LiA Reflection

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"So, tell me about yourself."

It's such a strange question, to be so casually tasked with summing up your hopes, failures, sense of humour, favourite candle scent, the path you love to walk most with your dog, the quote you still remember from that one book-I could go on and on.

It feels insurmountable to try and describe all the parts that make you whole. The formidability of explaining something as profound as oneself is akin to the task I confront now, trying to describe what was an experience meaningful beyond articulation.

It all began on July 8th, when I embarked on my first solo trip to the other side of the globe.

This expedition was part of a larger program I'm in that is organized by the Laidlaw Foundation. My first summer as a Laidlaw Scholar, the summer of 2022, involved conducting my own research project. I had the great fortune of being a principal investigator on an experiment I conducted at the Toronto Experimental Economics Lab, where I studied prosociality and decision-making (and wrote this paper about it). This summer, the program made possible a scholarship for me to join a community and health expedition in the Fiji Islands.

When others hear I spent my summer in Fiji, I often get asked what resort I vacationed at. The country is well-known for its clear waters, palm trees and tropical weather; it is less known for its indigenous population. Viti Levu and Vanua Levu are the two largest

of Fiji's 330 islands. Indigenous Fijians, or iTaukei, live in rural parts of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu or villages on the outer islands, making up just over half the national population.

As part of a team of sixteen other scholars from around the world, our expedition took place across two rural settlements in the Ra province; Waisava and Vunimaqo (pronounced Vu-knee-ma-ng-o). Half of the scholars stayed with host families in Waisava and the other half with host families in Vunimaqo. These two communities are separated only by a river, and both connect to Dreketi Road.

The road pictured is Dreketi Road, the house with the blue dot is my family's home, and the purple line outlines the river separating Waisava and Vunimaqo. Neither community was previously on Google Maps; one of the scholars added pins while on project!

My host family, the Rawaqa family, live in Waisava. My roommate and I spent our time in the settlement constantly abuzz and interacting with our seven siblings (four brothers and three sisters).

The Rawaqa Family (minus one cheeky brother who slipped away), myself and my roommate Catherine.

My role and the aims of our project involved building a community medical dispensary, delivering mental health workshops alongside a national mental health charity called Youth Champs 4 Mental Health, volunteering as part of a district health day put together by a charity called Diabetes Fiji, and taking part in an experiential culture program requested by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs.

Our project goals were, evidently, quite diversified. The settlements' community health worker requested the Ministry of Health to provide a dispensary. Building this requested infrastructure directly helped to expand medical capacity and supplies.

Our work with the local organizations, Youth Champs and Diabetes Fiji, delivered sensitive and necessary education. We hosted workshops on mental health, communicable diseases (CDs) and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Participation in the experiential learning program, guided by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, aimed

to stimulate engagement with and revitalize local customs and traditions amongst rural youth.

A more detailed breakdown of “what” we accomplished while on project can be found in my LiA Project Report.

Our team of scholars and community members (left) just after a mental health workshop with Youth Champs 4 Mental Health (right).

If I’m being candid, I’m not sure that I will ever be able to put into words how special this experience was, and is, to me. I long to share, with anyone who will listen, the context of inside jokes and Waisava slang and nicknames; all the minute details that make memories rich. Limited by words on a page, I attempt now to share some of the lessons I have grasped and anecdotally paint a picture of the beautiful community I called home this summer.

My time in Fiji created space to practice working with people from a variety of backgrounds, realize goals as a team, and instill optimism from a humble learner’s point of view. This meant grappling with difficult questions at times: How do you practice proactive servant leadership, seek the open-mindedness necessary to learn about yourself through others, and balance authenticity with noticing how others feel in your presence?

Big questions here.

Attempts at answers below.

Anxiety is the gap between where you are and where you want to be.
This trip felt right.

As someone young and ambitious, I often find myself caught up in trying to over-optimize my time. The feeling of anxiety is the gap between where you are and where you want to be, and in this context, that means a gap between how you are, and how you would like to be, spending your time. For me, the only way to calm this feeling is to work on closing that gap.

> There is peace in progress, in knowing that I am doing what I can to get to where I want to be.

There was not a single moment during my six weeks in Waisava that I wished I had spent anywhere else, with anyone else, doing anything else; and that was my signal that I was growing in the right environment.

Growth can and ought to be uncomfortable but the discomfort from being a beginner is worlds away from the discomfort of spending your time on the wrong thing. I think young adults often don't spend enough time considering this difference, misinterpreting cues that they need to be more patient with their current path rather than pivot to something new, and vice versa.

I study economics, and one of my frustrations is that I cannot as easily build relevant tangible projects. It is not a subject prone to physical demonstrations like bridges or robots but one that deals with much more abstract mathematics, data, and field applications in the form of literal government policies. I study what I do because I am keen on socioeconomic development and social issues.

This expedition was something I had trained myself to take part in for over a year, aware that it would be one of the most eye-opening, practical lessons I could ever have. Knowing now what "right" feels and looks like in 3D (i.e., a tangible application), I am better able to seek it out in abundance.

Painting the children's hands (left) to decorate the dispensary (the 3D application!) we built (right).

It is a remarkable situation to be able to have your values, goals, and use of time in alignment. There is a great privilege and effort required to be privy to this serendipity, and I'm learning that figuring out how to put myself in positions where it is possible throughout my life will afford me fulfilling work.

No frills; not the grocery chain but a way to treat others for who they show up as.

A scant topic of conversation amongst scholars, and a non-existent topic of conversation between scholars and locals, was our resume. It did not matter what we had done, who we had been around, where we had studied; all that mattered was how we made those around us feel. The only currency of credibility was your personal brand.

It was fascinating to experience a world where it did not matter so much how we came to be who we were. No one knew each other's backstory, or what life history had shaped us to be patient, respectful or open-minded; it only mattered that we were. Predicting the success of another depended upon their tenacity, not their formal education.

The stripped-down prerequisites for forming an opinion on someone showed me how many frills we attach to sizing up others. Before looking to see how senior someone is at a company or how many papers they have published, stages they have walked, awards they have collected, we ought first to recognize that accolades are simply not an indicator of character — nor age an indicator of wisdom.

I met so many youth in Dreketi wise beyond their years, criminally sarcastic and unconditionally loving.

A mentor of mine told me many years ago, just before I landed my first internship, that people hire people they want to be around. Certain roles indeed require specific skills which cannot be ignored, but they can be taught. Character cannot be.

This is a simple idea but one I have seen lose practice in a culture where access to information overload clouds our ability to form critical and independent character assessments of others. Sometimes the most brilliant and thoughtful folk are right under your nose.

Treat people for who they show up as.

When in doubt, be kind.

One of the most memorable conversations I had during my time in Waisava was with a man named Lionel Rogers. Lionel is the President of Youth Champs 4 Mental Health, a charity we worked with while on project.

After a mental health workshop one evening, I was sitting cross-legged in the community shed, which was a communal space built for us to host events during our time in Dreketi, and began chatting with Lionel.

The settlement had built the shed as a communal space for us to use for workshops, community activities like Zumba and for culture course sessions (photo on left). Me and Stabby the dog (photo on right) sitting in front of the work-in-progress dispensary on the left and the shed on the right.

It was about 4 pm and I could hear the children and youth just outside already setting up to play volleyball. Lionel and I got to talking about his life's work as a leader in mental health. I gained a lot of perspective that day, hearing his observations and understanding of underlying stressors that he had noticed. Although, at the time, I had been living in the community for nearly a month, there was so much that I had failed to pick up on. Whether it was shrouded by hospitality, the evergreen Fijian smile or

erupting laughter, I do not know, but I did realize that we knew only the tip of the iceberg.

Our being there had disrupted their normal way of life. The build, the workshops, the culture course, and even community activities like volleyball, were novel and naturally exciting, but this meant that we did not and could not truly experience a typical day in the life. We never saw what a slow Tuesday morning was like or a sleepy Thursday afternoon. Our presence and the activities of the project kept the settlement abuzz.

As a foreigner in a traditional village, I knew, fundamentally, that I was being "hosted". It had not really occurred to me, however, what that meant emotionally for the families we were living with. In trying to be hospitable, were they experiencing the undue burden of trying to keep day-to-day stressors under wraps? Did they want us to see what we did; happy families who were generous and benevolent, even if that might not have been the case all of the time?

Even learning from the mental health workshops that laughter is one of the most common coping mechanisms in Fiji changed my perspective on what a genuine positive interaction could look and feel like. The lesson I learned, and one that I'm sure is true of other close relationships in my life, is that we know so little about what other people are going through. The best course of action I have mustered when faced with this sort of ambiguity thus far has been to be kind. The same advice can be applied to hearing new perspectives.

There were many cultural differences, as one could imagine, between my Canadian upbringing and the community in Fiji. The role of women, in particular, was a hefty dissonance to try and understand. iTaukei societies are traditionally patriarchal with clear gender roles based on the perception that women are gentler and require protection. Before leaving for Fiji, we had been informed that this difference might be jarring.

In all truthfulness, I did not anticipate it being a point of discomfort for me. I had assumed that my small experiences of Western patriarchal behaviour would have been preparation enough. Gender roles of being the parent to take paternal leave or the most likely to cook at home were experiences I still saw and continue to see in North

America. In hindsight, I realize how greatly these experiences differ from those in a traditional society.

Besides what I had expected to see, which was women almost exclusively staying at home, cooking every meal, looking after children, and cleaning, I saw clear divides in communal experiences too. At nearly every community event we had together in the shed, women and children sat at the back. At every meal, women ate last. I had never seen a community norm like this before, and it took some getting used to.

During our very first culture course session, I heard a new perspective, from one of the women, on the roles that females play in iTaukei society. I remember being told that, while for us it might seem unfair or limiting, for them it was a matter of respect and love. It was because they cared so much for the women in their culture that they would rather not have them undertake difficult physical endeavours, like tending to the farm. Instead, men would take on that role out of respect for the women in their lives. I had never considered it from that point of view before.

Another woman I met in the village, who had married into it and was originally from a larger city in Fiji, said that she enjoyed and preferred to be at home taking care of her children, cooking and cleaning. This really tested my cultural humility; on the one hand, I felt poorly that the women tended to eat last, for example, but I also began to understand their perspective on wanting to be cared for.

It is a difficult dissonance, as I mentioned. Even the conditions of "being cared for" look so different in a Fijian settlement environment than they would in mine in Canada. The former might involve physical labour while the latter likely would not. I wonder if my stance on the patriarchy would be different had I grown up in a world more like Dreketi. I wonder what beliefs I would gravitate towards on my own despite that. Even if I do not have the answers to reconciling differences in perspectives like these, demonstrating an eagerness to understand and willingness to learn made conversations about it a lot easier.

Excitement is the key to fostering diversity in thought.

Another one of the many fundamental lessons I learned while in Fiji is how important it is to demonstrate enthusiasm and encourage excitement in others. In the context of our expedition, it became clear that the novelty of our presence and the diversity of

our backgrounds made scholars a sort of role model for children in the village. They often emulated the behaviours and colloquialisms we used out of curiosity or interest, and thus, our presence became closely perceived by many.

Two of my youngest Fijian brothers with some of the scholars (left). My roomate and I with our youngest sister (right).

From my point of view, this unearthed a great deal of responsibility; I did not know the depth of impact my actions might have. It felt increasingly important to demonstrate what I already felt, which was cultural admiration and a deep interest in the Fijian way of life.

I believe that one of the best experiences you can share with someone is to witness their excitement in sharing something they care about with you.

> Getting to see someone's unabashed joy is a privilege and celebrating that excitement ensures a repeat occurrence; it urges people to share what makes them who they are with others.

A fond memory I have is learning a meke, which is a traditional style of dance in Fiji that involves a great deal of storytelling through song and movement. One evening, a few of the Waisava scholars gathered in the shed to learn a farewell meke from the Youth Champs team that we would perform on our last day. Learning the moves and laughing with the other scholars was such a blast; the best part, however, was when youth began to trickle in.

Lionel and Agu teaching us the meke (left) and us learning the meke (right)

Some of the youth who joined in later (left) and our final performance on our last night in the village (right)

The music playing on the speaker had piqued the interest of many around the shed, and slowly, they came inside to sit and learn the meke with us. I think that hearing our laughter and seeing how honoured we were to get to learn this part of their culture made for a welcoming environment.

It also meant we filmed a TikTok after; the peak of cultural exchange.

A snapshot of the TikTok we filmed right after learning the meke together.

As a leader, it becomes necessary that you set the standard for showing initiative and interest. I can think of many moments where my pushing to want to learn and do more came as a pleasant surprise to those I interacted with.

My brother, for example, was headed to the cucumber farm one morning. My roommate, Catherine, and I asked if we could tag along. This came as a surprise to him; he seemed confused that we would want to accompany him on what was a normal and even mundane chore.

For us, it was novel and interesting.

Once we got close to the farm, he asked Catherine and me if we wanted to just wait outside the perimeter of the farm so as not to get into the mud. When both of us responded with a resounding, “Are you kidding! We want to see the cucumbers!” his reaction was nothing short of giddy. It became a fun activity; he explained and we learned which cucumbers were ripe, which ones to leave behind, and that the reason there was a bamboo post across the farm was to block Grace, the cow, from getting in and munching on all the vegetables.

My Fijian brother, roomate and I at the cucumber farm (left). Me looking into a bag of cucumbers we had collected featuring my American Psycho raincoat (middle). Some of our family's farm-grown cucumbers (right).

I'm not sure if the confusion caused by my enthusiasm was more so because I was a female wanting to participate in physical work, but it always seemed to put at ease and surprise whoever I was with.

I recall many moments during the build when I would seek out our build manager, Jim, to ask "What can I do next?" My (annoying) persistence eventually turned into him shouting for me across the site, asking if I wanted to saw the planks or hammer the next set of nails.

Even small things like insisting that we walk with our siblings to the Bausa (the nearest gas station where we purchased snacks) instead of taking up their offers of hitching a ride as they helped reiterate that I was there to live life their way rather than simply observe it.

As a guest, our siblings often asked what I wanted to do. Eventually, I began to ask back, "What do you want to do today?" Tiptoeing around what I might want as a guest gradually turned into, "Hey Ruci (my Fijian name, pronounced Ruth-ee), let's play cards after dinner" or "Hurry up, the Sunday movie is starting!"



In order from left to right: one of the scholars, my Fijian sister, my Na (Fijian mother), Ta (fijian Father), me, and my roomate at the bausa shopping for snacks and pasta ingredients (photo on left). Waiting for the cable network's Sunday movie program to start with our siblings and other children (middle and right).

Setting precedent is up to you; if you intentionally demonstrate genuine curiosity and a willingness to see another perspective, it is inevitable that you will breed trust and understanding.

Showing enthusiasm verifies to others that their contributions, their differences, and perspectives are what make them so valuable. This is what fosters diversity in thought, but it requires a degree of vulnerability and candor, qualities that survive best amongst encouragement.

Importantly, you can only really offer effective encouragement from a place of parity. For example, if you admire someone so much that they become a role model or something of a hero, you place yourself in a category separate from them, disrupting your ability to connect with them. When we idolize and turn people into things to behold rather than goals, we inadvertently tell ourselves we are not capable of being that thing. My take on confidence is to recognize that no one is better than you. NOT that you are better than others; it is simply that everyone is human, has been a beginner, a master, and every other level in between. This point of view affords a confidence that strays from being arrogant and is beyond self-doubt.

The flip side of this is when others put you on a pedestal. Going back to the place of parity, it becomes your responsibility as a leader to remove yourself from it, for you

cannot effectively connect if you are placed so far away from those around you.

> How will you empathize with the throes of being down in the weeds if you stand, unsoiled, watching from above?

One example of how I tried to create parity was through a haircut. I often heard the girls in the village say that they liked my hair because it was long and different from theirs, especially one of my younger sisters. I know that when I was a child, hearing encouragement and identity celebration from those older than me meant a lot. So, one day, when my sister said, “I want to have long hair like yours”, instead of reassuring her with words that our differences are what make us unique, I responded with, “I think short hair looks just as nice; in fact, would you cut mine for me, so I could match you?”

Getting my hair cut by my siblings!

Putting yourself in new situations acquaints you with parts of yourself you did not know existed can reaffirm what you already know.

It has been said a million times over that travelling and experiencing new ways of life shows you traits that you didn't know you possessed. However, my time in Fiji also reaffirmed to me parts of myself I had already met. It was helpful because it was almost like a test run; do these characteristics of mine hold up when I'm faced with a new and challenging environment? Are these constants of my character?

Something that this experience verified is what I look for in the people I surround myself with. As I've grown older, I've come to realize that I like to befriend those willing to try new things. That encapsulates a lot; it means you're okay with failing, you don't get embarrassed by trial and error, and you stick to things until you get better. While in Fiji, our team tried something new nearly every day. From new food, games, traditions, songs, dances and more. This ties back to the trip feeling right; I was always around people who were interested in learning through doing in public.



Our first Church service for which we learned a Fijian hymn (left). My roomate and I trying to wash vegetables (middle) for the lovo (right). A lovo is an underground oven used for cooking meals on special occasions. In this instance, the lovo was being prepared for our farewell dinner at the end of project.



We went to a nearby river to learn how to make bilibilis, which are bamboo rafts.

The secret, I think, is knowing what good looks and feels like. I'm fortunate enough to have some pretty great people in my life. They've set the bar somewhere I did not know it could be, and I'm forever grateful for it. It grants me patience; I'm much more willing to spend time alone than with people who make me feel alone.

We have all heard that your circle of friends influences your behaviour. Being around the right people so constantly in Fiji made me realize that your company also influences how you feel about yourself.

I noticed that the insecurities I harboured prior to Fiji disappeared while on project (and have stayed gone so far). I no longer cared so much about what I looked like, dancing (badly) in front of the entire village and having a blast, or ugly crying whilst saying farewell.


Some pictures of our teary farewell to Dreketi.

When you surround yourself with folks who are similarly okay with being new at things, bad at things, and getting better together, it strips away a lot of the reasons we stop ourselves from putting ourselves out there in the first place.

> Embarrassment cannot walk where empathy runs.

You can only meet people as far as, and in the ways that, they've met themselves.

This is something one of my friends on project said to me one evening. I had been talking to her about how I worried if the community really knew me. They knew this version of me; this girl who loves settlement dogs, prefers chiselling to hammering

and goes hard at Just Dance. I wondered if it mattered, that they did not know other parts of me.



My Fijian brother, Stabby the dog and roomate taking a water break (left). Hard at work chiselling featuring my hardhat that says “Road work ahead?” (middle). Two of my friends and I caught singing the season five opener of B99 while hammering at the end of the morning shift (right).

The language barrier we faced also made me wonder about how well we were connecting. While I was lucky that my entire family spoke English and most people in the settlement did, it did make me question the fullness of the conversations we had with each other. English is my first language; for those in the settlement, Fijian is their first language. I did wonder, were we receiving a watered-down version of everyone we meant simply because we could not communicate in the same language? Were there emotions or jokes that I was unable to really grasp because of that?

This meant that I had to look for non-linguistic forms of connection. While I was not sure that they knew me the way my family and friends do outside of Fiji, I realized that perhaps they got to know me in a way no one else ever would. Relying on displays of emotion and getting to know each other through silliness, sarcasm, excitement, and facial expressions was an interesting experience and perhaps the most transparent one I have ever encountered.

On our very first day in Dreketi, I connected almost immediately with two of my younger siblings over rock, paper, scissors. They taught me several of their hand games and we had a blast trying to understand the rules of the games we were

exchanging. Playing cards with our family, volleyball, doing Zumba, watching movies and cooking together were all ways that we connected without words.

Scenes from the kitchen! Making brownies in the dark with my siblings (top left). Making pasta for my family (top middle). Made 104 dumplings with my roomate and siblings (top right). Helped make a Brazilian Fijian donut (bottom left). Chaotic chocolate chip cookie making (bottom middle). Sugar cookies (bottom right).

I learned quickly that humour transcends language (as does sarcasm). By the end of the trip, my sister figured out how to tell me I wasn't funny in three different languages (English, French and Spanish). To make fun and be made fun of endearingly is such a familial experience, and I was lucky enough to witness it.

Laughter, hugs, and tears meant the same thing.

Not being able to express everything in words has made me more mindful of other ways of reading people and their emotions. Maybe not everything belongs in words (!)

Demonstrating care is a language we must all study.

Whenever I got sick on project, I was fortunate to have friends who would come visit me in my room if I was bedridden, others would bring me medication they thought might help, some texted, others offered to go to the hospital with me, and some

laboriously pushed me around in a wheelchair (long story short: I sliced my foot on coral!).

If I felt reluctant or drained, sometimes my friends demonstrating care meant nudging me to climb waterfalls or go walk-snorkelling on the beach. We had many conversations about feeling pressured to be "on" all of the time and wanting to be on full blast, taking part in everything and soaking it all in. At the same time, it became tiring very quickly to sustain that, so leaning on each other meant helping one another make the most of our time in the settlement.

Some pretty great friends.

Learning how to check in with others in the ways that make them feel most appreciated and supported is a skill that requires a great deal of intention and time.

I think it's a skill worth learning; it makes for some pretty great friends.

Leadership does not always look like Harvey Specter from Suits.

To me, leadership does not look like a boisterous or charming extrovert. A leader looks like someone who puts others in the spotlight. Someone who wants everyone around them to succeed and takes steps to make that the most likely scenario, without needing

credit. It means being a critical thinker, not agreeing with opinions you have not formed yet and being aware of the space that you take up.

During workshops with Diabetes Fiji and Youth Champs, we were often in groups of scholars and locals. Our groups were tasked at times with presenting ideas we had discussed. It became a goal for me, and for some other scholars, to encourage the local youth in the room to present and practice public speaking. Giving them the space and motivation to try something they found new and scary was the position I chose to hold as a leader in that situation. In that case, it was most beneficial to be a cheerleader.

There is a misconception that those who are quiet are shy. Having met many people who contradict this, quietness is typically a sign of thoughtfulness. Those who choose carefully when and if to speak make the most introspective and observant leaders, and we would be remiss to consider them wallflowers to be walked over rather than curiously engaged.

If you give people enough room and autonomy to step up to the plate, and the right encouragement, they usually will (and they'll do a mighty fine job at it too).

You learn more about yourself through others.

Living with a family in the settlements of Dreketi meant being a part of every family. Going on morning walks along the road or strolling through the settlement, it was not uncommon to be invited in for meals or tea at every home you passed. There was no real sense of "mine" and "yours" but rather a constant and ever-present idea of "ours."

It did not matter that we were new, did not speak the language, knew very little of the customs, or even that we would only be staying for such a short period; our presence was welcomed as though it had always been there and as though it always would be.

Upon reflection, this is quite unlike the North American experience I've had as a twenty-year-old, born and raised Canadian, where bouts over ownership of material things are the norm.

I like to think that as our time in the village passed, we as scholars adopted a similarly welcoming and collective way of life. We took a page out of their book. It became normal to walk over to another scholar's house to check in and chat rather than to text, especially since digital connection was scarce and poor. For six weeks, I swapped

Google Calendar invites with Zoom links and chats at Starbucks for strolls on the hills at 7 in the morning and drinking tea on porches. Being in a bubble of sixteen people in a new environment meant connecting far more with each than anyone else digitally, and I know that did me a lot of good. I'll miss being able to pull on my gumboots (i.e., rain boots, wellies) and make my way over to the houses of my friends to play cards, chat, and hang out with their families, at a moment's notice and know with certainty that someone would be home. I learned that this sort of closeness and connectivity is something I cherish.

It felt nice to know and be known by an entire community. Saying hello and goodbye to children I had come to know as they passed me on the carrier to and back from school became commonplace. Almost always hearing some small voice calling "Hani! Ruci!" and wanting to play or share hugs is something I will miss dearly.

Beyond the cultural exchange with the Fijians, our group of scholars was quite a diverse team. I had never really noticed "North American culture" or "Canadian culture" until I was no longer surrounded by people from other parts of the world. It suddenly became clearer to me why people found the "diversity" and "inclusion" of Canada so novel; the culture travelled with me, and I definitely noticed differences.

Even experiences that seemed so far removed from my upbringing ended up being very tangential. The day that I tried cutting sugar cane I called my dad and told him about the experience. Both my parents told me about how they also used to chew on sugar cane in India and how they'd drink sugar cane juice, or ganna juice, when in college. It was intriguing to find and learn about parts of my identity in unexpected ways.

Cutting sugar cane and chewing on it!

Sustainability has no static definition.

At the end of project, we worked on a reflective and future-facing presentation to share ideas for how we hoped our contributions could be carried forward after we left.

It was during those conversations that I felt I learned most about some of the underlying issues I had mentioned earlier. For example, we got to talking about NCDs and CDs and what treatment might look like for things like diabetes or cancer. When my team and I asked the locals in our group about what hospital they usually go to for serious treatments, we had a very telling conversation about attitudes towards healthcare.

Our first reaction was surprise and perhaps confusion; why would families be averse to receiving the healthcare they needed if it was something that they needed? Obvious difficulties existed like the cost of the fare to the nearest hospital. Other difficulties were less obvious. We learned that many locals are afraid of being admitted if they seek healthcare out of worry that they will have to be away from home for a long period of time. An absence like that, especially if the person seeking treatment is male, could mean that no one is able to tend to the farm, cut firewood, or manage livestock. It could mean not being able to provide food for their families.

This shifted our definition of what sustainable changes could look like. Advocating that they be more open to hospital visits when needed was no longer tactical; other issues prevented that from being an accessible option.

> Getting hands-on experience with servant leadership was an eye-opener, and I am grateful to the community for sharing with me the stories that they did.

My cultural humility was challenged when I began to think about my privilege. I found it difficult at times to decipher what I could and should share with my host family about my life in Canada. I tended to stick to things that seemed transferable; speaking about my family and friends.

A moment that really highlighted to me the differences in privilege was when we were talking about things that make us feel negatively during a mental health session.

Me: not having enough alone time to think and process things

Them: not having enough food for my family to eat

Our lives are deeply cerebral; we need everything in moderation.

I felt incredibly balanced for six weeks; I was building, learning, and socially fulfilled. I was initially concerned about the social lifestyle and being around people all the time, fearing it would be draining. Back in Canada, a much less communal place, I now miss it. Seeing familiar faces, bursting into spontaneous song (like the iCarly

theme song) with friends, staying back late on the build site chiselling, and laying on my friend's porch, talking about how we were taking it all in.

The nature of the project meant that there was no time to overthink; we were forced into being present. I slept soundly every night, having my fill of daily exercise, meaningful human interaction, and mental stimulation. No longer was I tied to a screen for hours on end, relying on it for learning and social interaction at times.

I felt that I had everything in moderation for those six weeks, and it was the most holistically healthy I had ever felt. The lesson I draw from this is not to chuck my laptop out of the window (!) but to plan more carefully what my ideal days look like.

That about rounds out the larger lessons I hoped to share — if you've made it down here, cheers! All these words later, and I know there is so much more I wish I could share. There is an endless bank of memories and moments that I will cherish for a very long time, and I know that trying to share them all would be a truly never-ending task.

This experience validated for me why I study what I do. Pursuing economics has always been about social good and development for me. Seeing firsthand the impacts of direct investment (i.e., the dispensary) and indirect investment (i.e., education via national charities) and the behaviour change necessary, funding required, and physiological needs have only furthered my interest in finding ways to reach parity and equity around the world.

One of the direct impacts; a photo from the opening ceremony of all the scholars and our build maanger with the dispensary.

The 2019 Household Income and Expenditure Survey in Fiji highlighted that iTaukei own 92% of land in Fiji but of the 30% of the population living below the Basic Needs Poverty Line, 75% are iTaukei. What is even more interesting is that it was not always this way. In 1997, the Fiji Poverty Report concluded that “poverty is not concentrated in rural or urban areas nor in any ethnic group. It is an under-current in all communities in Fiji.” The changes that have surfaced socioeconomically are undoubtedly tied to policy work in the country.

I hope to take this experience and the key insights I’ve learned to fuel my pursuit of a greater understanding of economic development around the world. Delving deeper into policy, government services and infrastructure, job markets, personal ambition, and the impact of climate change is sure to add colour to an already constantly evolving and complex study of our welfare systems and interconnectedness. Learning

how policies propagate poverty and the behavioural and economic consequences that emanate from them is something I look forward to engaging with further.

I have an army of people to thank for this experience. First and foremost, my host family and the community of Waisava and Vunimaqo; you forever hold a place in my heart. I cherish all of my memories with you fondly.

Thank you, of course, to my fellow scholars, with whom I made some of my favourite memories. You know who you are; thank you.

Finally, a heartfelt note of gratitude to the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation, Shraddha Prasad my LiA Project Advisor, and the UofT Laidlaw Scholars Program for this incredible opportunity. It baffles me that I've had the privilege to take part in opportunities like these, and your continued support has been nothing short of astounding.

Signing off!

Written by Ruhani Walia