Life in Rural Nepal

This past year I made the decision to spend ten months in rural mid-western Nepal through a fellowship offered by the Kopila Valley Children’s project. I worked and lived in a home with forty disadvantaged children as well as ten Nepali staff members. My role was multifaceted and at times very flexible to change with the needs of the project. The constant in my day was my work in the children’s home, helping to maintain and run a healthy and happy living space. This meant addressing any conflicts or issues in the house, making sure that all the kids did their chores and homework, making sure that everyone was both physically and mentally healthy, and facilitating a daily meeting with the whole family to talk about the day and discuss any current news and/or issues within the house. In addition to my role as “house mother,” my days were often supplemented with teaching classes at the Kopila Valley Primary School, facilitating correspondence with sponsors and donors, answering email that came into the organization, and helping organize extra-curricular activities for the kids.

The multidimensional nature of my position as the “Home Fellow” allowed me to get involved in many different aspects of NGO management. My days were often long and exhausting, quickly exposing all of my own strengths and weaknesses as well as my likes and dislikes. These self-discoveries allowed me to set goals for myself for the rest of my time at Cornell, as well as to start piecing together what I want from my future. An example of this was my realization that while I absolutely adore working with children, I dislike teaching in a traditional classroom setting.
Instead, I realized that my joy lies in child-care and children's development. I loved acting as the housemother and taking care of the kids when they were sick or upset. I loved encouraging the kids, and being a support for them as they discovered their own capabilities and strength. I was forced to navigate my relationships with each child, and tailor my role in their lives to match each of their individual needs. It was a new experience for me working with children who have suffered through immense loss and hardship at such a young age, but I felt so lucky to be a part of their healing process.

In addition to my recognized love of children's development work, I came to realize that my satisfaction working for Kopila Valley came in large part from actually being on the ground, and creating relationships with the people that the project aims to serve. I think that some of my most valued experiences came from total immersion and exploration of a new culture and people. Living in Midwestern Nepal was an adjustment, and initially felt like worlds away from home. Yet, after a few months I surprised myself by waking up one day and realizing that I felt so happy and comfortable within the Nepali community around me. If I were to give advice to anyone going abroad to a country that operates very differently from their own, it would be to allow themselves time to adjust and make observations. This was a struggle for me at first. I came in to my job at Kopila ready to work hard, and was immediately frustrated when some of my approaches were not effective or well received. After taking a step back I realized the importance of self-awareness, and through this was able to better understand the disconnect between my own
priorities and Nepali customs. I eventually allowed myself the time and space to observe and experience, and as my understanding of Nepali culture grew I became more approachable to those around me, opening myself up to new relationships and opportunities for collaboration.

Going abroad gave me clarity, and moving forward I want to continue learning through experiences and relationships. The excitement that I felt in Nepal pushes me through my time at Cornell, suddenly putting images and faces to the things that I am learning. Looking around at my peers, not only at Cornell, but also everywhere around me, I realize how fortunate I was to have had the support and the means to spend a year in another country. It is unfortunate that many will not have the same opportunities that I did. Yet I think that it is not the airplane ride or the borders crossed that made my time last year so valuable, but instead meaning came from creating relationships with individuals who shared experiences and a life outlook so far removed from my own. I think that we can find opportunities for self-discovery everywhere, and it is often merely a question of being open and proactive in our search for these moments. My hope for the future is that I master the Nepali language at Cornell and eventually return to Nepal to work with children that have displaced from war and poverty.