

Food Insecurity and Health Across the Globe

2018-19

Personal Statement

For as long as I can remember, my mom has been known for her cooking. Her Pad Thai was recognized for being the best you could get in town, her spring rolls a delicacy on the South Dakota plains I grew up on. Her simple Thai dishes fed many a dinner guest and were always the first gone at neighborhood potlucks. When I was nine and my father left the house, my mother turned to the only marketable skill she felt that she had—cooking. She began to prepare family sized meals out of our home for a small group of friends. As interest grew, along with the grease layer on our kitchen ceiling, she rented a kitchen and started a to-go business. My four little sisters and I were, and still are, her only employees, and to this day the business provides the main financial support for our family.

I grew to know my mom as the dictator of the trash can; she was a fanatic about food waste. The business model that she constructed was simple and fit into her no-waste mantra. All food was pre-ordered so exact quantities could be bought for each day. Any unforeseen excess was always put to use: after limes were squeezed their rinds flavored our water for the next few days, tamarind pulp used to make Pad Thai sauce was re-rinsed at the end of the night and fashioned into a tart drink, mung bean sprouts were packed into school sandwiches the next day. Our family was fed on the excess of our mom's business. It was a rare occasion, a birthday or Christmas, to go to the store and purchase ingredients to make a singular dish for dinner. (As a kid I envied friends who had kitchens full of packaged snacks, cheese sticks, or Capri suns, although I grew to love my interesting family meals.) The small amount of food that wasn't used in time went to the compost pile in the corner of our garden, and I learned to accept this messy system of using all excess as our lifestyle. For food, the trash was not an option.

At the age of 15 I stepped out of my mother's kitchen and into the kitchen of an upscale restaurant, and I was shocked at the amount of waste I saw. Day-old sandwiches and bakery items spent only two days on a donation rack before ending in the trash. Employees weren't allowed to take home excess because supervisors believed that creating extra food would become a self-serving habit. The summer before college I worked in the local hospital cafeteria

and my view of food waste expanded even more. My home is about an hour drive from Pine Ridge Reservation, which is one of the poorest counties in the United States. I encountered many homeless individuals who would come into the cafeteria looking for a free bite to eat, but donation was prohibited by hospital policy.

It was these accumulated food service experiences that compelled me to join the Carleton Food Recovery Network my freshman year. This turned out to be the most worthwhile endeavor I undertook in my undergraduate career. I became a program director my sophomore year and in three years we have become one of the largest chapters of the national Food Recovery Network. This year we are recovering food six nights a week in multiple dining halls and are providing food to community partners throughout the area that range from youth centers, to after-school programs and centers for adults with disabilities. Along with recovering food from our dining halls, our volunteers are also collecting unwanted food for the local food shelf from Cub Foods, Target, and a CSA (community supported agriculture). To give a sense of the magnitude of food we transport, within the past eight weeks our program has helped donate over 11,930 pounds of food.

I believe that the moment individuals can help fill the need in a community is the moment that they find a home within it. My involvement with food recovery was one of the reasons that Northfield became a second home for me so quickly. I am now rooted in the community, among people that I never would have met if I had stayed in my campus bubble. I also believe that the moment an individual can merely see the need in a community can have significance; the need that stands out to them, whatever it may be, can shape what they devote their life's work to.

This "moment" in my life came the summer after my freshman year when I had an education-based internship on Pine Ridge at a Lakota Immersion School. I had no idea then that my goal of going to graduate school for geology and eventually teaching would be slowly replaced with an interest nearer to my heart. I tried to stay focused on my assignment, which was to help develop a kindergarten curriculum, but I was constantly distracted by other realities of life for those who live on the reservation. I couldn't help but notice the 25-minute drive required to get to a grocery store with fresh produce. I couldn't ignore the reality that the only restaurant options for people in the community were a Subway, Taco Johns, and Pizza Hut. According to the American Indian Humanitarian Association, adult obesity on Pine Ridge sits at 45 percent and diabetes in individuals over the age of 40 is five times higher than the national average. These truths I had *subconsciously* known by living with Lakota people my entire life,

yet I had never stopped to wonder what the root causes were. I didn't understand how inaccessible fresh food could be until I was forced to live within the inaccessibility that summer. I realized that I had lived 18 years blind to the struggles of a community which coexisted with my own.

At that time I had no idea how important this experience was in shaping where my life would lead me, but it changed the way that I interact with the world. From Pine Ridge I carried with me the image of how food insecure children eat their school lunch. I began to look for pockets of individuals who are struggling within a larger, thriving, community. I now think about things like the placement of grocery stores and the accessibility of free meals on weekends.

My goal now is to attend medical school two years after graduating from Carleton. While I realized that I will devote years of my life to learn how to diagnose and cure, my life experiences taught me to not underestimate the power of prevention. While good health is often associated with advanced medicine, it begins in homes, in kitchens. It is found in the peace of mind of knowing where your next meal is coming from. It is at this intersection of food availability and health that I want to understand how other areas of the world attempt to safeguard the health of their people by ensuring that everyone has access to food. With my Watson I will seek out those who help food insecure communities across the globe. By working with international organizations to rural farmers and community food pantries, I want to understand how food gets to the tables of those who need it.

Project Proposal

Food insecurity is a complex, debilitating crisis that has millions of people in its grip. For my Watson fellowship year I will volunteer and live among communities who struggle with food insecurity in both the developed and undeveloped countries of France, Madagascar, India, Japan, South Africa, and Nepal. I will seek to explore how food insecurity and malnutrition are tackled across the globe by volunteering with organizations and observing the day-to-day strides they take.

I will begin my year in France, which is pioneering the battle against food insecurity. In 2016, France became the first country in the world to pass legislation requiring supermarkets to donate unused food, and I want to understand the impacts of these measures. I have been in

contact with the French office of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) to secure contacts with different donation sites in Paris with English-speaking opportunities. I want to sense how the French people received the measures by interacting with as many people as I can with the help of a translator, from business owners to recipients of the donated food. Did the new legislation cause a cultural shift towards awareness about food insecurity, or was it already present? Along with gauging the community perception, I want to explore how the centers have handled this increase in donated food. Logistically are they able to manage the quantity they receive? At these donation sites I will be able to interact both with those who donate food and those who benefit from the food to gain a rounded perspective.

In France I also want to explore the intersection between needs and dignity. The food pantry that I work with in Northfield is undergoing major reconstruction to transition from looking like a warehouse to looking like a grocery store. The changes run deeper than just aesthetics; they will hopefully transform the client's experience and increase their excitement about the food they take home. The hope is that this excitement will become tangible as healthier food choices are made and overall health of this population increases. In France, I will discover what the food distribution centers look and feel like by volunteering in various centers and visiting as many others as possible.

After France I will travel to Madagascar, which has the world's fourth highest rate of chronic malnutrition with only 30% of children consuming the minimum diet recommended for growth and development. According to the 2017-18 World Food Programme report, about 1.5 million Malagasy people are in food insecurity "Crisis" mode. The report attributes this to Madagascar's extreme vulnerability to natural disasters such as drought, cyclones, flooding, and locust infestations.

In Madagascar I will volunteer with PIVOT, which provides accessible healthcare services with a focus on fighting malnutrition in the Infandiana district of Madagascar. I hope to observe how local doctors treat malnourished individuals and where they refer patients to go for nutritional support once they are back out in their community. I also have two promising contacts through the World Bank and the continental FAO office in Ghana who are helping me connect with other organizations focused on food access and nutrition in Madagascar.

Next I will travel to India, where I will volunteer with Akshaya Patra. Akshaya Patra is the

world's largest NGO-run mid-day meal program, serving school lunch to over 1.76 million children across 12 states in India. Its English-speaking team has invited me to examine their entire process: from the relationships they have established with local vendors that provide their produce, into their kitchens where they use self-designed technology that minimizes human contact during food preparation, ending at the schools that they serve.

Fortunately while I am there, their team will also be partnering with Columbia's Institute of Nutrition to help analyze different aspects of their program and has invited me to observe and participate. My time with them will give me valuable insight not only about operating a large-scale organization fighting food insecurity, but also about analyzing the procedures to make them as beneficial to the recipients as possible. While in India I also want to volunteer with Robin Hood's Army, which delivers surplus food from restaurants and stores to communities in a similar manner to my own food recovery network.

After India I will travel to Japan, where food is often described as "eaten with the eyes as much as the mouth." Japanese cuisine is known globally for its aesthetic codes of presentation that include small, meticulously prepared and designed portions eaten with specific etiquette. However in a country where 55% of single parent households are living below the poverty line, I want to explore how aestheticization of food coexists with providing wholesome meals for food insecure populations. I plan to travel among "kodomo-shokudo" or "children's diners," which are makeshift eateries that have sprung up in Tokyo and provide price-flexible, nutritious meals for low-income children and parents. I am curious to see if these diners preserve the deliberate attention given to food presentation even while feeding large numbers. I am interested in exploring whether this aspect of the Japanese culture will be preserved among the next generation, regardless of socioeconomic status. I am in contact with young Japanese students who are willing to translate for me during this portion of my project.

In Japan I will also spend time volunteering with Second Harvest Food Bank, which is an English-speaking non-profit that takes unwanted food from over 400 donors and connects it with around 320 agencies. I'm particularly interested to see how a culture that meticulously prepares the food it consumes treats its unwanted food. By volunteering with Second Harvest I will be able to interact both with food recipients and donors and will get a sense for how food insecurity is handled in urban Japan.

After Japan I will travel to South Africa to volunteer with the Southern Africa Food Lab (SAFL), which brings together NGOs, government, corporations, grassroots, and universities to respond to the issue of hunger in collaborative efforts. SAFL is currently focusing on bringing awareness about nutrition-related health challenges in Southern Africa, where malnutrition and obesity are both present due to a lack of nutritious food and health education. I will explore how SAFL facilitates large-scale collaboration among diverse sets of leaders. This concept of a “collective impact” is a community organizational technique that is becoming more popular across the world and is based on the simple knowledge that a united force can achieve more than individual efforts.

Finally, I will travel to Nepal during their summer crop season. Even though agriculture provides livelihoods for 68 percent of Nepal’s population, farmers in Nepal struggle to produce an adequate supply of food for their families. In Nepal I plan to volunteer with USAID, which functions underneath the U.S. Government’s Feed the Future Initiative. Its work with the government of Nepal and local partners has helped rural Nepali communities in the south and southwest regions increase their incomes through improved agricultural productivity. Resultingly, rural poverty and malnutrition has dropped as the production and consumption of nutritious foods has increased.

I also plan to volunteer with Groundswell International while in Nepal. While Groundswell also focuses on food security, it specifically looks to strengthen women by improving their farming practices to sustain their families. The organization primarily focuses on supporting marginalized women from the “untouchable” dalit caste who endure extreme discrimination. As evidenced in my life through my own mother, I believe that women hold a unique power for increasing the health and wellbeing of a community. By empowering just one woman, you improve the lives of her current and future children along with countless other lives that she touches. While volunteering with Groundswell I hope to witness the strides of these women who live in social and physical isolation: how they provide food for their families and how they view their own health and wellbeing. It is from them that I hope to learn what I need to know in order to help others in isolation, such as the Lakota women on Pine Ridge that touch my mind often.

While I can verbalize the global extent of food insecurity, I know that I do not fully understand it yet. The many forms of food insecurity that I will see throughout the year will change my perception of what it is, and the degrees of malnutrition that I will be exposed to will

likely change the way that I view food for the rest of my life. There may be times when I must observe great waste coexisting with great need, and times when my tasks seem insignificant compared to the needs. I am counting on my determination to ultimately increase the health and wellbeing of small, individual lives to keep me moving forward. While my goal is to understand food insecurity at a global level, I will be grounded each day by an interaction as simple as a smile and the substance of my efforts will be tangible to me despite the difficulties.