

*Community and Health Project, Fijí.*

# LIA REPORT



## BACKGROUND

For the Laidlaw Leadership-in-Action summer, I had the opportunity to partner with Think Pacific through the centrally offered program on the Health and Community Project in Dreketi Settlement, Ra, Fiji. The four main components of the project included the build of a dispensary, diabetes workshops with Diabetes Fiji, mental health awareness with Youth Champs for Mental Health and a Think Tank presentation. During the four weeks of the project, all scholars had the privilege of staying with iTaukei host families in Dreketi settlement. The four weeks in Fiji with these communities have taught me lifelong lessons and I am extremely grateful to these families for opening their hearts and homes to us. This has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I am truly honored and privileged to be able to be a part of this expedition. I am also extremely grateful to the sixteen scholars who I had the honor of sharing this experience with. This report covers the project details, goals, outcomes, sustainable and ethical considerations and personal growth aspects of my experience. The more detailed critical engagement, personal learnings and realizations are outlined in my comic strip format leadership in action reflection that breaks down the complex issues in accessible language and light-hearted graphics.



# ABOUT

## *Preparations before the Village*

# PROJECT DETAILS

Before our arrival in Fiji, travel preparation began with online learning modules and guidelines provided by Think Pacific through the global skills and travel preparation modules. These modules included packing lists, safety guidelines and information about the history and culture of Fiji. On arrival, the health and community project began with a four day briefing. At the briefing, we were introduced to the on-site Think Pacific team, local build team and external partners that included representatives from Diabetes Fiji and Youth Champs for Mental Health. Through slideshows, we were informed about village life and reminded of project goals and expectations. Before departing to the village we were able to familiarize ourselves with the other sixteen scholars and practice for the Kava ceremony where a traditional drink is served to welcome highly honored guests. Kava or Grog is the traditional, mildly narcotic and sedative Fijian drink. On our last briefing night we were also told about the scholar we would be rooming with in the village host family accommodation. The next evening, we were welcomed in the village community shed with a grand ceremony that included prayers, welcome songs, welcome speeches, welcome by our host families, kava and dance. The first night in the village ended with dinner with the host families.



## EVERYDAY LIFE

The first three weeks of the project focused on the build of the health dispensary. We met our build manager in the following week and immediately started with profiling, foundation and gravel runs for the first stage of the build. During the three weeks we finished different stages of the build that were the foundation, framing, wall and roof sheeting. The chronological order of our process after profiling was mixing cement, putting down posts, leveling the posts, making the timber wall frames with window spaces, paneling the walls, paneling the floor, making window frames, adding the roof sheeting, making signs, painting and doing the decorations. My daily participation in the build and collaboration with other scholars, community youth, build manager and the TP leaders allowed me to achieve my SMART goal of "Active participation in the build to ensure its completion in three weeks". The build stage of the project ended with the opening ceremony and community dinner.



While the group would work on the build in the morning, the second half of the day was the culture course. There was time for evening activities after the programming ended at 4 pm. On the weekends, Saturdays were for excursions such as to the waterfall or family picnics and Sundays were the communal church mass and rest day.

At the culture course, ladies from the village prepared lessons and workshops from different cultural activities to teach scholars the Fijian way of life. We had ten different experiences of the fijian culture from learning the family structure to farm visits and cultural crafts. The ladies taught us how to weave baskets, make bracelets, weave mats, make fans, Kava bowls and the fijian cassava dessert Vakalolo. This was an extremely enriching experience and taught me about resourcefulness, sustainability and resiliency. All the raw materials needed for these activities were sourced from the natural environment and used in the least exploitative ways. Through the culture course, children in the community were also able to learn more about their own culture that was getting lost with social media exposure and urbanization of Fijian villages.



PROCESS

# THE BUILD

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COLLAGE

# CULTURE COURSE

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## AFTER PROGRAM HOURS

I co-hosted Ladies Night during the last week in the community. Despite being completely exhausted, I was filled with excitement and motivation to provide this unique opportunity to the women in the community to leave their children with their husbands and come enjoy a ladies only session of providing welcome speeches (done by men traditionally), having Kava, desserts made by the scholars and dancing. Together among us scholars we were able to make white chocolate cookies, oreo s'more cookies, Brigadero and chocolate cake. We also had a juice option for non-kava drinkers. The event ran much longer than expected, past curfew and my co-host and I were thrilled by its success. It was heartbreaking and touching to hear the community elder say that this was probably the only time ever in her life she would be able to do such a thing. Through this experience I was able to achieve one of my SMART goals which was to "co-create new experiences with the scholars and the Fijian families". Finally, the storytelling at the homework club was actually a night tradition with my five year old and nine year old fijian brothers. My roommate and I would read stories to them and we noticed they would write them down. So I decided to start drawing out stories and characters. This was so successful and made them so happy that I decided to draw dragons at the homework club for the other children. It was rewarding to see the joy and excitement in their eyes that came with hearing and visualizing stories they loved. I was able to attain my final SMART goal of "using my skill set to educate the children in the community in new and exciting ways" through the homework club activities.



**SOCIAL**

## AFTER THE BUILD

After the build and culture course ended, the next phase of the project were the health awareness workshops and check-ups. The first external stakeholder was Diabetes Fiji that ran educational workshops on Leptospirosis and NCD diseases. We also did a village clean up and built a greenhouse. Another key part of their programming was health check ups in the community where they did a physical check up and provided ENT, dental, breast examination and mental health services. There were also educational booths on diet, exercise, foot care and resources. The next few days were allocated to workshops from Youth Champs for Mental Health that educated the community on mental health, the stigma surrounding it, the resources to help someone struggling and provided free counseling for community members.



The last part of the program was the Think Tank where scholars were divided into four groups with the village youth and worked on providing sustainable solutions for issues on mental health, diabetes, build and the culture course. I was in the build Think Tank team with four other scholars. We proposed the build of a Kindergarten/evacuation center. As the principal architect, I created analog floor plans and isometric drawings of the building in collaboration with community leaders. We also raised 5000 FJD in less than 24 hours. We have continued working on the project ever since leaving the village and we are in conversation with the Laidlaw Foundation and other potential education NGOs to build the Kindergarten/evacuation center.

Some of the most fun I had in the project was during the unplanned programming bits. I hosted a birthday party for my nine year old and baked his cake with my roommate. We also went for a 'billi billi' excursion where we made a bamboo raft. We would cook for our families and do regular snack runs at the nearest gas station. There are so many other fun stories and aspects of village life that I will keep close to my heart. Finally, our time in the village ended with a closing ceremony and Meke dance performances by scholars as a way of showing gratitude to the families for hosting us.



WORKSHOPS

# HEALTH

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PRESENTATION

# THINK TANK



## *Sustainable and Ethical*

# CONSIDERATIONS

I go over my concerns and learnings about sustainable and ethical considerations of this project in full detail in my LiA reflection comic. I believe there were several elements that the scholars had to be mindful of at all times such as their privilege and footprint in the village. As scholars from outside we were inevitably idolized and looked up to where our actions were replicated by the children in the community. Moreover, we had to be careful about making sure the build was not a one time project that the community abandons. There were disappointing elements such as the upskilling of the youth during the build that was mentioned by Think Pacific did not actually happen because the youth were men with construction experience in their thirties.

Furthermore, we had to be very critical of Think Pacific and their programming to ensure our project did not propel narratives of white saviorism and volunteerism. The Think Tank helped the scholars propose and ideate ways in which the impact and change can be sustained by the community members. Having the diabetes health check up in the health dispensary we built also ensured the community health worker was aware and able to use the dispensary for further check-ins. Considerations of sustainability also need to keep in mind that community work is very nuanced and not everything is in our control as scholars. Our health dispensary has been used in more ways that we could have imagined by the community such as for guitar sessions and children lessons. I have realized it is important to be intentional and critical of our actions and behaviors as scholars in the community. At the same time, it is essential to recognize our limitations and understand the agency the community has of their project needs and wants.



Some scholars also had concerns whether due to the white idolisation and funds invested by Think Pacific in the community, the actions of the community members may be inauthentic. In efforts to sustain different elements of our project scholars came up with different ideas such as recording the culture course, maybe a wellness note pick up box and creating charts with helpful information that the community worker can use during her regular rounds.

Therefore, at different times in the project we had to come together as scholars and rethink our actions and their impact. We also had to discuss with community members and find solutions together with them being at the forefront of the change they wish to see in their communities.

# GROWTH

Although our time in Fiji has ended, I will carry the learnings with me and the lifelong bonds I have made. These unforgettable six weeks of cross-cultural immersion and exchange have altered my life trajectory forever. I have felt years of personal growth and awareness. It is the lessons between the comfort in the silence, the small moments of absolute joy, the train of laughter and utter chaos, the beats of fijian songs, the smell of my Na cooking Babakau, the tricks and pranks with my siblings, the fresh village air and the 'Yadras' every morning that changed the way I understood and looked at life even before I realized it. As I continue to unpack this once-in-a-lifetime experience, I am constantly surprised by the tangible and intangible aspects of my journey thus far.

Besides the memories, experiences and teachings I hold close to my heart is my epiphany of the change in my career aspirations. I always knew I liked working with communities and contributing to grassroot efforts. However, I never pieced it together as my deep passion for social work. Therefore, as an architect I hope to work with NGOs and do unconventional architecture work that is most needed by underprivileged communities or struggling populations. That is the kind of work that fuels my creativity and fills me with joy as I am challenged and able to co-create a positive experience for an entire community. This summer will be one of many more community-rooted travel experiences to come. I would like to sincerely thank the Laidlaw Foundation, the UofT Laidlaw team, the Think Pacific team, the other scholars and the lovely people of Dreketi for making this the ultimate LiA.



For making this incredible...

# THANK YOU!

