

# My Laidlaw Leadership Journey

A story of personal growth and invaluable connections



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There was a most important job that needed to be done,  
And no reason not to do it, there was absolutely none.  
But in vital matters such as this, the thing you have to ask  
Is who exactly will it be who'll carry out the task?

Anybody could have told you that Everybody knew  
That this was something Somebody would surely have to do.  
Nobody was unwilling; Anybody had the ability.  
But Nobody believed that it was their responsibility.

It seemed to be a job that Anybody could have done,  
If Anybody thought he was supposed to be the one.  
But since Everybody recognized that Anybody could,  
Everybody took for granted that Somebody would.

**Excerpt of the responsibility poem by Charles Osgood** (Organization Builders, no date)

Milton Irving, executive director of the Timothy Smith Network, greeted us with these words for the start of our Leadership in Action project in Boston. This was followed by: "But this is not you; because you have taken the responsibility to act, to challenge yourself, to learn!" Looking back at my leadership journey, his words encapsulate the goals I had. I became a Laidlaw scholar to challenge myself and to learn about leadership and research. But it has become far more than that. Over the past two years I have been on a journey of personal growth, learning more about responsibility in groups (sometimes meeting Anybody, Somebody, Everybody and Nobody), and meeting wonderful, inspirational people from all over the world!

Two years ago, I applied to the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship because I was looking for research experience early on in my undergraduate degree. Never did I anticipate the journey that would follow. From the first meeting with my Laidlaw cohort in St Andrews, I knew that this journey was going to be shaped by the people around me, the network I would be able to build and the friends I would make in the process. These connections have become integral to my experience as a Laidlaw scholar, and they are the first aspect I highlight when discussing the scholarship with others.

Leadership is about being able to communicate and understand different kinds of people; it is about building social awareness and meeting your teammates where they are at. The beauty of learning about leadership through Laidlaw was that one was not alone. So many of the leadership activities that we did at different events were shaped through scholars offering different perspectives and insights. One such activity was when we analysed different moral dilemmas. I found it fascinating to see how different the approaches to these problems were and how the solutions were influenced so much by

the individual's past and their beliefs. Although common moral ground was found in the sense that there was a red line that none of us would cross, the specifics were a lot more blurred. The exercise showed me how all our decisions are shaped by our experiences and how difficult it is to find one correct answer, if there even is one. Exercises such as these helped me build my social awareness, something that I would greatly rely on during my Leadership in Action project in Boston.

When I arrived in Boston, I was welcomed into the warm community of the Timothy Smith Network (TSN), a non-profit organisation based in Roxbury that aims to bridge the digital divide by providing technological education to underrepresented and minority communities. I was looking forward to teaching high school students about web design, including coding with HTML5, CSS and JavaScript. Whilst in the classroom I was hoping to build my leadership and teaching skills. However, I did not anticipate the amount of personal growth that I would undergo during a mere six weeks abroad. The Leadership in Action project has become one of my favourite Laidlaw experiences. Although we learned a great deal about leadership and teaching during our leadership development weekends in St. Andrews, being in the classroom and managing it firsthand teaches you so much more.

My biggest leadership development in these six weeks was linked to social awareness and effective communication. During the first week, my teaching team, composed of a fellow Laidlaw scholar, a university student from a historically black college or university in the USA, and a TSN staff member, quickly realised the challenge that faced us. We had a group of eight enthusiastic students with a wide range of knowledge and experience. Some were already familiar with the software we were using and had even been exposed to coding before, while others were encountering the material for the first time or had learning disabilities that required more one-on-one support from us. Over our time in Boston, one of the most valuable lessons and tools became effective communication and teamwork between our small teaching team. It was vital for our own success, as well as that of our students. Particularly interesting to see was how our leadership styles changed over the six weeks, when moving from assisting the main instructors to becoming the main instructors. Both roles required effective leadership teamwork between us, again only possible through continuous reflection as a team and open communication.

Continuous reflection is integral to leadership. This is an important lesson that was emphasised in my Laidlaw journey. During my first research summer, I had the exceptional opportunity to work in an organic chemistry laboratory at St Andrews University, supervised by Dr Gordon Florence. My research project, titled "Lead Optimization of Pan-Trypanosomatid Inhibitors Inspired by Nature," involved synthesizing various small organic molecules with the goal of optimising the activity and selectivity of the current lead compound against *Trypanosoma brucei*, a parasite responsible for

human African trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness), a neglected tropical disease. During my time in the lab, I developed valuable research skills that prepared me well for the upcoming academic year. I also gained important lessons in patience and the necessity of continuous reflection throughout the research process. Some experiments took longer than anticipated and did not always yield the expected results, requiring me to continuously adapt my methods. By the end of the six weeks, I was proud to have synthesized five new synthetic compounds, which were subsequently biologically tested for their activity and selectivity against *T. brucei*.

Not only did Laidlaw give me the opportunity to spend six weeks in a chemistry lab early on in my undergraduate degree, but it also allowed me to learn if I enjoyed this kind of research. After my time in the Florence lab, I was enthusiastic about research and confident in my decision that I would pursue a PhD in medicinal biochemistry after my time at St Andrews. During my Leadership in Action project, I was able to explore the PhD opportunities offered at different Boston institutions. Laidlaw has given me the opportunity to build a research network both in St Andrews and Boston that I will forever be grateful for.

The people! Yes, my favourite part about Laidlaw! As I mentioned before, my experience was truly shaped by the people, beginning with the amazing Laidlaw cohort in St Andrews and extending worldwide to the wonderful international scholars that I was fortunate enough to connect with. During my first summer researching in St Andrews, we had action learning sets; informal meetings with five other scholars where we had the chance to reflect and discuss about our research experience. I really enjoyed talking to other scholars about their experiences because even though our research fields were often very different, many of our difficulties and challenges were similar. Having the opportunity to reflect and discuss, sometimes even vent about our daily tasks allowed me to feel more comfortable with my own research journey.

During my Leadership in Action project, I had the joy of spending six weeks in Boston with ten other Laidlaw scholars from around the world. My experience was greatly shaped by the friendships I made along the way. Together, we explored the beautiful city of Boston and its surrounding areas. More importantly, we embarked on our leadership journeys together, often spending hours in the evening sun reflecting on our day's experiences. We encountered similar challenges and were able to share and discuss the different approaches we each took. Personally, I was reminded of how powerful it is to learn alongside others and how invaluable it is to have people who understand the challenges you are facing. While leadership often requires individual decisions, the true strength of leadership lies in the team around you. Over the past two years, I have realized that even when I find myself leading or researching alone, I always have a close-knit community to lean on. Thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation for helping me build this network of friends and peers that I know will stay with me for a lifetime!

As a student, I have always found immense value in having mentors, whether they are professors, PhD students, or my parents. Knowing that I have people around me who have navigated similar stages in life, particularly in my STEM education and research journey, has been incredibly reassuring. Many times I have leaned on conversations with my mentors to gain clarity on important decisions ahead. Now, having completed the Laidlaw Scholar journey, I hope to become a mentor for students in future cohorts. I have already had great conversations with students from the cohort proceeding mine, and hope that I have been able to offer valuable insights. I am also excited to use the Scholars Network to connect with and support future students. I remember how grateful I was for the guidance I received from a scholar who completed their Leadership in Action project with TSN the previous summer, and now, I look forward to passing on the lessons I have learned to future scholars.

As my time as an active Laidlaw scholar comes to an end, I look back on a journey of personal growth; one that I am very thankful for. There are few opportunities in life that allow you to develop in such a unique way. Combining research and leadership is vital in today's world, and I am thankful that I have been able to do so at a young age. I now look forward to my final year at St Andrews and then hope to continue my academic journey with a PhD overseas. I am fortunate enough to have met many wonderful friends during these past two years and am sure that we will continue to cross paths in our bright futures ahead.

*I would like to start by thanking my incredible research mentor Dr. Gordon Florence for giving me the opportunity to spend six weeks in his lab, where I learned so much about small molecule synthesis and research as a whole. I am excited to now pursue my joint honours project under his co-supervision. A huge thank you to the St Andrews Laidlaw team, who have put in so much effort to ensure we scholars had an amazing, unique experience—from organizing leadership weekends to always being there for a chat. It has been a pleasure working with you. A heartfelt thank you as well to the team at the Timothy Smith Network in Boston, who dedicated countless hours to making the Boston Design Academy a success. It was a pleasure spending this time with you and learning from your leadership. My deepest gratitude goes to my fellow Laidlaw scholars, who have truly shaped my experience. I am proud to call you my friends, and I am excited to see what the future holds for all of us.*

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## References

Organization Builders *Responsibility poem van Charles Osgood*. Available at: <https://www.organizationbuilders.com/content1/responsibilitypoem> (Accessed: 05 September 2024)