



Middlebury College

Center for Social Entrepreneurship

- ▶ **Summer 2015 Fellow Reports:**
- ▶ **Sarah James**
- ▶ **New York, NY; Oxford, England**



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Oliver Wendell Holmes is credited with writing, “I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” I left Middlebury last semester meditating on this statement, asking myself, what is the simplicity on the far side of complexity? And how can we take steps to weave a world from that wisdom?

These are simpler questions to ask from within my Middlebury incubator. I spend much of my academic life reading poetry and novels, mining for truth relevant to my development and to the world I live in. Finding beauty in our fractured world is easier when I can look out my window and see the sun rising over the creek and the purple, stirring mountains behind it. My summer was divided into two primary chapters: the first, where I lived in New York City and worked remotely for an organization called Partnership with Children; and the second, where I studied abroad at the University of Oxford in England through the Bread Loaf School of English. Though the two experiences may appear disparate: one month spent looking at charts of social science research, two months spent reading Victorian literature. I have found that the threads of insight I can weave together from both chapters are helping me to focus my intention for my final year at Middlebury. I believe I will return for the fall semester wiser, stronger and more centered than I ever have before.

With over eight million people in less than 400 square miles living, working and commuting in the summer heat, it was easy to become overwhelmed in New York City. The city was intense in beautiful ways. I admired its cultural diversity, its long history of bringing people together, its pulsing ambition, marked by the constant stream of people on its sidewalks rushing to be on time to make a difference in the future of an organization or a company or a classroom. New York asks individuals to have faith and work with diligence. It promises to let those individuals live with the pride and freedom to be themselves. Despite the hopes that hang in the air and the determination that courses with the running of the subway, the fractures in those promises are evident. Lines of privilege are drawn finely, at times only one street separating rights to comprehensive education, the ability to shop at a grocery store, and access to fair and equitable housing.

This summer, I had the privilege of working for Partnership with Children, a New York City-based non-profit addressing access to social and emotional support for children in the city's highest need communities. Their theory of change stipulates that placing social workers and trained counselors in underprivileged schools helps students feel safer and improves their education outcomes. As an intern, I worked on independent data research projects, collecting demographic data from each neighborhood for new partnerships with city schools.

It was a small research project on the ACE Study and trauma-informed education paradigms that expanded my understanding of effective social change and education reform in unexpected ways. The ACE Study, or the Adverse Childhood Experiences study, found that childhood trauma is correlated with adult onset of chronic diseases, life-threatening illnesses like heart disease and cancer, depression, mental illness, potentially a greater propensity towards violence and a greater likelihood for becoming the victim of violence. Trauma-informed schools understand that underprivileged youth, for a variety of reasons, are more at risk for experiencing trauma in their early childhood and throughout the course of their life. Their students' "ACE Score" is higher and predicts that they are much more likely to drop out of school and suffer from mental illness and physical, sometimes life-threatening illnesses. By "digging into the lives" of students, trauma-informed schools ask the question: "What happened – what is happening – to you?" They discipline children differently, resolving to take each child aside to look them in the eye and relate to them as individuals. Some trauma-informed schools open on holiday breaks, for students to drop by if they need somewhere to go. Others actively describe the school as a family, telling their students that they "love" them. "ACES Too High," a great website for more specific information, profiled several schools that have adopted a more holistic model of education, one in line with Partnership's goals. In trauma-informed schools, expulsions and suspensions, across the board, have dropped to zero.

This project helped me circle back to the questions I raised at the end of my last semester at Middlebury. In New York, it can seem physically impossible to address its social problems, their complexity looming like the skyscrapers overhead. Partnership with Children and trauma-informed schools, however, are taking a profoundly revolutionary and yet exceptionally simple approach to healing social wounds. By looking children in the eye, by asking them questions about their lives, by listening to them, by giving them the space to speak, children become healthier physically (the physiologically toxic effects of stress and poverty are mitigated some), they feel safer, and they are better able to focus in school. This is an example of the simplicity on the far side of complexity. Partnership with Children's work is not at all easy, but they practice the transcendent truth that children matter and deserve to be listened to. I believe now that recognizing how the spiritual and the practical

intersect is crucial to understanding how best to create social change on yearly reports and to reach every child who walks through the door of the school every morning.

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I got on the plane to England, questioning whether or not I should leave New York City. Part of me wanted to continue studying the practical applications of the research I was doing for Partnership. Through other research projects I was learning about the landscape of New York City public schools. I was bringing particular statistics up during social dinner conversations. It permeated the way I saw and walked around the city.

Returning to academia, driving up to the walled colleges of Oxford was initially disorienting. It felt, at first, exactly as it appeared. All the knowledge and deep conversations were kept from the world at large. As people walked past the locked libraries, scholars worked inside until late hours of the night reading books and thinking important, complex things.

The mornings in Oxford are intensely beautiful, much like they are in Middlebury. Though, the Oxford variety mornings include better coffee, Victorian gardens and students carrying stacks of leather-bound books. I settled into life there surprisingly quickly. I loved annotating my copies of Dickens and Bronte. Long conversations with my professor, Cora Kaplan, at dinner about her scholarship were interesting and comforting. I took refuge in walking through the gardens, reading poetry, and thinking about how I was positioned in the world. These inner dialogues could sometimes become quite anxious, similar to when I have questioned my choice to become an English major or to study at a bucolic, isolated college.



*Sarah at work at
Oxford University.*



I am drawn to academia. I enjoy attending class, writing long papers, bringing my questions to my professors. I enjoyed Oxford's pulse. The diligence of its students, the interesting conversations that I overheard in the café and that I participated in with friends

I made in town about poverty, living with integrity, and the purpose of humanities texts were all key parts of my emotional and intellectual devel-

opment this summer, yet my mind often drifted back to my time in New York, and I carried the statistics and research I read about with me.

I only have one year of my undergraduate degree left, and along with most of my rising senior friends, I am often contemplating my next steps. This summer represented two primary forces pulling on my heart: socially engaged work and the intellectual, literary life. At Middlebury, we are encouraged to make a series of choices that seemingly have clear effects. We pick four classes that will have four separate syllabi that will give us four distinct credits. We will graduate when we have met certain requirements, but a large part of moving on from the intellectual incubator requires us to know and trust our ethical cores, to find what gives us energy, and to articulate how our unique experiences and worldviews can help us be of service going forward. These are complex questions that I am trying to treat with ongoing care.

On a particularly sunny Friday in July, I drove from Oxford to Tintern, Wales, a small village on the River Wye, close to the English border. The sleepy town is home to Tintern Abbey, the ruins that inspired William Wordsworth's evocative "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." It feels impossible to describe this day without sounding like an English Romantic myself. Large stone walls reach towards the sky like sturdy tree trunks, grass has grown where the foundation of the church used to be, the windows, now hollow, frame pieces of the forested hillside, the lines of coniferous trees against scraps of blue sky, dappled sunlight covers the ground in parts, visible rays stream through the windows in others.

I sat beneath an oak tree that day and read "Lines," the same poem I wrote an essay on for my application to Middlebury over four years ago. Wordsworth writes, "With an eye made quiet by the power / of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things." Four years ago, I used Wordsworth's work to attempt to connect to nature with intelligent awareness, but wrapped in Tintern Abbey's history, the striking beauty of the Wye Valley and the golden afternoon light, it became much more. Its context and the context of my summer framed the work more poignantly. The poem no longer stood separately. It became my directive for how to live with confidence, faith and thoughtfulness.

In that moment, and throughout my weeks at Oxford, Oliver Wendell Holmes' words came to mind, "I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." The world my generation is inheriting is rife with conflict and entangled by complexity, but the answers must transcend our accepted structures. As fellows at the CSE, we are asked to look within, look far beyond ourselves, and to use the wisdom of our liberal arts degrees to live meaningful lives and to create change. Just as there is unity between the liberal arts education and social reform goals, there is unity between Word-

sworth's ethic and Partnership for Children's theory of change. Both ask us to look for what may be hidden, to listen intently, and to act with courage. Furthermore, the intellectual questions I ask in literature classes inform my ability to feel strong enough and soft enough to see the world more clearly.

The question of how to make the world a healthier, more equitable place for all is fundamentally a spiritual one to me. It transcends academic discipline and geographic location. As I move forward, I am digging to find a path that looks for unity before separateness, one that takes the heartbreak of our world and seeks to heal it.

