

Summer 2015

Earlier this summer I had the opportunity to intern for the Haiti Institute in Sewanee through the organization Zamni Kafe. Zamni Kafe is a project affiliated with the NGO Zamni Agrikol; both organizations work to help bring Haitians out of poverty through improving agricultural resources and education. I was part of a four-part research team made of Sewanee students under the leadership of Biology professor Dr. Deborah McGrath. The team was divided into two different projects related to Zamni Kafe: a biodiversity study and a photosynthesis study.

Zamni Kafe is working to help reforest the Central Plateau region in Haiti through an agroforestry and carbon sequestration program. Most of Haiti has been stripped of its natural forest as people attempt to make a living amongst crippling poverty. Whether it be for farming hillsides or making charcoal for cooking, tropical forests have been turned into scrubland. Zamni Kafe was founded by Dr. McGrath in collaboration with Zamni Agrikol and the Haiti Institute in Sewanee. It works to counteract the rampant deforestation by providing farmers with crop plants in addition to fruit trees and trees that can be used as timber. The hope is to incentivize farmers with a diversified range of crops and trees that will further the growth of trees in the region. Coffee has been given to our farmer-partners to help their livelihood while also promoting shade trees that are planted as well. The beauty of this project is that it creates a partnership and sense of equality between aid-bearing Westerners and Haitians. Haiti is a country that hosts a myriad of NGO and aid organization that seek to help the impoverished nation and, while they promote lots of good, often miscommunication and obstacles stagnate potential help. Our project is by no

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means perfect, but it helps Haitians to become self-reliant and attempts to create a relationship built around shared goals rather than falling into the latent power dynamic between giver and receiver. This power dynamic is never intentional, but is often an obstacle for aid organizations. Without community relationships, miscommunication is capable of distorting interactions between those giving and receiving aid. If aid is given time and time again without allowing for self-motivation and involvement on the part of the receiver, then a weird power dynamic can emerge. Our hope is that through our partners' involvement and motivation, they can become self-reliant and can alleviate themselves from poverty.

My team's general goal was to help promote the health of the farmers' coffee plants by researching the various issues that arisen since the plants were planted last summer. During trips in early 2015 it was discovered that fungi and disease, such as scale and rust, have been endangering the planted coffee. My project was to analyze photosynthesis rates of healthy and infected plants to monitor differences and to help find optimal light levels at which coffee can best grow. Through this project I was able to gain a vast appreciation for the biological sciences. As a Natural Resources major, most of my science background is related to earth sciences, forestry, and geology, so it was such a fun and awesome experience to delve into biology, a field that I am not often exposed to. I learned so much, from identifying various Haitian flora to observing different types of plant disease. One of the most valuable skills I learned this summer was how to operate and finesse the LI-6400 Portable Photosynthesis System, the machine that we used to measure various photosynthetic rates of coffee plants. I went from having no idea what a Li-Cor machine was to be able to improvise and repair the machine in remote mountain

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villages. My fellow intern, Ben McKenzie, was an invaluable asset who was of great assistance learning both biology and how to operate the photosynthesis machine. Our project served as one more cog in the wheel of the effort to demolish generational poverty through the propagation of healthy plants and the hope of a self-reliant future.

The other major emphasis of our project centers around building relationships in the farming villages in which we work. So whenever I was not working in the villages I was attempting to forge bonds with the farmers and their families despite the language barrier. Card games turned out to be a fantastic way in which to interact when shared words were not possible.

Learning to communicate with others who are so very different from me was a lesson that will and has impacted almost every interaction I have with other people. It has been so amazing to be able to attempt to empathize and communicate with others in such an intentional manner. In addition to the experience of building interpersonal connections, I have received so much knowledge through lessons and thoughtful conversations with both my team and the Haitians we worked with. I believe exposure, on many different levels, is probably the most important lesson I can take away from my time in Haiti. Exposure to different lifestyles, modes of thought, concepts, culture, etc., helps to create a more well-rounded worldview that is sometimes hard to come by in the self-insulated world in which we live here in the US.

As far as career goals go, I think that both communication and exposure are two experiences that will help to shape not only my life but my ambitions as well. Experiencing the difficulty that is inherent to aid work has given me such an appreciation for arduous task of people attempting to help people. Altruism is difficult and not easy, but it makes all the

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difference in the world, despite opposition and obstacles. I think that I want that desire to help others to be reflected in anything that I do later in life.