

Addressing Food Insecurity and Learning About Post-disaster Resilience Strategies in Central
New York

I spent my summer living and researching, with seven other interns, at Fallen Tree Center for a Resilient Future. Fallen Tree is a small sustainability center, operating on Zen principles, set on $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre in Northeast Ithaca.

Going into this summer, my research project revolved around food insecurity, and focused in on strategies used to move people toward food sovereignty. However, as the summer progressed, my project began to expand and evolve. In addition to food insecurity, I began researching post-disaster resilience strategies. The two topics go hand in hand.

The locational scope of my project also changed, in that it now looks at Japan *and* Puerto Rico. In the past decade, both places have experienced massive disasters, from the Triple Disaster to Hurricane Maria. The impacts of such are still being felt, and their societies are still rebuilding.

At various points during the summer, I worked with Mutual Aid of the Finger Lakes (MAFL). MAFL is a mutual aid group that organizes free distributions of food, clothing, household goods, and other necessities to the people of Central NY. The people being helped tend to be caught in the gridlock of generational poverty, which I, myself, have experienced and arguably still do. Being on the flip side of things, now helping, as opposed to the one being helped, was quite an emotional experience. People of all ages and walks of life would come to the popups. Poverty does not discriminate.

What I love about MAFL is that there are no requirements in order to obtain any of the items being given out. People who are food insecure desire nothing more than what they are

lacking: food. In my experience, tons of paperwork would have to be filled out and various proofs provided to even be considered for free distributions. Even after such, many people are turned away. If food insecure individuals rely on the system, they will starve before receiving the help they need.

Every Tuesday and Thursday during my stay at Fallen Tree, I would help teach a class to local residents interested in transitioning their lives to a more engaging, sustainable, and ecological lifestyle. The class was entitled: An Introduction to Suburban Homesteading. Some of the topics covered include: Setting up a safe and effective composting system, planting and maintaining a productive vegetable garden, using and drying herbs, adding a flock of chickens to your backyard, supporting pollinators / beekeeping, making Norwegian brush fences, hügelkultur, vermiculture, log inoculation, and creating community through food systems participation. A large portion of the class dealt with putting public speaking skills into practice - presenting all that we had learned to others. I spoke in depth about caring for tools and embodied energy, a plant called comfrey, French drain systems, and Norwegian brush fences.

In addition to oral speech, this summer was immensely hands-on-oriented. Aside from the day-to-day caring for and maintaining of Fallen Tree, I participated in an installation at the home of one of the women attending the class. In just three Wednesday mornings, we were able to transform her home from, essentially, a junkyard to a small-scale version of Fallen Tree. Participating in such is a perfect example of mutual aid in action.

While I had the opportunity to live at Fallen Tree, I also had the opportunity of being exposed to other sustainable living spaces. On two separate occasions, in the form of fieldtrips, I was able to visit a yurt and an earthship. I encountered, for the first time, humanure toilets at both locations, which are essential implementations in post-disaster situations. Other fieldtrips

included: The Seneca Art & Culture Center at Ganondagan State Historic Site, the Cornell Botanic Gardens, and the NYS Equal Rights Heritage Center.

Living with seven other individuals held a plethora of lessons and opportunities to learn and pass on knowledge, too. We cooked for one another, helped each other with chores, shared means communally, and meditated together. During meals, we would talk about our research projects, share our findings, different cultures, various upbringings, and much more. The communication of culture was mostly found in the dishes we cooked, originating from all corners of the world: China, Japan, Puerto Rico, Spain, Burma, etc.

Everything that I learned this summer, in some way, shape, or form can be applied to my research topics. Having the opportunity to go to Japan next summer will allow me to showcase such, as I plan to address the continued struggles following the Triple Disaster. I also plan on traveling to Puerto Rico during winter break, as a means of continuing my research, given the continued struggles following Hurricane Maria.

Professor Law will be allowing her summer researchers to host workshops at Fallen Tree during the academic year, which I plan to take full advantage of. My workshops will likely revolve around composting, fencing, utilization of human waste, and the like. Ideally, I would like to communicate post-disaster strategies, both immediate and long-term, which can even be applied to the closely related issue of food insecurity.

As shared in my last reflection, my family is moving to Ithaca on September 1st. However, New York City will always be home. I say this because I would never turn my back on my community, the South Bronx, even if I no longer live within it.

My experiences, which are rooted in the South Bronx, are the main drivers of why I have chosen to pursue such research. The endgame, and ultimate goal, is to be able to go back to my community fully equipped and ready to transform it. From the food insecurity stemming from generational poverty to the opioid crisis still being faced, I plan to invest all that I learn back into my home.

While I am saddened by this summer ending, I know that this is only the beginning of a long, fulfilling journey. I cannot explain how much my life has been transformed by summer '21. That is thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation for providing such an overwhelmingly rich, gratifying experience.