

## **On Wandering in Wonder**

*Reflections on 18 Months as a Laidlaw Scholar and 5 Years of Ambition*

When I look back at my journey of becoming a Laidlaw Scholar, I realize how much of that journey was rooted in fear. I wasn't one of the talented Laidlaw Scholars whose friend, mentor, or professor saw something in them enough to recommend them to the program, or someone who coincidentally stumbled upon a flyer or an email.

Instead, I was a high school student in Vietnam, driven by the fear of not getting into a college that matched my dreams. I found out about Laidlaw during my search for ways to personalize my scholarship applications to the universities I was applying for—ways to prove that I did my research, that I deserved my chance at a big-name university in the West.

When I got my chance to attend the prestigious university, I was afraid I wouldn't live up to the expectations of "the people." I worried that I would be discovered as a fraud, so I told myself I had to at least act like a competent scholar before anyone found out. Yet despite all my preparations and early efforts, when it came time to apply to the Laidlaw program in my first year, I doubted my ideas, convinced myself they weren't good enough, and ultimately psyched myself out of applying.

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A year later, on a walk with my family on vacation in Seattle, I saw a sign that would change my life forever. I was curious to see how a literal street sign marking South Jackson Street also included its translation in Vietnamese—*Nam Đường Jackson*. My parents moved back to the States when I graduated high school, and at the time, I had yet to return to Vietnam. I was violently homesick, and as crazy as it sounds, staring at that sign and its diacritic accents, for a moment, it felt like I was back home.

My studies in architecture had taught me enough to know that something as official-looking as this sign, in a non-official language of the city, is surprisingly difficult. What I didn't know was how they did it. I didn't know then about Little Saigon, or that Little Saigon was part of the larger Chinatown-International District. And I didn't know that this random, wandering stroll would help form the topic I had been looking for for my Laidlaw application: how Asian immigrants transformed unfamiliar streets into communities that created a sense of home.

As I finish my time in this program, I see how much my journey has been about wandering in my fears. I've confronted anxieties about not knowing what career I wanted, not feeling "Filipino enough," and feeling alone in those discomforts. I've learned to use curiosity as a compass, ask big questions, and get closer to answers. Laidlaw has helped me let go of my need to have it all figured out and taught me to thrive in uncertainty. As I move forward, I know to approach the future not with fear, but with curiosity, compassion, and ultimately, with wonder.

## **Seattle, and Wandering in Passion**

When I returned to Seattle for the research summer, I walked in with vague, ambitious goals of creating “a dream paper,” one that could establish me as a competent researcher. I carried the expectation that it would help me figure out the direction of my career and anchor a strong sense of passion toward the work I could one day hope to accomplish.

At the time, I thought that my fractured studies in architecture and economics were signs that I didn’t know what I wanted from my education. While many of my friends seemed to pursue architecture with steady focus and the enthusiasm that comes with “following your passion,” I felt anxious because I wasn’t experiencing the same clarity.

But over the course of the summer, what once felt like a weakness began to show itself as a strength. My interdisciplinary background allowed me to be flexible and responsive to the research adversities I encountered. The statistical proficiency from economics, the visual sensitivity from architecture, and my growing understanding of place-based research all came together. Whether I was tracing the evolution of affordable housing access in the Chinatown International District or interpreting the layered histories my interviewees shared, I began to see the value of my fractured identity.

Curiosity started to replace fear. It drove me to keep asking questions, to keep walking the neighbourhood, and to let my observations of the built environment guide the direction of my research. My wanderings allowed me to seek new perspectives in the academic literature and informed conversations with local historians, city officials, and community development workers. Those conversations, with people from diverse professions, made one thing clear: there isn’t a single perfect career waiting to be discovered.

I’ll be honest in saying that my final paper was not the “dream paper” I expected. But writing it taught me to see passion not as a profession but as the feeling I had of being in a constant state of curiosity, awe, and wonder about the work I was doing. And I can safely say I’m still passionate about the questions I was exploring in my research.

## **Payatas and Ho Chi Minh City, and Wandering in Belonging**

With a newfound belief in curiosity, I pushed myself further while planning for my LiA summer. I stayed career curious, exploring education, sustainable development, and non-profit management, even though I had no prior experience in any of these fields. More importantly, I became curious about my own discomforts. I started to confront the internalized biases I held about people in poverty and the sense of disconnection I felt from my Filipino diaspora identity.

When I arrived in Payatas, I tried to center curiosity in my day-to-day interactions. Instead of conforming to the dominant narratives often pushed by traditional media and stereotypes, I focused on the lived experiences of the people themselves. I saw how these narratives misrepresent and indignify, reducing individuals to symbols of poverty and struggle. These perspectives erase humanity and dehumanize the critical problems that deserve attention, not because those affected are poor, but because they are human.

Engaging with these perspectives helped me confront some of the biases that had quietly unsettled me. In my final week of LiA, I returned to my hometown of Ho Chi Minh City and began to see how facing these discomforts led me to a more grounded understanding of poverty and privilege that is informed by empathy, not assumptions.

Reflecting on my time in the Philippines while reconnecting with my hometown helped me realize that my sense of cultural belonging is rightfully layered and complex. Being an American-born, Vietnam-raised Filipino means that my cultural identity does not fit neatly into any one box. And that cultural belonging is a constant exploration of finding representations of culture that feel authentic, not to a vague “member of the diaspora,” but to myself.

### **Toronto and New York, and Wandering in Community**

The biggest challenge I faced in Seattle and Payatas wasn't about the projects themselves, but about travelling to unfamiliar cities alone. If I am honest, I have often carried a quiet sense of loneliness whenever I was asked to step up as a leader—the weight of big decisions, the fear that nobody would fully understand my specific problems, and the responsibility to break down doors that few around me had ever walked through. Leading has often felt like an isolating path.

But my time in the leadership sessions in Toronto and at the conference in New York showed me something different. This journey was never meant to be walked alone. Through our monthly sessions, the Oxford Character Lab project, and the events at Barnard College, I had the privilege of meeting other scholars who stretched how I thought about leadership. They reminded me that personal growth can be supported by a community of people who may face different circumstances, yet share the same struggle.

As someone who rarely trusted that I knew what I was doing, I often doubted whether what I had to say was valuable. That is why it has been an honour to be part of spaces where I could build understanding, challenge ideas, and generate new perspectives. My experiences in communities through Laidlaw—researching the Chinatown-International District, working with Fairplay for All, and learning alongside fellow scholars—have taught me that curiosity grows deeper when shared. Leadership fueled by curiosity is not about isolation. It is about drawing on many perspectives, building something stronger together, and breaking down doors together.

## **Home, and Wandering in Wonder**

As I look back on these past 18 months and on the person I was five years ago: a wide-eyed high schooler with dreams, I have gained a renewed understanding of fear and curiosity. I don't think it would be right to live without fear.

My anxieties, worries, and fears shaped the Pearson and eventually the Laidlaw Scholar I became. They helped me plan, pre-plan, and prepare for the futures I hoped for myself. What was wrong was not the presence of fear, but my relationship to it.

Growing up, I was constantly surrounded by messages on social media, YouTube, and from personal brands that told me I was doing this "living" thing wrong. They bred false comparisons of what a "good life" looked like and the hard work required to be successful. They distorted how I saw the future, and I reacted with attempts to grow up too quickly.

Yet, as I continue to grow in my leadership, I realize that this fear of being "too old" to be confused about my future is one that can only be transformed when nurtured alongside characteristics like care, compassion, and, most of all, curiosity.

As I look to the future, I'll be honest in saying that I do not know what life beyond graduation will look like. I am no closer to a commitment to an industry, an organizational sector, or a geography than when I started this program. Being a Laidlaw Scholar has opened more doors than it has closed. It introduced me to new skill sets like GIS and writing and rhetoric, new professions like education and international development, and to a new understanding that home is not a place, but the community you help build.

So, as I brave this next phase, it is time to reclaim and believe in my youth: to let the kid in me be a kid again, and to feel the joy of curiosity, of exploring, and of discovering what is best in me. To wander in wonder.

## ***For Those Who Made This Possible***

My 18 months with the Laidlaw Program have amounted to *the* biggest and proudest project I've ever undertaken. Forgive my self-indulgence, but it's not lost on me that I began this journey as a young dreamer in Vietnam, and somehow found myself growing in global cities like Seattle, Toronto, New York, and Manila. Words will fail in expressing the gratitude I feel toward the Laidlaw Scholarship Program and the University of Toronto for making this incredible opportunity to learn, challenge myself, and grow possible.

This growth would not have been possible without the generosity, encouragement, and care of so many people.

To my closest friends, Khanh Linh, Renee, Jack, and Gurshan, and to my family: thank you for your unwavering support and for virtually keeping me company as I navigated new cities, adjusting to places where I knew absolutely no one.

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- To my Sealy Coaching coach, Lyn-Marie, thank you for shaping not only how I approached my Leadership-in-Action project, but also how I reflect, write, and continue to grow through my (wandering) educational journey.

And finally, to the 2024 cohort of Laidlaw Scholars and to our incredible program coordinator, You Jia Lee: Thank you for your kindness, your openness, and your steady support. You each offered more than insight and camaraderie. You helped me navigate the often quiet and uncertain transition from fear to curiosity, and reminded me, in countless small ways, of the joy and wonder that come with learning, exploring, and growing alongside others. It has been a privilege to be part of this community.