

# Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship Programme

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## **Empowering Minds, Building Bridges: Mental Health Advocacy and Awareness with Voluntario Global in Argentina**

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*Sociabilidades x los márgenes*



Funded by the Laidlaw Foundation

**Dear Elena,**

**We are delighted to offer you a Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship for 2023/2024. Many congratulations on being selected!**

I immediately called my father and told him, "*I can't do this; I think this is a mistake.*" He laughed casually as his eyes welled up and said, "*Congratulations.*" An immediate sense of fear flooded my brain; I was aware that the normal response would be excitement or joy, but all I could see was a big red sign saying, **You're not good enough.** All I had done for the past month was wish for this opportunity, and now that I had it, I didn't know what to do with it. I would be lying if I said that sometimes, even two years after this email, I didn't feel the same. But the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship has taught me that feeling that you're not good enough can coexist with knowing that you've done a good job. I guess Laidlaw has also taught me to re-examine what "enough" means. And when I say Laidlaw, I don't mean the conferences or the websites or the main stage—I mean the people who have made all of this possible, the people behind the stage. It's all well and good to see how far I've personally come, but it wouldn't be fair without examining exactly how I got here, who helped me along the way, and how I intend to use this help.

Something to know about me is that I have chronic major depressive disorder (MDD) and have had it for the better part of the last two decades. This illness shapes and reshapes my life on a daily basis, but a constant factor is my confidence, or lack thereof. My first Laidlaw weekend at Hospitalfield was eye-opening for my leadership development. When I received my DiSC profile, it indicated that my leadership style was highly compliant. This allowed me to do some initial introspection about my strengths—I am very concerned about producing high-quality work—and my limitations—I can unnecessarily dwell on my mistakes. This was reinforced by

my limiting belief: I am not good enough and will never be. Learning this alongside the other St Andrews Laidlaw scholars, who are now dear friends, was probably the most rewarding part of that initial weekend.

After Hospitalfield, I embarked on my research project, *The Effect of alpha-Synuclein Aggregates on Astrocyte Calcium Signalling in Neurodegeneration*. This was a deeply personal project, as I had first-hand experience with the devastating effects of neurodegeneration. The idea that I could contribute something to the field was both daunting and exhilarating.

During my research project, I was fortunate enough to live with two other scholars, Lottie and Yoshi, and to see the remaining scholars daily. I quickly learned that leadership and development cannot happen in a vacuum. Who you choose to surround yourself with in times of laughter and hardship shapes how you are able to lead. I don't think my fellow scholars realize the positive impact they had on me and the lessons they taught me daily—from asking if I'd remembered to have lunch to sitting down and listening to me talk about my experiments in far too much detail. At this point, they didn't know about my MDD, which made their genuine care even more valuable. To this day, I can hear Calum and Oliver saying, "You need to take a break, Ele," whenever I work a bit too much.

My research project taught me a great deal about self-leadership and resilience in tolerating myself. This self-leadership included self-regulation to complete my experiments and weekly tasks, setting clear goals, and embracing the hundreds of experiments that went wrong, needed to be repeated, or required alteration. This often involved re-questioning what the concept of

“enough” was, restating the bigger objective, and taking ownership of the fact that not feeling confident is not a valid excuse to avoid doing something.

The pinnacle of my research project was finishing it and taking a step back to see what I had accomplished in ten weeks—the impact of my work and its implications. This marked a before-and-after moment in my leadership development, as it showed me that I did do it, I completed the research project, and it had gone well. I even presented my work at Trinity College in Dublin. It was proof that I had achieved what I set out to do, so, in some dimension, it was “enough.”

Next came preparation for my Leadership in Action project (LiA). I decided on a self-defined project because I believed a true leader grows most in areas where they can convey passion, and my biggest passion is mental health. My fellow scholar, Rosa, mentioned *Voluntario Global* to me, and I was filled with curiosity. *Voluntario Global* is a distinguished network of organizations in Argentina dedicated to fostering collective action grounded in social and cognitive justice. *Voluntario Global* seeks to redefine traditional philanthropy by providing a platform for collaborative engagement. Their network operates on the fundamental belief that meaningful change is most effective when it involves a reciprocal exchange—what we term “give and take.” They aim to avoid creating a narrative of victims saved by the Western world, instead engaging with the idea of sharing skills, expertise, and time in a collaborative partnership.

The more I learned about the mental health situation in Argentina, the more helpless I felt about how my role could make a difference. I was also mortified by the idea of taking on this huge

project (**Empowering Minds, Building Bridges: Mental Health Advocacy and Awareness with Voluntario Global in Argentina**) by myself, on the other side of the world, for thirteen weeks. Initially, my leadership goal was just to prove that I could get through my LiA, but this changed very quickly once I arrived.

In Buenos Aires, I took on several roles and jobs. I became part of an interdisciplinary research group called *Sociabilidades x los Márgenes*, which specializes in raising awareness about the institutional and psychosocial violence faced by homeless people and conducts research on homelessness. The group included individuals who used to be homeless, clinical psychologists, social workers, social psychologists, and many other professionals. Through *Sociabilidades x los Márgenes* and *Voluntario Global*, I was able to work with *Abrigar Derechos*, a non-profit organization providing comprehensive support to people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness; *La Olla Popular del Parque Lezama*, a makeshift community kitchen set up in a public park to provide meals for homeless individuals; and *Sopa de Letras*, a non-profit organization supporting the homeless. I also had the opportunity to work with a team of psychologists in *Villa 21-24*, Buenos Aires, on the impact of violence on vulnerable children in an area prone to gang activity and domestic violence.

Through these experiences, my understanding of leadership evolved to mean deep connection and co-creation, a far cry from the hierarchical definitions I'd once assumed. I learned that leadership here required presence more than perfection, and it meant listening to and learning from those who knew these challenges firsthand.

One of the most powerful tools we used to amplify voices was radio workshops. Working with *Sociabilidades x los Márgenes*, we hosted radio sessions in community spaces, where people could speak openly about their experiences, hopes, and frustrations. These sessions became a space of *Abrigar Derechos*—sheltering rights—giving homeless individuals a safe and supportive forum to express themselves. I witnessed people, often overlooked by society, share their stories with dignity and honesty. These sessions didn't just raise awareness; they built community, offering connection and validation to people who've endured both physical and emotional isolation.

The arts and theater workshops brought a different form of visibility and healing. These sessions allowed people to explore self-expression through visual arts and performance, which, for many, became an outlet to process pain and reclaim parts of themselves often erased by the stigma of homelessness. The impact was profound; participants found joy, a sense of belonging, and even pride as they showcased their talents. Seeing their confidence grow over time made me realize that leadership could be about enabling self-discovery, empowerment, and the courage to share one's story.

My experience with *Sociabilidades x los márgenes* extended to broader forms of advocacy, like the QUE NO CALLE! Festival, a community-led festival that highlighted the struggles and resilience of the homeless community. Here, I worked alongside many organizations to create spaces that showcased art and dialogue for change. It was more than an event; it was a call to break the silence around homelessness and challenge the structural injustices that perpetuate it. This festival taught me that part of leadership is helping raise awareness not only through words but through collective action that fosters real change.

One of the most complex yet rewarding aspects of my journey was working in Villa 21-24, where our work centered on conducting workshops about violence prevention, empowerment, and reclaiming memory and identity with children. In this community, where the scars of domestic and gang violence run deep, my leadership took on new dimensions—empathy became as essential as resilience. In workshops on violence and resilience, we engaged in difficult conversations about domestic and systemic violence, creating a safe environment for participants, especially children, to share their experiences. We also ran empowerment training sessions, focusing on coping strategies, confidence-building, and the importance of reclaiming their narratives. These were moments of mutual learning; the children and families taught me as much about strength and courage as I taught them about resilience.

As part of my work with *Sociabilidades x los márgenes*, I was able to witness the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Register of Violence (RUV), a documentation of violence, deaths, and injustices faced by people without homes. The RUV was more than a report; it was a hard look at the systemic issues and a call to action to protect the dignity and safety of these individuals. Seeing it reminded me of the responsibility that comes with leadership—to be a voice for justice, even if it means confronting difficult truths.

This experience was integral to the compilation and culmination of a book, *Las Mil y Una Noches En Calle*, which was born from these stories and moments of shared humanity. Inspired by the classic *One Thousand and One Nights*, our book compiled poems, narratives, and artwork contributed by people living on the streets. The stories aren't just accounts of survival—they're acts of defiance against the invisibility imposed on them. I meticulously

compiled compañeres' transcripts and audios for months, wrote them up, edited them, and published the book. Creating this book taught me that leadership can mean helping people find their voices and providing a platform for them to be heard.

In the final months, I had the privilege of being with *Comunidad Milpa*, a community-based organization dedicated to agroecology and social justice. Here, I gained insight into leadership that values sustainability, collaboration, and long-term impact. In the shared gardens and classrooms, I saw how empowering individuals to work toward common goals fosters a kind of leadership rooted in community and care. *Milpa* taught me that every person, every story, has a place in the larger ecosystem of social change.

Reflecting on my journey, I realize that Laidlaw's leadership framework helped me reframe my understanding of leadership and service. I came to Argentina uncertain, insecure, and fearful of failure. I leave with a sense of purpose, knowing that true leadership isn't about fixing everything—it's about building bridges, creating spaces for dialogue, and being present. This experience in Buenos Aires has changed me at a core level, embedding within me a belief in the power of empathy and the importance of amplifying unheard voices. It's not about being "enough"; it's about sharing enough.

### **Acknowledgements:**

To the Laidlaw team, thank you for believing in me. This journey has taught me what it means to lead with vulnerability, passion, and, most importantly, purpose. I now understand that

leadership is not a skill set but a way of being— a commitment to growth, justice, and solidarity, wherever life may lead me next. My most profound gratitude goes to Lord Laidlaw for this journey, as well as to Celina O’Conner, Callum Irvine, and St Andrews Laidlaw cohort, who I hold dear to my heart. My deepest thank you to Milena Sapey, Jorgelina Di Iorio, Valeria Gracia, Rosa Morgan-Young, Isabelle Law, *Abrigar Derechos*, *Sopa de Letras*, and *Milpa* for letting me view the world through your lens. Thank you to Dodo and Lunacitos for showing me the real meaning of passion, love, and life. My biggest thank you goes to Gema and Carlos for never doubting that I am enough; you are my heroes.

**Gracias a los compañeros por enseñarme que el valor de la vida no se compra con un techo, sino con el amor que estamos dispuestos a brindar. Siempre os llevaré en mi corazón.**