“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” — Benjamin Franklin

**MID-TRIP REFLECTIONS OF HSPH MIRT 2013 FELLOWS**

“This journey has made me aware of the small comforts that I take for granted in my home country and has given me the confidence to continue challenging my limits in regards to embracing different cultures and experiencing new things. I am certain that my remaining time in Ethiopia will leave me with a multitude of memories that I will cherish for a lifetime.” — Kia Byrd, MIRT 2013 Ethiopia

“It has been truly amazing to see the dedication that the people here have for their patients. This entire experience has been eye-opening and incredibly rewarding. The MIRT program has allowed me to combine my passions for travel, culture, science, and public health into one unforgettable experience.” — Tessa Concepcion, MIRT 2013 Chile
Journeying to Africa as an African-American has been both a physical and psychological adventure. At Howard University, we often refer to the West African Adinkra ideology of ‘Sankofa,’ a phrase that literally translates to “go back and get.” After being exposed to the powerful heritage of Ethiopia—the Biblical legends of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba, the history and legacy of icons such as Emperors Haile Selassie and Menelik, the evolution of human form embodied in the remains of Dinkinesh, and the symbolism surrounding national customs and practices—I felt pride in my ability to “go back” and re-claim this essential portion of Black history and culture in Ethiopia that often goes unrecognized by Western civilization.

“May your hands always be busy. May your feet always be swift. May you have a strong foundation when the winds of change shift. May your heart always be joyful. May your song always be sung. May you stay forever young.” —Bob Dylan
Kia’s Reflection (cont’d)

The amazing people that I have gotten to know during this short period have further maximized my time and experiences in Ethiopia, especially the children and staff at AHOPE Ethiopia, an orphanage for HIV-positive youth. The children at AHOPE are bursting with life and energy and are shining examples of how happiness and curiosity can arise from some of the most dismal situations. From the beginning of our time at AHOPE, I marveled at how receptive the children were to our own personal experiences and individual cultures. I found myself surprised at how quickly we were able to build relationships with the kids—drying their tears, holding their hands, and embracing their tiny figures at times when they felt insecure. The children of AHOPE inspire me with their ability to grab life by the horns and their capacity to do so much with, relatively, so little.

Thus far, my experiences in Addis Ababa have been life changing, exposing me to a way of being different from my own experiences in the United States. This journey has made me aware of the small comforts that I take for granted in my home country and has given me the confidence to continue challenging my limits in regards to embracing different cultures and experiencing new things. I am certain that my remaining time in Ethiopia will leave me with a multitude of memories that I will cherish for a lifetime.
Upon arriving in Addis Ababa, I whipped out my journal and recorded my first entry. In that journal entry, I wrote down 5 goals that I wanted to work toward during my time in Ethiopia. The goals encompassed excelling in my research, learning more about the state of public health in Ethiopia, connecting with the Ethiopian culture and language, and connecting with family in Ethiopia. I reasoned that I could only get the most from this unique experience by continually engaging with my work and the Ethiopian culture; sticking to these goals would help me do just that.

After growing accustomed to the daily sights around our neighborhood, I found myself more concentrated and engaged with my research. Working with Dr. Tadesse to analyze the data through the SPSS software gave me insight into the importance of statistics in interpreting large data sets and drawing valuable conclusions. Without knowing it, I realized that I picked up a decent amount of statistical knowledge. In re-reading some journal articles, with this newly acquired knowledge, I found that I was better able to understand the results and conclusions of the various studies.

After completing our data analysis with Dr. Tadesse, we spent the next two weeks volunteering at AHOPE. The time spent at AHOPE was a refreshing, educational and enlightening experience that meant a lot to all of the fellows. It didn’t take long for us to realize that we were getting just as much from the volunteer experience as the kids were, perhaps more. One of the first things that struck me after my first few days volunteering at AHOPE was the fact that the kids (especially the young ones), have a seemingly magical ability to forget a significant obstacle (i.e. the HIV virus) and continue living their lives as if there was nothing standing in their way. This independence from their medical condition often made me forget their difficult situation. It would usually be later in the day, after I had left AHOPE that their situation became a reality to me.

While I wished that I could somehow change their predicament, I came to realize that my role for them at this point in my life would be to communicate to them the message that they shouldn’t be defined (or define themselves) by their HIV status. Rather they should define themselves and their worth by the positive impact that they have on the world around them. I understand that this could be a difficult message for the kids to accept, especially as some of them begin to transform from the magical stage of childhood to the uncertain and challenging stage of teenage life, but I feel that it is a message the kids have to hear, especially from someone like me who shares a similar background and culture in addition to our established relationship and perhaps as a result, will be someone that they will listen to.

My experience thus far has been eye opening in many ways, whether it was observing the day to day activities of the locals, understanding complexities of economic development and learning the state of public health and medicine in the country. I am grateful to the HSPH MIRT Program for this wonderful opportunity!
“Sa-at” (clock), “Buna” (coffee), “ Za-af?” (tree). Little over an hour after arriving at AHOPE, I was being quizzed on my little Amharic knowledge by over 15 young teachers armed with picture-books, stickers, and lots of laughter! As a segment between our statistical data analysis and the final report of findings, we have had the pleasure and privilege of volunteering at AHOPE orphanage for about a week and a half. During this time we have bonded with big and little AHOPE (2 of AHOPE’s three locations) over soccer, health lessons, group conversations, checkers, arts and craft and of course 4 square! After 5 days playing with the kids, I can definitely feel muscle groups and joints that have been grossly over-worked. Reflecting on AHOPE begins my mid-point reflection as I consider the fact that statistics that speak about health disparities, poverty, or economic issues cannot truly encapsulate daily realities of the populations being described. When we decide to rest down those stats and begin to learn first-hand the struggle, triumphs and journeys of those being described, meaningful change truly occurs.

Taking a step back, on this my 3rd or 4th week in Ethiopia (keeping track of time is not my strong suit) I am continually amazed at the beauty of the people, culture and landscape that is Ethiopia. From Bole Airport to Ayat, our home during our time here, we have been showered with smiles and wishes of peace from passersby, members of the ACIPPH, and the host family. It is clear that the 13 months of sunshine has really given those that we interact with a genuine sense of warmth and affection.

Our first few weeks were filled with Statistic Work, as Dr. Tadesse guided us through the various steps needed to transform unexplored questions in our data into concrete answers supported by p-values, and Confidence Intervals. Work with SPSS was initially challenging; however, through practice and guidance by Dr. Tadesse, we were able to complete our major analysis.

Outside of our time exploring the wonders of Epidemiology and sharing life with the kids at AHOPE, we were blessed with numerous opportunities to explore the wealth of sites and resources throughout Addis. We were able to visit the national museum and have buna (coffee) with our ancestor ‘Lucy’, we were able to visit Black Lion Hospital and get a personal tour of their public health school, we visited the original palace and church of Emperor Menilick II who saved Addis Ababa with Eucalyptus trees, and also explore Bole road and its sights and sounds.

One portion of our life in Addis Ababa that takes me back to the time that I was living in Jamaica is our time riding the Mini bus taxi (a small minivan that transports people around the capital). What at face value seems to be a do-able activity becomes difficult, when the language written and spoken is not your native tongue. In addition the speed at which conductors share the various stops is so quick that I often mistake them for auctioneers rather than conductors.
Darve’s Reflection (cont’d)

Despite these factors, I have found this experience to be enjoyable. The enjoyment comes from the fact that for those 20-30 minutes I am experiencing a portion of life from a local's perspective. The experience reminds me of travelling to and from school in the Caribbean and the loud and boisterous minibus drivers that have hefty sums of change in their left hand and wield the mighty doors with their right. That vivid picture reminds me that while I might be many miles away from my country of heritage or my home in the US, there are still many factors that unite us.

Thus far this world wind of a few weeks has confirmed my desire to continue working and contributing to global population health research and ultimately positively impact the journey towards eliminating the disparities that exist in health care.

Thanks so much Harvard MIRT for the amazing opportunity to live and conduct public health research abroad and I am excited for what my remaining time will bring.

Jason’s Mid-trip Reflection

It hit me. I left the red, white, and blue. I left the country that I knew so well. I left the Californian lifestyle. I left these parts of myself behind because I wanted to discover new perspectives in life. Within these four weeks, I did just that and came to admire the latent beauty of the “New Flower” (literal translation of Addis Ababa).

I remember going to Emperor Menelik’s palace where I saw a plethora of historical treasures. The church was extremely beautiful with its colorful patterns, and the museum displayed some of the most incredible archeology. I especially liked the authenticity of walls, because the aged structures tell a story that could only be experienced through vision. My favorite part was overlooking the city of Addis Ababa on the top of the hill, because I saw how the intricate colors of each structure (buildings and houses) resemble a prized garden, filled with flowers and plants of all sorts. This location was truly made for an emperor – high on sea level and stature.
The highlight of my stay had to be my volunteering experience at AHOPE, an orphanage for HIV+ youths. Despite their status, they were all fun-loving, energetic kids who could just brighten up anyone’s day. *I came to admire the strength that each of them had, and their positive attitudes inspired me to become a better person. For example, I admit that I take some things for granted, and seeing how the youths make the best out of their situation was a life-changing moment.*

There was a particular boy who always greeted me with the sweetest smile; we played all kinds of games together and talked about the silliest things. My job was to teach him (and the other kids) about hygiene and other nifty facts, but it was him (and the other children) who taught me a lot about life. For example, they taught me how important a smile is, how precious hugs are, and how uplifting laughter can be. *I have always aspired to become a researcher and pediatrician, and after this experience, I wholeheartedly know my path in life: working in the nexus of public health, medicine, research, and education. It’s truly incredible how the human heart and interpersonal relationships can inspire other people.* Secondly, it’s astounding how powerful education can be, because that’s how one person can impact another’s life.

Aside from the exploration, I also worked on a public health research project that involved epidemiology and biostatistics. I was challenged to my limits, because I never took a quantitative statistics course. However, I truly appreciated how Dr. Mahlet Tedesse taught all of the MIRT fellows everything that we needed to know, which included SPSS (statistical program). The struggles metamorphosed into a feeling of accomplishment as I saw how the data sets turned into something significant. Once unsure about my future in public health research, I can now say that I am very interested in this discipline.

Additionally, Ethiopian food was phenomenal. From injera to sambusas, I left wanting more. My favorite kind of traditional Ethiopian dish had a variety of vegetable paste, while my favorite sambusas were fried triangles stuffed with lentils. Being here, I can definitely say that my decision for a vegetarian diet changed my life, because I feel healthier as I approach vegetarianism. The food choices in Ethiopia will make any veggie lover fall madly in love with the dining culture.

All in all, I cannot begin to fathom the extent of this opportunity. From traveling to the research training, any young scholar would be enthralled, because this experience is a once-in-a-life-time opportunity. There are not many undergraduates who can say that they’ve conducted research in Ethiopia, and I cannot thank the HSPH MIRT program enough for this experience. Waking up to the “New Flower” everyday will stay as a tattooed memory in this traveler’s soul and mind. It will never fade away, and I’ll always cherish the green, yellow, and red.

“If you learn only methods, you’ll be tied to your methods, but if you learn principles you can devise your own methods”—Ralph Waldo Emerson
What’s new to me is the way it integrates the city with all the natural beauty of the region. Since it’s winter, the days are shorter, which means we’re greeted with a beautiful sunrise as we go into work every morning. There’s a beach right near the center, so we can comb for sea glass during lunch if we want. Beyond that, some of the prettiest scenery I’ve ever seen is essentially right in our backyard – just a bus or car ride away. We’ve been to Fuerte Bulnes and Puerto Natales already, and have plans to head to Torres del Paine soon. All of those are beautiful natural sites in Patagonia that I’d never even considered visiting before. We’ve even been to Santiago, Valparaíso, and Viña del Mar, too, to satisfy my itch for seeing more cities! I can’t believe we’re traveling this much – I’ve always wanted to, but never had the resources. It’s truly amazing.

We still work, of course. Putting together our projects has been pretty challenging so far, but learning through doing has taught me a lot about epidemiology (and as a side effect, programs like SPSS – it seems like I have to mention it as I’ve spent so much time with it here!). I know I want to go to graduate school, so this is great preparation. I’ve always enjoyed research, and being able to do it so extensively here is very exciting.
I also have to add that the children at the center are some of the cutest that I’ve ever seen. I really enjoy shadowing there. It’s helping me improve my Spanish, and I’m learning a lot about how Chile treats children with disabilities. That’s especially interesting for me because my best friend and by far the biggest influence on my life is my little sister, Sarah, who has Down syndrome. I tried to come down here without any expectations for what the center would be like, but I guess what I didn’t consider was the possibility that it would be almost exactly like the one she used to receive services from in the States. I really like that – I’m already familiar with a lot that they do there, and it gives me the extra benefit of feeling at home.

I’m still floored by the fact that I’m able to participate in a program like this. I’ve been having such a wonderful time. There’s no doubt that the next few weeks will be just as amazing as the ones I’ve spent here already, and I’m extremely excited to continue my journey.

Being a snowboard instructor, coming to Patagonia was a dream come true. Every morning, when Deborah, Anjalene and I drive to the Centre de Rehabilitacion, we are greeted with stunning sunrises over the Estrecho de Magallanes (Straight of Magallanes) and in the distance, you can see the Darwin mountain range. Some days, the wind is so strong that you can physically lean into it. This is a land of extremes.

We slipped right into normal, local life here in Punta Arenas. Our host mother, Monica, is surely in the running for World’s Best Mom. She dedicates her entire day, every day, to making sure that her large family (now including us) is happy, well fed, comfortable, and warm. The night I arrived in Punta Arenas, I learned quickly that Chilean families are very tight knit. I met aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, cousins, daughters, and granddaughters in the span of a few hours. This pushed my Spanish speaking ability to its limits, but at the same time, it made me feel welcome and at home.

Our work days begin in our office with our mentor, Micah. My project works with common mood disorders in Chilean college students and their relation to poor sleep quality and caffeine consumption.
SPSS, the program we use for data analysis, was difficult to work with at first. It was like learning a new language, slow and with many mistakes. However, with time and practice, we have become fluent.

One of the most rewarding things we’ve been able to do here is work with and observe the physical therapists, doctors, kinesthiologists, and nurses here at the Center. The Centre de Rehabilitacion is a free care center for children and adults with special health care needs. The staff members at the center work tirelessly with immense compassion and love for the patients. My favorite experience so far has been working with the neonatal group. This is a class held once a week for mothers, aunts, or grandmothers and their infants who were born premature. All of the infants in the class I attended were about 5 months old. Alejandra, the therapist I was following, led the women and infants through a series of exercises involving sound and picture association, noise stimulation, and touch stimulation. The purpose of all these exercises was to help the infants develop normal sensory responses and associations.

I couldn’t have imagined Patagonia and Chile itself in any better way. The kindness showed to us from our host family and the other Chileans we’ve met is something I’ll never forget. I had been a little nervous about feeling homesick while I was down here, but that feeling is impossible to have when you are surrounded by caring, loving Chilean people. I cannot thank the MIRT program enough for this wonderful opportunity. This entire experience has been eye-opening and incredibly rewarding. The MIRT program has allowed me to combine my passions for travel, culture, science, and public health into one unforgettable experience.

**Favorite Quote from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

“It has been truly amazing to see the dedication that the people here have for their patients. Many of the patients and their families that attend the center come from lower income or resource poor backgrounds. I was able to follow a physical therapist one day and go to a patient’s house. The young boy has cerebral palsy and his condition as well as his family’s situation prevented them from being able to come directly to the center. That isn’t an issue for the center, however, they simply have the physical therapy session at his home, with the same dedication and care that he would receive at the center.

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“I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you.... But be assured that we’ll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”

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**Tessa’s Reflection (cont’d)**

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We have three weeks left in our experience here in Patagonia Chile. Every so often, whether it’s at work, a family gathering with my home stay, or a night out with the other fellows, I am constantly reminding myself that I’m in Chile. CHILE. I’ve been approaching everything with excitement and an open mind, looking to take advantage of everything while here because I’m pretty sure I won’t get the chance to come back!

After about 25 hours of travel and three plane flights from June 27-28, I made it to Punta Arenas (“Sandy Point”), Chile. I was picked up at the airport by the Director of research at the center. When we stepped outside, I expected it to be a lot colder (Ithaca’s winter had been even more brutal), but I was told that it would get worse! Punta Arenas is the southernmost city in Chile. Their winter is our summer, and vice versa. There are about 150,000 people living here, and it is known especially for its oil, fishing industry, and agriculture.

The other two fellows and I are working at a rehabilitation center (Corporación de Rehabilitación Club de Leones Cruz del Sur) that is dedicated to serving the physically or mentally disabled (of all age groups and conditions) from underprivileged communities here in Punta Arenas.

The city itself is very isolated from mainland Chile; the effort of the center and the help it has received from former fellows and other employees to provide extensive support to the disadvantaged are tremendous. Conditions such as cerebral palsy and autism are most commonly seen. Our responsibilities include shadowing specialists and performing data analysis of a sleep study that has already been conducted.

A few of the specialists I’ve been able to shadow include a pediatrician, nursing assistant, kinesiologists, and speech therapists. They are all very knowledgeable about their work and immensely conscious and caring. I’ve observed the pediatrician perform a check up with a 10-year-old with Down syndrome who had a head cold. The nurse assistant fed liquid servings to a couple of children with cerebral palsy through a tube that was inserted into their stomachs. I was able to observe one infant with a speech impediment say his first clear animal sound (“moo”) in repeating after the speech therapist. It was moving to see the therapist’s excitement at the child’s progress (regardless of how little it may have been) as well as the heightened energy she had to sustain to keep the child’s attention for just half an hour. I observed the kinesiologists’ work with a couple of infants who were a little late in their crawling stages. All of the specialists work together in a wonderful way to improve the conditions of many individuals throughout this region.
Deborah’s Reflection (cont’d)

Out of the countless facets of this experience that stand out to me, the endearing character of my homestay mother is certainly most prominent. She takes much pride in her job as the homemaker, and she’s always very bright, attentive, solicitous, and accommodating. I would love to emulate her one day when I have my own family. It is because of her that I feel encouraged to get more of a taste of Chilean culture by engaging in consistent conversation and activities with the family and friends.

Chilean culture, from what I’ve seen, is similar to both U.S. and Guatemalan culture (I’ve visited, studied, and worked in Guatemala a couple of times before). It’s similar to the U.S. in that people go to bed fairly late, especially on weekends, it’s very relaxed when families sit down to eat meals together as they watch TV or fiddle with their cell phones, and young people smoke, drink, party. It’s similar to Guatemalan culture, however, in that families are big, everyone is very open, intimate, and warm towards each other, there’s the custom to kiss the other person on the cheek upon greeting them or saying goodbye (not between a man and a man though), and families eat together often.

I’m incredibly grateful for this opportunity the HSPH MIRT program has provided me with to take part in public health research abroad and engage in a cultural exchange.

It was cold but beautiful!
Dodie Arnold, PhD was a graduate student at Meharry Medical College when she participated in the MIRT Program in 2006. Since completing her MIRT fellowship, Dodie completed her Masters Degree in Public Health from Meharry Medical College and Doctoral Degree in Epidemiology from the University of Washington.

What is your current status/jobs?
I am a Global Health Consultant and Research Associate at Pennington Biomedical Research Center/Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

How did the MIRT fellowship help you in your career path?
I participated in the University of Washington MIRT program in 2006 and it had a tremendous impact on my career path. As a MIRT student, I traveled to Ethiopia to complete a gender-based violence project. I was engaged in data collection in the field, data entry, cleaning, analysis, and manuscript writing. It was the first research project I had ever been involved in that was not bench work/basic science. Upon completing the summer program, I decided to pursue a PhD in Epidemiology. I was accepted at UW and began my PhD program in 2007.

What is something most people would be surprised to learn about you?
I was interested in a career as a comedy writer. When it’s done well, comedy can help you process events and put difficult parts of life into perspective. You can make comedy very intellectual or nuanced or keep it simple and silly.

What are your hobbies?
My hobby is baking. I am a great cook, but I’ve always struggled with baking. To bake well you have to be precise, but my cooking style is a little less strict and I like to experiment. I’ve been working on breads in the last year. Some of my tastiest results include rosemary oregano focaccia and a sourdough starter I made from scratch - once a month I make sourdough waffles. My entire family has sworn off store bought waffles!

If it was possible, with whom would you like to change places with for one month?
There is no one I would want to change places with, but I would like to have a month to travel and visit new places with friends and family.

What’s your best advice to students who want to succeed?
I think one of the overlooked keys to success in graduate school is to have a peer mentor and stay socially engaged with classmates. Graduate school can be very isolating, especially once you have completed your coursework and your attention is focused on your specific research project. Graduate students are also older and more likely to have family obligations (i.e. spouse, children). But it’s important to stay in touch with other students - they offer a social support system, guidance, and lasting relationships.

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." — Bishop Desmond Tutu
Thank you for all who participated in our Summer 2013 MIRT Newsletter photo quiz. By responding first, Merry Tatch, from the University of Washington is the winner of this photo quiz!

Whitney Moore Young was a social worker and civil rights leader who was an effective powerbroker between the races during the 1960s, a time of racial unrest. He grew up in a middle class home in Lincoln Ridge, Kentucky. His parents emphasized that people are inherently decent, and that by working together, they could solve social problems. Much of his social work and advocacy philosophy was honed in the military during World War II where he focused on positive interpersonal mediation and communication. As a member of the US Army, Young developed skills as a “powerbroker” and mediator between whites and blacks; this experience influenced him to become a social worker. Young was instrumental in breaking down the barriers of segregation and inequality that held back African Americans. He was a mediator, pragmatist, and organizer who could bring consensus among many disparate groups as he focused on political and economic equality.