

In the summer of 2023, I embarked on a transformative journey, engaging in a six-week international 'Leadership in Action' (LIA) project as part of my Laidlaw Scholarship. Situated in the heartwarming communities of Vunimaqo and Waisava, nestled in the Dreketi Settlement of Ra province on Viti Levu Island, Fiji, this endeavor granted me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to immerse myself in the enriching Fijian culture and work hand-in-hand with the local population towards common goals.

### **A Holistic Project with Multifaceted Outcomes**

The project was structured meticulously, encompassing various dimensions that contributed towards community development and personal growth. The cornerstone of our initiative was the construction of a health center, a much-needed facility to enhance the healthcare infrastructure in the region. Alongside this, we forged partnerships with local organizations - Diabetes Fiji and Youth Champs 4 Mental Health - for knowledge exchange and collaborative solutions to pressing health issues prevalent in the community.

To ensure the sustainability of the efforts undertaken during our stay, the project culminated in a Think Tank session. My subgroup took the responsibility of gathering feedback on the mental health workshops through a comprehensive survey. The objective was clear - to comprehend the perspectives of the locals and advise on fostering mental health discourse both in the immediate and extended future.

### **An Immersive Cultural Exchange**

Living with a host family opened a gateway to an immersive experience of Fijian lifestyle. Welcomed with open arms by our 'na' (mother), 'ta' (father), and wonderful siblings, I became a part of their rich tapestry of life that echoed with warmth, unity, and harmony with nature. From indulging in the fresh produce cultivated by our family to engaging in exhilarating games of rugby and volleyball with the villagers, every day was a revelation of the joyous simplicities of life.

What stood as a testimony to the harmonious blend of cultures were the vibrant evenings characterized by a kaleidoscope of activities ranging from Zumba sessions, salsa nights to profound mental health workshops and empowering ladies' nights. Each scholar brought a unique

element to the communal life, creating a symbiotic learning environment for both the scholars and the villagers.

### **Building from Ground Up: Lessons in Collaborative Effort**

The physical involvement in the construction of the health center, right from the foundational steps of hammering to painting, engrained a deep sense of accomplishment and responsibility. The process was more than a learning curve; it was an exercise in unity and collaborative spirit, accentuated by the guidance from the kind-hearted building manager and the camaraderie forged with the local youth during the cultural courses and workshops. Through diligent efforts and collective toil, we witnessed the metamorphosis of bare ground into a beacon of hope and health for the community.

### **Personal Growth: Finding Courage and Adaptability**

Despite the vibrant experiences, the initial days were marred by homesickness and a strenuous adaptation process to the rudimentary lifestyle that was far removed from my comfort zone. The sight of cockroaches and the chill of cold showers were initial hurdles, dwarfed eventually by the gargantuan learning and growing experience that awaited.

With the invaluable support from the Think Pacific team, fellow scholars, and the nurturing environment created by my host family and the villagers, I embarked on a journey of personal growth. I discovered the vast reservoirs of adaptability within me, learning to embrace the unfamiliar with open arms. The transformation from a reticent individual to a confident and actively participating member of the community marked a significant milestone in my personal growth narrative.

### **Closing Thoughts**

As I reminisce about the enriching six weeks in Fiji, I carry with me not just fond memories but also invaluable life lessons of resilience, adaptability, and the magic of community bonding. The LIA project stands as a testament to the transformative power of collaborative effort and the beautiful outcomes that can be achieved when diverse individuals come together with a unified purpose. It's a chapter of my life that has instilled in me an unyielding confidence to face challenging environments in the future, armed with a heart ready to learn and a spirit willing to

adapt. This experience is more than a badge of honor; it is a repository of cherished memories and newfound abilities, ready to be harnessed in my future endeavors.