This summer I interned with a non-profit organization called Zanmi Kafe, based in Sewanee, TN, and in Corporant, Haiti. Zanmi Kafe is a partnership between Professor Deborah McGrath of Sewanee’s Biology Department, and Zanmi Agrikol, a Haitian organization that works to empower the people of Haiti through training in sustainable agriculture, as well as providing sustainable infrastructure. Zanmi Kafe’s mission is to supply farmers with coffee and shade tree seedlings, make payments for carbon sequestration, and offer technical support informed by on-farm agroecological research conducted by Sewanee and Haitian students. One of the goals of Zanmi Kafe is to apply the results of undergraduate research to help Haitian farmers adopt and manage more economically viable and ecologically resilient agroecosystems.

As an intern with Zanmi Kafe, I was responsible for taking part in decision-making regarding Zanmi Kafe’s mission and how we should fulfill it, as well as establishing and strengthening our relationships with our partners and partner communities in Haiti, and conducting on-farm agroecological research. Part of my responsibilities involved my expertise in Geographical Information Systems (GIS.) As the only person in the organization proficient in the use of GIS software, I was put in charge of all spatial analysis and cartography for the organization. I was also in charge of conducting a research project studying photosynthesis in young coffee seedlings on Zanmi Kafe’s partner farms.
My research involved using a LI-6400 Portable Photosynthesis Machine to measure photosynthesis in diseased and healthy coffee seedlings. The goal of this study was to determine how badly these seedlings were affected by diseases such as coffee rust (*Hemileia vastatrix*). To do this, I was required to become proficient in the maintenance and use of the LI-6400 Portable Photosynthesis Machine. Familiarity with the maintenance of this machine was especially important as the conditions under which we were operating were far from ideal, and we were often required to make repairs to the machine in the field. Because of this, my research partner, Peter Davis, and I learned a great deal about the operation of this machine, as well as how to take it apart and put it back together again, and how to improvise for broken or missing parts. We also learned a great deal about the normal operation of the machine.

The data we gathered over the course of our internship was very suggestive, giving us insight into how coffee photosynthesizes and how to potentially optimize coffee growth on our partner farms. We also used the data gathered over the summer to help our partner interns at the Zanmi Agrikol trade school, CFFL, to put together a thesis for their graduation. This data will also be presented at the AASHE conference in Minneapolis this year, and may be submitted for publication after further analysis.

As well as being responsible for carrying out this research, I was also encouraged to build relationships with Zanmi Kafe’s partners. This included agronomists, trade school interns, and farmers, and necessitated the learning of Haitian Creole, or Kreyol. I don’t pretend to have mastered the language during my five weeks in the country, but I
Ben McKenzie, Summer 2015

did develop a working knowledge which allowed me to communicate with those around me and build my relationships with them. I am still in contact with the agronomists and trade school interns with whom we worked. I also made connections with others in the country, aid workers,

Some experiences that I gained during the course of my internship in Haiti were unique and invaluable. Because Haiti is a country in which nothing is on schedule and a mechanical failure (or an obstinate donkey) can mean hours of waiting, I learned a great deal about patience. With this patience came a clarity of thought and a sense of wonder that I rarely achieve in the U.S., due to the constant barrage of information, news, and media assaulting me there. In Haiti, my mind was free to wander, and to wonder, allowing me to deal more effectively with the everyday problems I faced there. While I have not been able to achieve quite this level of clarity since my time in Haiti, I believe I have retained a great deal of the clarity of thought and increased problem solving ability that I gained there.

My time in Haiti also expanded my horizons in another way. Working in Haiti introduced me to the realities of foreign aid work, both good and bad. I caught a glimpse of the way aid is given and how development works. By being exposed to both the worst and the best practices of development, I developed a passion for implementing the better practices. I am not entirely certain of whether or not I will pursue development work as a career, but it is now something that I am considering and am passionate about. My experience has also given me many contacts in the development world. Over the course
of my stay in Haiti, and even on the planes to and from the country, I met incredible
people working in everything from infrastructure, to cultural, to agricultural
development, both foreigners and Haitians themselves. Some of these contacts I expect to
stay with me throughout my life, and if I find myself working in development, I expect
that my time in Haiti and the contacts I have made there have given me an valuable start,
for which I am eternally grateful.