

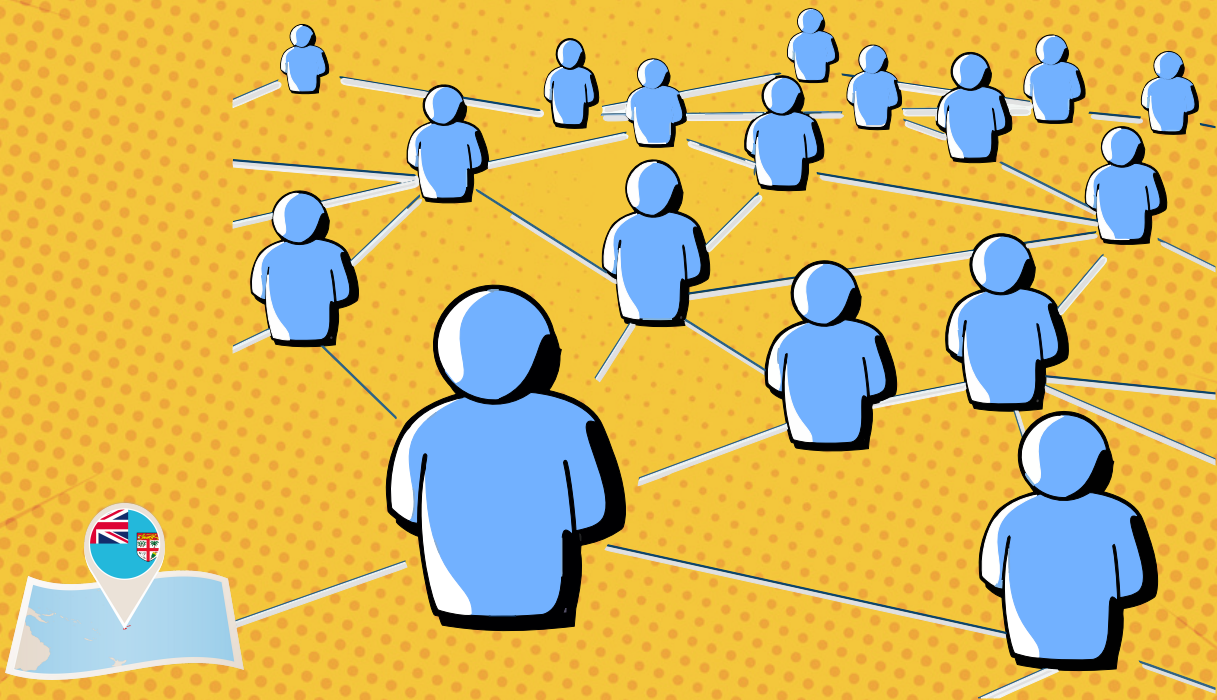
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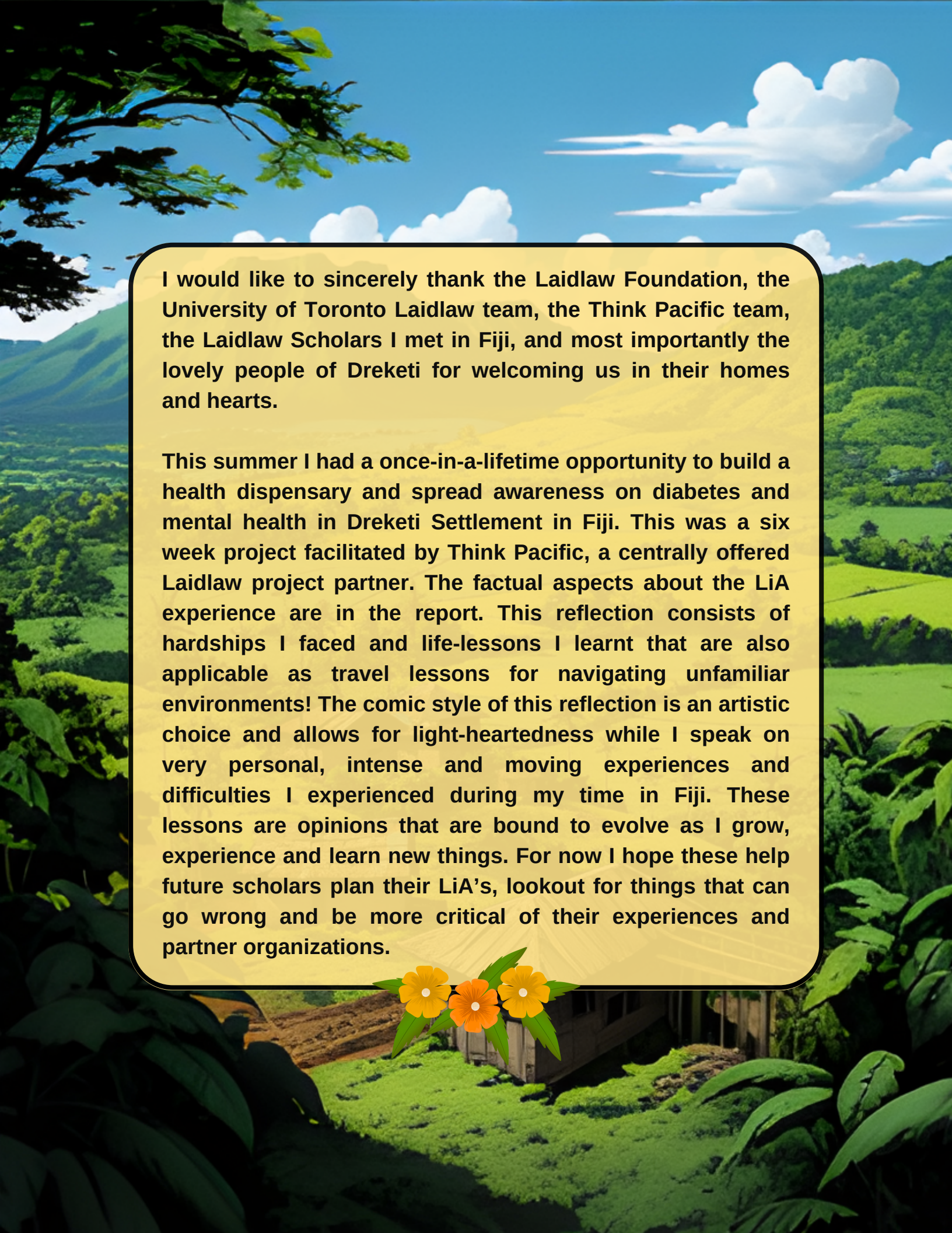
ISHA D. SHARMA



LESSONS!

COMIC





I would like to sincerely thank the Laidlaw Foundation, the University of Toronto Laidlaw team, the Think Pacific team, the Laidlaw Scholars I met in Fiji, and most importantly the lovely people of Dreketi for welcoming us in their homes and hearts.

This summer I had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build a health dispensary and spread awareness on diabetes and mental health in Dreketi Settlement in Fiji. This was a six week project facilitated by Think Pacific, a centrally offered Laidlaw project partner. The factual aspects about the LiA experience are in the report. This reflection consists of hardships I faced and life-lessons I learnt that are also applicable as travel lessons for navigating unfamiliar environments! The comic style of this reflection is an artistic choice and allows for light-heartedness while I speak on very personal, intense and moving experiences and difficulties I experienced during my time in Fiji. These lessons are opinions that are bound to evolve as I grow, experience and learn new things. For now I hope these help future scholars plan their LiA's, lookout for things that can go wrong and be more critical of their experiences and partner organizations.





**COMMUNITY IS
EVERYTHING**

Looking back at my journal entries from the Fijian settlement, I realized the one common strand that always gave me hope was the support I knew I had from different members of the community. When faced with adversity in a foreign country with unfamiliar surroundings, the trust in people I had barely known for four days kept me going. It is very difficult to understand the complex relationships and behaviors in the close knit village community after living most of your life in metropolitan cities. However, my appreciation and belief in valuing and supporting your immediate community has only increased after my time in Fiji.

There are many moving parts that make one's community their everything. While in some aspects, I observed the close Fijian connections materialized in toxic ways such as gossip, on other occasions the support gave people the courage to stand up for themselves. For context, in the Dreeketi settlement everyone knew everyone. Everyone also knew what everyone was doing in that exact moment due to a phenomenon called "coconut wireless". The houses in the community were close enough to know what your neighbor was doing and sometimes even to overhear what your neighbor was talking about. In this set up, there was a lot of room for assumptions and misunderstandings. However, there was also a lot of room to help each other out by pooling personal resources for communal use.

While I believe communal connections and support is extremely important to live a happier and more enriching life, it is also extremely difficult! You need a gazillion skills and patience to choose to love on people everyday. By choosing to love people everyday you will be able to look past their imperfections and immerse yourself in the experience to learn and grow in your life journey!

+ ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

SUSTAINABILITY NEEDS COMMITMENT

I had a lot of concerns and worries about the ethicality and sustainability of the health dispensary build project. From Think Pacific's end this problem was tackled by training the youth during the build and ensuring the build had a purpose for future use by one of the community members which was the community health worker. Unfortunately, when the scholars arrived on the build site we learnt that the "youth" were actually men above thirty with some of them having worked in the construction industry for years. Moreover, the labor was being underpaid and overworked. This was disheartening, worrisome and even caused trust issues between the scholars and the Think Pacific team. A way I and a few other scholars in the Build Think Tank team worked around this was by continuing working with the community, Laidlaw Foundation, raising funds and finding other potential NGOs to build a Kindergarten/Evacuation center. This is one way to continue and sustain a partnership with the community to have a positive impact.

An integral element to sustainability is holistically understanding the community, all the stakeholders and the nuanced and complex kind of work that needs to be done. When the scholars arrived in the village, we learnt that the building site had been changed to the other side of the river and that there were actually two clans in the village who could potentially have conflicting interests. This information made us question the ethicality of the build and of Think Pacific. There were also worries whether our build project would cause conflict within the community in the future. We also heard rumors from Think Pacific's community partner organizations that some of the builds in the past were abandoned. We kept our differences as scholars aside and planned and prepped for a meeting with the Think Pacific village leaders. After conveying these concerns we learnt there were practical reasons for the change in site location. Furthermore, after closely living with the community for four weeks and using the build dispensary for health check-ups I believe that our dispensary will be used by both clans in the village in more ways than we could have imagined.

+ ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

**SUSTAINABILITY
NEEDS
COMMITMENT**

The last week of our project programming included diabetes and mental health awareness. Scholars working on the Think Tank for these were uneasy about the sustainability of their efforts and the partner organizations' initiatives. Preventing health problems often requires lifestyle changes which make sustainability harder to tackle. While scholars tried their best and came up with innovative ways to continue diabetes and mental health prevention and awareness efforts, it is important to acknowledge that individual health will always be an individual's choice and need commitment from the individual to get better.

I learnt that even in the most desperate and hopeless moments, if one believes in their skillset and works towards what is best for everyone the outcome is eventually favorable.



**LEADERSHIP
≠
BEING RIGHT**

“What does leadership mean to you?”, “What makes a good leader?”...

These always seem to be the start of every college entrance essay and sometimes even within university when applying for programs such as the Laidlaw leadership and research program. I am not sure if I will ever have the correct answers to these questions.

Being among other “leaders” in Fiji taught me that one of the most important things about leading is ensuring everyone has equal space and agency in a room to be themselves and share their opinions. Leadership is truly more about learning, listening and observing before trying to hijack a space and doing what a leader thinks is right or needed by the community. People come first and then a leader’s belief and work. Oftentimes in the village I found myself among scholars who wanted to do right by them even if it meant isolating or belittling the actions of their peers. On several occasions they even acted selfishly. I made several mistakes too where I assumed other scholars’ identity or experience instead of focusing on mine. Looking at others’ mistakes and my own taught me that leadership is not about policing or expecting everyone to hold the highest standard at all times. Instead leadership is about being selfless, creating bridges instead of divisions and giving people the grace and time to better themselves.

Leadership should be educational and as a leader connecting and having those difficult conversations is always key. Making people feel welcomed, appreciating individuality and uplifting people is important to work together. Expectations only lead to disappointment but that does not mean lowering the standard. It means taking one step at a time till everyone can agree on what the highest standard is and what betterment for everyone looks like.



**LEADERSHIP
≠
BEING RIGHT**

It is always easy to divide people but to bring people together, respect people, love people despite their imperfections and help people achieve their goals is what I believe are qualities of a good person and possibly a good leader. Leadership is very nuanced and community-specific which is why I am highly critical of the word “leader” itself and all its immediate connotations. Therefore while I use the word leader above, I think it is synonymous to community volunteer and qualities of any good person.



**VALUE
YOURSELF
FIRST**

As cliché as it sounds, in a new environment it is essential to know your worth and have grace for yourself. If you are not valued, that place is simply not right for you. Always choose spaces where you are valued because that will help you achieve the meaningful impact you are looking to create.

I definitely learnt this lesson the hard way by chasing people in the past and looking for recognition from the wrong people. In Fiji, I was challenged once again when there was unbearable white idolisation everywhere we stepped foot. To add to it, there was also high levels of racism by the iTaukei population of Fiji against Indians. I was fortunate that my host family was not racist and did not put foreign people on an unnecessary pedestal and treated all scholars like how they would treat their neighbors and family. However, whenever I was outside my home I had hurtful experiences and from those I learnt that I just have to love myself for my own culture and heritage. I have to be proud of who I am before I can try to help someone else.

I also learnt to not harbor the same hatred or ignorance a racist person might have. I also had to give people grace and acknowledge that there might be systemic factors and a general lack of education and exposure to different kinds of people that can lead to such behavior. While I am not trying to make excuses for wrongful actions, a part of developing resilience and being well-traveled means understanding that this behavior exists and learning to stand up for yourself. To manage different kinds of situations such as racist attacks or times when you are questioned morally and maybe other unpredictable situations that can arise, it is crucial to value yourself. Having the highest regard for yourself, holding yourself accountable and knowing your worth will take you a long way.



RELATIONSHIPS TAKE WORK

People often prioritize affinity and how naturally comfortable a relationship is. Being with complete strangers in Fiji in what felt like a simulation of interpersonal relationships and life, I have learnt relationships are not formed on affinity. Relationships take work and intentionality. Showing up for others is extremely important. It is the small actions of who you look at in a room full of people and how you make the other person feel heard that matter.

I also realized in Fiji that it is not the physical building or blood relations that make a home feel like home or family feel like family. Home is where your heart aches to be at and family is not created by blood. I felt closer to my host family in six weeks than I had felt to my real one in years ever since I moved out. My fijian Ta (dad), Na (mom) and siblings taught me what it meant to have an open heart and give selflessly. They gave me more than I could have ever asked for. I learnt it does not matter how much you have but how much you choose to give.

Always remember your voice matters in every relationship dynamic. Alternately, it is also important not to take yourself too seriously in your relationships and to let go and forgive others. Harnessing hatred will only make you bitter. Focus on the positives, give grace and move on to keep allowing yourself to experience the ups and downs of life. My journal entry is filled with experiences of frustration, exhaustion, happiness, loneliness, pain, sickness, gratitude, joy, pleasure, satisfaction, hope and excitement.

I made so many unexplainable bonds and from all those new and old developing relationships I learnt sacrifice, adjustment, love, tolerance and effort that make relationships rewarding. I wish I took more mental captures of all those beautiful moments I took for granted. I will cherish each person, the relationship I had with them in Fiji and the lessons it taught me forever.




GO DO IT

People often get lost in their thoughts and hesitate when trying to do something for others. Sometimes the action of doing is more important than doing it perfectly. Perfectionism also holds back a lot of people. Other times it's the worry of other people's opinions that pulls people back. From organizing events such as the Ladies Night, Mental Health Youth Chats and doing the build decorations I have learnt to just go do it. Believe in your own instincts, take up space and be proactive. Own your space and go do it.

No one knows who you are or what you have gone through. Do not let people define you. Be proud of your journey and how far you have come. Do not feel less than or intimidated by other people. Believe in yourself! The fear of the unknown or imposter syndrome also holds us back from achieving our true potential. While it is good to be aware of your weaknesses and learn from other people, it is important to acknowledge how far you have come. If you are unsure of an idea, talk to the right people about it. Talk to someone who will give you genuine feedback, who wants you to win and do good. Communicate, get criticism, be proactive and materialize your ideas. I have learnt no idea is silly and all ideas should always be welcome especially when it comes to making change. In this process, if you feel overwhelmed, take a break and prioritize self-care.

I almost felt too exhausted to do the Ladies Night event but I still went ahead with it. That's when I learnt this might be the one and only time the ladies would be able to step away from their homes and leave their children with their fathers. After similar experiences and discussions with other scholars who overthink the logistics, I know now that it is better to go ahead and just do it.

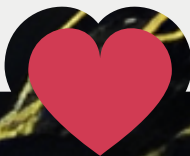
A woman with long dark hair, wearing a green sleeveless top and shorts, stands on a rocky shore. She is looking out over a tropical beach with turquoise water, white sand, and green hills in the background under a blue sky with white clouds. Palm trees are visible in the upper left corner.

My leadership in action in Fiji will always be special to me. It felt like years of personal growth, exploration and awareness in one summer. Despite my best efforts I cannot summarize all my learnings and experiences from those six weeks. This has been a summer to remember forever and connections to hold closer than ever. I cannot thank everyone who has been a part of this and made this possible enough.

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I start the new school year with unfathomable and unstoppable aspirations that stem from this summer’s learnings. I have found my passion in social work and I hope to be an architect that creates more than just residential and commercial buildings. I continue to work on the second Kindergarten/evacuation center build project in Dreketi while also working on a second NGO project with Riwaq in Palestine.

Once again, I owe so much to the people of Dreketi and I am so grateful for their love. Shoutout to my Fijian family Ta Solo, Na Kesa, Zita, Buka, Waise and Vili. Thank you to all the scholars as well who made this unforgettable!



***VINAKA VAKALEVU. BULA
VINAKA. SO TA TALE!***

