were to do this project again, I would love to bring teachers materials such as sensory items and frameworks for lessons that they could use for years to come. I would also probably stay longer, to better understand what daily life in Nepal looks like for my students, and to inform my teaching methods to be more culturally responsive. I hope to see my new family at AWIH again soon and I am so grateful that I was able to immerse myself in another culture this summer while doing meaningful work.



## DAVIS TAMEH-NFON

Computer Science; Mathematics, '26

Hometown: Bamenda, Cameroon

Project Location: Cameroon

*Davis helped purchase laptops for Misongi scholars in Cameroon that will help them prepare for their end-of-year national examinations and college applications.*

This summer, I embarked on a project rooted in access, equity, and the power of education. My original plan was to travel to Cameroon with a set of laptops I had personally purchased to distribute to students in the Misongi Scholars Program—a community of high-achieving, low-income students dedicated to pursuing higher education opportunities in the United States. Although unforeseen travel complications prevented me from going in person, I was still able to fulfill my mission by coordinating the shipment of the laptops to Cameroon. I am currently working closely with Veronique Hob Hob, the custodian of the Misongi organization, to ensure the devices are distributed to scholars who need them most.

Receiving the Nichols Humanitarian Fund stipend was critical. It allowed me to take a project that had lived in my head—and my heart—for years, and turn it into real, tangible action. The impact of providing these laptops goes far and wide as it's about giving talented students the basic tools they need to compete in a global academic space. Many of these scholars rely heavily on online access for SAT prep, essay writing, research, and college applications. Without a functioning laptop, their dreams are put on pause. This experience gave me a deeper understanding of how global inequality isn't just measured in economics or policy, but in day-to-day access to the tools required to dream big.

Even though I couldn't be physically present in Cameroon, the collaboration between myself and the Misongi community remained strong. In many ways, this distance made me more intentional in my communication and planning. I had to rely heavily on trust and remote coordination—skills that I'll carry with me into any future global or humanitarian work. I learned a great deal from the Misongi scholars as we connected virtually and they shared the challenges they face and how they continue to push forward regardless. Their resilience and resourcefulness made a lasting impression on me. In turn, I was able to offer insights into the U.S. college admissions process, SAT prep strategies, and application guidance—resources that can be hard to access without personal mentorship.



In addition, I've offered to tutor the scholars in SAT preparation and to serve as a college application mentor moving forward. I also plan to return to Cameroon this upcoming winter break hopefully with a few more laptops. Being able to meet these students in person, hear their stories, and witness the impact firsthand is something I still deeply want. While I understand and respect the reasons I couldn't travel this summer, not being there is the one part of the project I would change. Nothing replaces face-to-face human connection.

Long-term, I plan to continue supporting Misongi however I can. I know this firsthand because I've seen the trajectory of those who came before me. Many Cameroonian students currently studying in the U.S.—myself included—owe their journey to the opportunities and support they received from Misongi. I want to make sure that pathway stays open and accessible for the next generation.

Looking back, the Nichols Humanitarian Fund helped me realize the power of giving back to the very community that shaped me. It helped me grow as a leader, a planner, and a mentor. And most importantly, it reminded me that meaningful change often starts small— with a single idea, a handful of laptops, and a deep belief in the potential of others.



# YONATAN TARIKU

Medicine, Health, & Society, '26

Hometown: Antioch, TN

Project Location: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

*Yontan helped strengthen STEM education at a low-income high school by organizing and facilitating a STEM training workshop for physics teachers in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy and the Ethiopian Ministry of Education.*

My Immersion Vanderbilt project, supported by the Nichols Humanitarian Fund, focused on strengthening STEM education at a low-income high school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Over two weeks, I helped organize and facilitate a STEM Training Workshop for high school physics teachers, collaborating with the U.S. Embassy, Ethiopian Ministry of Education, Addis Ababa University, and Ethiopian Professionals in STEM in North America (EPSNA). Through this partnership, we provided hands-on lab materials and led demonstrations designed to make science education more engaging and accessible.

Working alongside passionate educators showed me the power of collaboration and sustainability in service. Many of the teachers had limited access to lab resources, yet their enthusiasm and creativity were inspiring. Together, we explored ways to use simple, locally available materials to demonstrate core physics principles. This experience reminded me that impact isn't defined by the size of the resources, but by the commitment to empower others. I learned that real, lasting change requires partnership—listening to community needs, adapting to local contexts, and building capacity rather than dependency. The teachers' dedication and resilience motivated me to think about how I can continue to use my skills in science and health to support underserved communities.

This project not only strengthened my leadership and problem-solving skills but also deepened my understanding of equity and access—values that I plan to carry into my future career in Healthcare. Just as I worked to expand access to science education, I hope to expand access to healthcare in communities that need it most. My Immersion Vanderbilt experience reaffirmed my belief that education and service can transform lives, and I'm grateful to have contributed to that mission in Ethiopia.



## KENG TEGHEN

Cognitive Studies; Communication of Science & Technology, '26

Hometown: Williston, ND

Project Location: North West Region, Cameroon

*Keng supported a hospital in Cameroon by identifying critical supply needs, coordinating donations, and mobilizing community volunteers to enhance the facility's operations.*

This summer, I worked with the Bome Integrated Health Centre in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. My original plan was to volunteer onsite, assist with restorations, and donate needed supplies. Although I could not be physically present, I partnered closely with Mr. Joel Wasi and the hospital director to identify and meet the facility's needs. The Bome Health Centre is primarily community funded and serves more than 15,000 people. Of the 10 staff members who work at the center, only one receives government support, while the others rely on the community. Most of the medicine, supplies, services, and renovations are made possible through donations from local residents and organizations.

After several calls with the hospital director, we identified the most critical supply gaps: consultation books, gloves, plaster, bandages, gauze, bedsheets, bedding, and additional benches. Consultation books allow staff to maintain accurate patient records, while supplies such as gloves, gauze, and bandages are essential for infection prevention and wound care. Additional bedding improves hygiene and patient comfort, while additional benches provide much-needed seating for patients and their families. I worked with Mr. Wasi to source these items from local suppliers, place orders, and ensure their delivery to the hospital. These resources directly support the hospital's daily operations and enhance the quality of care it can provide.

Service has been an important part of my identity since high school. I participated in initiatives ranging from raising funds for cancer and Alzheimer's research to preparing Thanksgiving food baskets and purchasing Christmas gifts for children. While service has always been central to my values, I realized during college that I had stepped back from engaging in it consistently. The Nichols Humanitarian Fund experience reminded me of the importance of intentionally pursuing service, not only as a series of projects, but as an ongoing way of life.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this project was seeing how the Bome community itself stepped up. In addition to coordinating the delivery of supplies, we organized a day for

volunteers to come together and support the health center. Over twenty community members committed their time, and many more arrived to help unpack and organize donations, create more efficient storage systems, and clean and enhance the center grounds. Their collective effort not only transformed the physical environment but also shaped my perspective on how communities sustain one another. Conversations with volunteers and patients reinforced how essential the health center is and how deeply people value the care it provides.

This experience renewed my sense of responsibility to continue serving in every community I am a part of. Even now, while studying abroad in Japan, I have joined peers in volunteering locally, a continuation of the mindset reinforced through this project. I also plan to remain in touch with Mr. Wasi and the organizers at the Bome Health Centre and explore future opportunities to support their initiatives.

This was one of the first Nichols Humanitarian Fund projects in Cameroon, and I am grateful to have been part of bringing it to life. Whether through donating resources or offering time, being of service not only transforms communities but also shapes those who serve. Thank you to the Nichols Humanitarian Fund for making it possible to support the Bome Integrated Health Centre and their impactful service to the community.



## KRISTINA TROJAK

Anthropology; Cinema and Media Arts, '26

Hometown: Churchville, PA

Project Location: Chile

*Kristina conducted anthropological research with the Mapuche community in Chile to learn about historical and current interactions between them and their environment.*

This summer I was very lucky to get to travel to southern Chile as a member of Proyecto Antropología Ambiental Huilo-Lanin, an interdisciplinary archaeological project centered on Mapuche history, a population indigenous to the country.

For six weeks I resided in a small town named Neltume and would venture out daily to complete various tasks such as collecting water and soil samples, performing survey work, and attending community events, alongside the Vanderbilt Director of Undergraduate Studies, Dr. Jacob Sauer, and two of my classmates. The majority of the work done was within and around the Reserva Biologica Huilo Huilo, a private protected area in the Patagonian region.

As an archaeological student, I have always wanted to be able to work on an actual site and be able to contribute more thoroughly to our knowledge of physical human history, but there are often monetary restrictions that create preventions to being able to work on-site, whether it be transportation, equipment, or other daily expenses. Flights outside of the United States can be extremely expensive, and the cost of this alone would have barred me from participation. Being granted funding from the Nichols Humanitarian Fund was integral to my ability to participate in this program and facilitate growth within me.

My time in Chile has significantly changed my worldview. I had never spent such a long time outside of the United States of America in a non-English speaking country before my arrival in the country. Not only did my time in Chile provide me with hands-on experience in my area of studies, but it allowed me to immerse myself in studying the Spanish language, and begin speaking to people I never would have had the ability to converse with otherwise. I learned so much from each place we visited, and from every conversation I had. To this day, I still regularly communicate with people I met in Neltume, and get to keep working on my Spanish daily.

In addition to this, I have been exposed to new academic interests which I had never considered before, such as the history of colonization in South America. Not only have I walked away from my time in Chile with a new perspective on the world, but with encouragement to continue this process of learning that my time there inspired.

Looking forward, I now have plans to return to South America and deepen my studies of the continent and the many diverse countries which make it up, as well as continue to learn Spanish, a language I always had a deep desire to learn, but only truly began doing so in preparation for my work in this project. In addition to this, I would love to continue my participation on archaeological field sites, and take the variety of skills I learned over my summer in Chile to new topics and areas of study.

Looking back, I would easily repeat every step of the work again. I returned to the United States of America with newfound knowledge, interests, and a newfound drive to pursue them to a deeper level. I came back not only changed as a student, but changed as a person. I cannot wait to see where I continue onwards from here.





## KERMINA WADEH

Medicine, Health, & Society; Sociology, '26

Hometown: Antioch, TN

Project Location: Egypt

*Kermina helped run activities, pack care packages, and assisted healthcare workers in providing care for young people and children in Upper Egypt with non-communicable diseases.*

This summer I completed a 2.5-week mission trip that took place in 5 cities in Egypt: Cairo, Alexandria, Upper Egypt (Qena, Sohag, Akhmim). This was a mission trip serving the minority religious population (Coptic Orthodox Christians) and populations in poverty in Egypt. During the 17-day mission trip, we traveled to various special needs centers where we spent time with intellectually challenged kids, participated in 500 home visits where we delivered food boxes specific to the family's needs, visited two pediatric cancer hospitals where we delivered toys to youth receiving chemotherapy treatment, visited two orphanages where food boxes and a monetary donation was given while spending the day planning activities to partake in with the orphanage's youth, and more. This mission trip was in partnership with Orthodox Christian Campus Ministries (OCCM) and the Hands in God's Hand (HIGH) office.

Receiving this stipend gave me the opportunity to give back to my community in a way that changed my perspective and lifestyle. I am a first-generation Egyptian that was born at Vanderbilt University's Medical Center. I spent my whole life in Nashville, even choosing to complete my undergraduate experience 30 minutes away from home. The Nashville life was all I knew, which disconnected me from my religious roots and culture. Because of this generous stipend, I was able to truly appreciate my background for its richness and vibrance. The kindness of the people that had so little, the smiles of the people that were uncertain of their future, the welcoming atmosphere that I experienced in a country I call home was all possible through this stipend. The experience this trip offered me changed my perspective towards volunteering. Instead of seeing volunteering as giving, I now view it as a way of receiving more help than what I give. The lessons I learned through this experience have helped me find meaning in the way I wish to continue my future career. With aspirations of helping minority communities in Nashville navigate legal challenges as a public interest lawyer, I have found that making tangible change doesn't have to start when I start my career, but I can actively give back in any stage of life, feeling tied to my roots now more than ever.

Mutual learning during this mission trip was extremely deep. Through my service sites, I learned what it means for a society or a community or an individual to be resilient. Through living with children suffering with cancer, poverty-stricken families, families living with disabilities at home, I experienced firsthand how there was hospitality living side by side with joy in the face of severe suffering. That resilience made me reinterpret success and happiness for myself, not in economic success but in a spirit of gratitude, belongingness, and faith.

At the same time, I brought my own experience and knowledge into those interactions. Through my experience in public service and advocacy, I inquired insightful questions during our visits, led thoughtful debriefing with my team, and engaged children and families intentionally with compassion. Many members in the community were thankful for our visit, not just as donors, but as those who listened, laughed, prayed, and played among them. Even spending our time in their reality created some spaces for mutual recognition and dignity.

As a student with an enduring interest in public interest lawyering and advocacy, I went into the trip wondering how to "help." But I came back with a more nuanced understanding that service is not charity, it is solidarity. I learned change is not only about large-scale policy or institutional transformation.

I also hope to further this work. Although I won't actually be there in Egypt in the near term, I have remained in contact with the HIGH office and am exploring means of advancing their cause while overseas, at a distance, with fundraising, grant-writing, or drives here in the States. I hope in the longer term to share this experience in presentations and forums within faith-based student groups and campus social justice organizations so as to generate a greater awareness about global poverty, disability advocacy, and pediatric healthcare equity.

Long term, I aspire to forge a career in law which closes the divide between international service and national service, utilizing my training in service towards marginalized groups in my own nation as well as internationally.



## CAREN ZAREF

Neuroscience; Medicine, Health, and Society, '27

Hometown: Nolensville, TN

Project Location: Egypt

*Caren helped run activities, pack care packages, and assisted healthcare workers in providing care for young people and children in Upper Egypt with non-communicable diseases.*

From May 6th to May 22nd, 2025, I participated in a mission trip to Egypt in partnership with HOPE (Help Other People Excel) and the Orthodox Christian Campus Ministries (OCCM). This trip was rooted in service and cultural immersion, spanning several locations in Egypt: Alexandria, Anafora, and Upper Egypt. During these two and a half weeks, our group, composed of 20 American college students, engaged in various service activities based on the needs of the communities we visited. The work included both educational and medical outreach, aiming to provide much-needed support in under-resourced areas.

This mission trip aligned perfectly with both my personal values and my academic aspirations. As a pre-med student majoring in Neuroscience and Medicine, Health, & Society, I am deeply interested in understanding how healthcare systems operate across different socioeconomic and cultural contexts. I was able to compare the healthcare challenges faced in Egypt, particularly among underserved populations, with those I have studied in the U.S. This experience helped me cultivate essential qualities such as empathy, adaptability, and cross-cultural communication, which are critical for any future physician. I also gained a better understanding of medical logistics in resource-limited settings, an area that increasingly informs global health policy and humanitarian work. And on a personal level, this trip represented an opportunity for growth in independence and resilience. It was a chance to reconnect with my Egyptian heritage and deepen my understanding of my cultural and spiritual roots as a Coptic Christian.

Our daily schedule varied depending on the location, but one consistent theme was service from morning to evening. In Alexandria and Upper Egypt, our days began with planning and preparing educational lessons, followed by classroom time with children and adolescents. We taught a mix of hygiene education, basic math and reading, and creative activities designed to engage them and encourage critical thinking. We also visited orphanages spending the day doing various activities like playing sports, building crafts and gardening with the children. Additionally, we planned activities for those who had hearing and visual impairments which was difficult at first but rewarding in the end. In Anafora, our focus shifted more toward spiritual reflection and

cultural exchange. Here, we participated in workshops, group discussions, and service around the community center. These moments allowed us to process our experiences and build a strong sense of unity. At the Ragaa Medical Center, our responsibilities included assisting with patient transport and helping organize. We also observed diagnostic tests, x-ray procedures, and consultations. While our roles were limited due to our student status, we were able to contribute meaningfully by supporting staff in non-invasive tasks and interacting with patients and families. At the end of our trip we got to visit Akhmim, a holy site where the martyrs of Akhmim were resting. One of the most fascinating and miraculous things was witnessing the blood of some of the corpses glistening when in fact it should've been long dried up after centuries had passed. The ancient monasteries were also a sight to behold.

This trip was an incredibly eye-opening experience on multiple levels. One of the biggest lessons I learned was how different healthcare delivery can look in an underdeveloped country. I gained a deeper appreciation for the challenges healthcare workers face in resource-limited environments, from limited medical supplies to overburdened staff. I also saw firsthand the power of education and human connection. Working with children who had so few resources but so much enthusiasm reminded me that love of learning and hope are not measured by material wealth. Teaching basic hygiene and academic subjects felt small in the moment, but their gratitude showed how much it meant. Our small group supported each other through the long hours and bonded deeply. The cultural immersion also helped me grow more confident in my ability to navigate unfamiliar environments. At times, the unpredictability of our schedule and the emotional weight of the service work was hard to navigate but nonetheless worth it. There were moments when it was difficult to see the level of need and not be able to do more. But even in those moments, I learned the value of presence, of showing up, listening, and doing whatever I could, however small. This mission trip has been one of the most transformative experiences of my academic and personal journey. It reinforced my desire to pursue medicine not just as a career, but as a lifelong commitment to service. It challenged me to think beyond the textbook and to approach health as a holistic concept-one that includes education, culture, faith, and community. As I returned from Egypt, I brought with me not only memories and new friendships, but a clearer vision for the kind of physician and person I want to be: compassionate, culturally aware, and committed to justice and equity. This all would not have been possible without the financial security the Nichols Humanitarian Fund brought.

Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Nichols!!!

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