A report on:
Cohen Fellowship 2012

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There are many different hands behind a success story and this one does too. Even though I do not completely consider it to be a success story, I do believe that it was a successful first step towards my goal. I would like to thank The Centennial Center for Leadership, Trustee Dr. Stephen Cohen’67, Professor James McCorkle’76, Director of The Centennial Center for Leadership Susan Pliner, Associate Director Amy Forbes and Coordinator of Leadership Programs Morgan Hopkins for all their motivation and support. Lastly I would like to thank the amazing members and great friends of Serving Souls Nepal and the administration, teachers & students of Vishnu Uchha Madhyamik Vidhyalaya (Vishnu Higher Secondary School), Pokharathok, Palpa, Nepal who allowed me to put my ideas into action.
Me

My story starts from a small remote village in Nepal. I was born in a rural village in Nepal, the same place where I ended up implementing the first phase of my fellowship project. The village, even today, has no running water and telephone lines. Especially after getting hit by the ten-year-long civil war that ended in 2006, villages like Pokharathok were completely devastated.

Personally, I was very lucky to have left the village before the civil war started. This kept me usually at a distance from the war. However, the effects did get to me and millions other directly and indirectly. The war was what gave birth to several Non-Governmental Organizations currently operating in Nepal – most of them for the sole purpose to help maintain and elevate the living conditions of innocent people in war zones across the nation. As someone who saw the war happen right in front of my eyes, and observed the consequences that followed, my conclusion has always been that most of the NGOs and INGOs that operated in Nepal during and after the war were incompetent. From my own experiences, I can attest that most of the international as well as national organizations that ran with the help of donations from the west never really made it to their project zone.

It was definitely not a good sight to see reports pop up in newspapers about how horrible some war zones were. The devastation was disheartening and terrifying. However, even more frustrating was to see the INGOs and NGOs work from the capital rather than actively participate in field work.

After seeing this happen too often, I got together with some friends of mine from high school and decided to do something about it. We decided to do whatever we could by utilizing
the resources around us. This ended up giving birth to the Library Establishment Project at Trinity International College - my high school. The project ran under the Social Service Club.

The project was essentially driven to establish public libraries at schools in remote, war-hit districts around the nation. After working on the project for almost two years, we had established three libraries and I personally oversaw establishment of three more.

I received a great deal of positive feedback from the project. According to the students and locals, a public library created an immensely positive environment at these schools and the local communities. The enrollment trend in the schools where the libraries were established seemed to be rising. The civil war had just ended around this time. The people who had to flee their villages during the war had started to come back home. At that point, the libraries turned out to be one of the major factors to keep the war victims from leaving their villages again. I was told time and again that they saw the library in their community as a ray of hope for the future.

The Library Establishment Project, even today, remains one of the most fulfilling experiences I had till date. It not only allowed me to think harder, but it also allowed me to think in different ways, taught me to approach people independently, showed me a world of resources lying right around me that I had never thought of and helped me make great connections at institutions like Room to Read, The Asia Foundation and The United Nations Organization.

All in all, I would say, the Library Establishment Project was when I realized there is nothing impossible. A little more determination than everyone else, a little more devotion, and a little more sacrifice: this was my mantra for the project and it paid off. However, it did leave me with a question. The question of how far I could take it and how many more lives I could change remained unanswered.
Evolution

My preliminary proposal for Cohen Fellowship was to establish another library at one of the community schools in a remote district of Nepal. I saw Cohen Fellowship as an opportunity to help some more kids who are facing consequences of a war that devastated the educational system of Nepal for a whole decade. Cohen Fellowship was also important to me in the sense that I imagined it to be helping me figure out the unanswered questions from my past experiences.

However, later in the summer of 2012, I decided to change the format of my proposal. Instead of establishing a library, I decided to take steps to open up a Technology Resource Center. When I researched on the possibilities of injecting technology in education in developing nations, I found it to be working extremely well in almost every country till that point. Along with the possibility of making the process of educating school children more fun, the Technology Resource Center could also be able to function as a digital library. Hence the process of establishing a Technology Resource Center commenced.

This project, in my opinion, had bigger impacts because of the fact that it encompassed a wider dimension than a library could have encompassed. It comprised not only taking computers to a school in a remote village but also connecting the school with the outer world using the internet & tutoring teachers and students about how to best utilize the facilities provided to them. This also gave the school a constantly updated; free[1] to use resource while giving students and teachers a gateway to train themselves to catch up with rest of the world.
Implementation

During the summer of 2012, I started the search for my implementation site with a list consisting five schools. Out of all the schools, Vishnu Uchha Madhyamik Vidhyalaya in Pokharathok, Palpa, Nepal was deemed as the best one to implement this project. Some of the major factors that played role in the selection of this particular school were availability of funds, past and current personal relationship with the school administration, possibility of connecting the school with the internet. A series of conference calls between the school administration and I followed immediately after I proposed the project to them. After reviewing my proposal for more than three weeks, the school administration approved my project.

Even though the Cohen Fellowship is meant for summer, I implemented it during the winter of 2012/13. This was made possible by a great deal of trust and support the Centennial Center for Leadership showed towards me. I am grateful towards the Center, Susan, Amy and Morgan for their support and constant push to get me out of my comfort zone which eventually ended up bringing my proposal out of paper and into action.

For the implementation of the project, I left the United States on the 17th of December 2012 and reached Nepal on the 20th of December. I travelled to the project site, Pokharathok on the 23rd of December. I travelled to Pokharathok with two other friends of mine – both representatives of Serving Souls Nepal[^2], the organization that is currently taking care of the project locally. We stayed in Pokharathok for seven more days and implemented the project using a pre-determined schedule. Both the friends helped me implement parts of it and were instrumental in assisting me run basic computer related training for the teachers and evaluate their knowledge later on.
The first five days of the training, I ran sessions for the teachers that included anywhere from training related to hardware, software to learning about YouTube. After the first five days, the teachers were asked to follow a two-step plan. First, demonstrate their knowledge via a short question & answer session that included other teachers, me and the members of Serving Souls Nepal. Secondly, on the seventh day of the training, they were asked to teach their students what they had learnt that far into the trainings.

All the teachers were very comfortable in answering questions among their peers and had learnt majority of the content. However, some of them seemed slightly hesitant in front of the students when they had to train their students about computers. This, as some of the teachers who were hesitant explained later, had happened only because it was their first time.
Details

In this section, I will try to cover the most important details from every day.

Day I:

Day I consisted mainly of training the teachers about hardware related issues of computers. I started the training thinking the majority of them had never seen a computer. However, to my surprise, a lot of them had been introduced to computers and they had some basic knowledge about some hardware parts of the computer. The whole process got interesting when I opened up casing of one of the CPUs and explained how exactly computers function. I taught them how to remove the RAM, disassemble the cooling fan, and take the motherboard and its components apart. I also warned them about the consequences of taking apart the physical parts without having sufficient knowledge. Most of them responded saying they would never attempt to take apart the motherboard. And it is certainly an overwhelming job to perform, even for someone who has had experience with computer assembly. I showed the teachers how to put together a computer i.e. connect all the hardware units to the CPU correctly. Afterwards, all of them were asked to demonstrate what they had learnt and were able to assemble the computer properly. The training for the first day went as smoothly as I had expected it to go. The teachers were extremely excited to learn how to tackle minor hardware related issues and were very attentive all the time. The only issue I had the first day was regarding attendance. There were fewer teachers in the training than I had expected. I brought this to the attention of the Principal of the school and it was resolved Day II onwards.
Day II:

Day II was focused on training the teachers about the Operating System used on the computers. Both the computers that were donated to the school had Windows 7 installed on them as the operating system. For this particular training, I made groups of 7 teachers and divided three groups among two of the members of Serving Souls Nepal and I. We used two of the desktop computers that had been donated through the fellowship and one of our laptops, sat in a circle and demonstrated them details about what is an operating system, where to power up the computer from and where to reset it in case of a system crash, how to change settings, and how to go back in time to restore the system if the whole system crashes etc. Most of it included the very basics of getting used to with the operating system. The teachers raised questions about possibilities of students playing inbuilt games and wasting time allocated for learning and research. To tackle that issue, we created an administrator’s account and used password to secure it. Under the administrator’s account, we created restricted account for students and blocked games and ability to install new software. This is identical to what the IT services at HWS does with school computers. At the end of the session, once again, the teachers were asked to demonstrate what they had learned. This included anywhere from them booting up the computer, entering password and getting into the system to changing settings, opening up applications, monitoring the restricted account etc. All of them were able to finish the assignments given to them correctly.
Day III:

The training on the third day included nothing but Microsoft Office Package. All the teachers were introduced to the office package, its benefits and proper usage. When the computers were purchased in Kathmandu, I had specifically asked the dealer to include (localized) Nepali keyboards\(^3\) rather than regular keyboards. This turned out to be extremely helpful and a big encouragement factor for teachers to start using the computers. Even the teachers who were hesitant on the first and second days of the training seemed to be very receptive of the benefits of learning to use computers. Following the discovery of localized keyboard, the teachers asked me if their students could be included in that particular training. We then followed the pattern from Day II and made three groups - two of which consisted upperclassmen and one of which consisted teachers.

I believe that purchasing localized keyboard was one of the best decisions I made during the implementation of the project. It not only brought more attention to the project but also gave a sense of comfort for people who were overwhelmed by the feeling of learning to use computers in a different language. However, they didn’t want the system languages to be changed as they also wanted to sharpen their skills of using computers in English. If they had wanted all of the operating system to be in Nepali, it would have been possible to do so by installing a small local language package distributed by Microsoft in Nepal. Day III was possibly the longest of the training days yet one of the most exciting training days. By the end of the training, 85% of the faculty and 90% of the upperclassmen were confident enough to discuss about Microsoft Office Package and they demonstrated their skills by using the software package after the training on the same day as well as following days.
Day IV:

On the fourth day, the teachers were introduced to the internet. This was possibly one of the biggest attractions of the whole project. I was informed that a few teachers who were educated outside Palpa, the district where Pokharathok is situated in, had learnt how to use internet on their phone using a GSM 2G SIM card. This is possibly one of the oldest forms of cellular technology that is still around. Just for a comparison, the HWS website would take anywhere from 5 minutes to 15 minutes to load completely on this technology. However, the internet I was able to purchase was far superior and used a highly reliable technology. The internet for the school was fetched from the Tansen, a city 50 miles away from Pokharathok.

We started the training by demonstrating features associated with internet browsers. Then we moved on to open resources on the internet. There are several websites that provide free Nepali e-books, free daily newspapers and a dedicated online library service. The teachers were introduced to most of these websites. Likewise, they were introduced to Wikipedia but were told about the limitations and the open source design of any Wiki website. Wikipedia currently holds more than 10,000 articles written in Nepali. I was also able to localize Google as it offers services in Nepali. This allows the students and teachers to search in Nepali as well as get all their results listed in Nepali – if they wish to do so. However, the biggest attraction of the day was YouTube. It was very exciting to see one of the Physics teachers immediately get on YouTube and search for an experiment he couldn’t perform at the school because of lack of resources. He even reached out to his class and showed them the whole procedure and explained every single part of it. This was most possibly, the best moment for me throughout the project as I saw pieces of paper turn into a project and get practically implemented in real life. At the end of the session, the same procedure of Q&A like previous days was followed.
Day V:

Fifth day concluded the formal training of the teachers. On the fifth day, they were trained how to configure internet system and monitor the usage of internet to make sure it was being utilized for academic purposes only. They were given all the details about setting up a wireless/wired area network and securing the network to make sure the internet was not being misused by anyone outside even though the chances of happening so was very low. Likewise, they were introduced to anti-virus software and ways to avoid getting hacked and spammed. They were also introduced to internet monitoring system that keeps track of every user who logs in and blocks websites that include profanity, pornography and age, region and religion sensitive materials. An internet troubleshooting session was also included to explain the limitations of the wireless technology that was used to fetch the internet. The wireless technology used at the school can get poor signals if the visibility is extremely low. However, because that part of the country receives 300 plus days of sunshine every year, the internet should be fine almost year round. Like other days, this day also concluded with a Q&A session with the teachers.
Day VI:

The sixth training session was a closed one. It was designed to be identical to an open book exam. The teachers had previously taken notes on whatever they had been taught to that point and this session essentially went back and looked into the most important of the topics. To perform this test, 60 questions, more than twice the number of teachers, were put up on the board of a classroom. After that, the teachers were asked to answer at least two questions each verbally so that everyone in the classroom got a revision. Close to 75% of the answers were exactly correct and the rest were very close to correct. Likewise, the teachers were asked to perform certain tasks, one by one, on computer. There were more correct answers in the practical part than the theoretical part of this session. While performing tasks on the computer, 23 out of 25 teachers were correct close to 90% of the time. Before wrapping up for the day, a Q&A session was held which let the teachers ask any and every confusion they had regarding computers. Majority of the questions were regarding what not to do while learning to use computers. From my own experience, the only thing not to do is physical harm to the machine and I shared the same idea with the teachers. From my informal interactions with all the teachers later, most of them seemed to be confident about moving forward with the learning process and were very appreciative of the Q&A session.
Day VII:

The seventh day was the last day I spent in Pokharathok. On this day, I, along with two of the members of Serving Souls Nepal observed the teachers instruct their students about computers. For this practice session, three of us sat on a classroom and asked all the teachers, one by one, to share their knowledge about computers to their [4] students. We did not interfere the session with any kind of questions or answers. Rather, we noted pros and cons of each teacher and discussed about it with them after the session was over. This process, depending on the teacher, took anywhere from 10 minutes to half an hour. I provided them with a lesson plan to teach computer science at beginner’s level. This is the same lesson plan that was followed by my school when I first started learning Computer Science in 3rd grade. I also provided them with a self-instructional kit in Computer Science. The kit was donated by a family friend once they learned about my project. It runs completely in Nepali and was deemed extremely helpful by both the teachers and students.

The seventh day brought an end to the project. However, this was just a pause, almost comparable to a comma in the process of writing and defining a long & prosperous future. It will not be an overstatement to mention that every day I spent in Palpa was full of epiphanies. It was full of realizations as to what should be done next and where my energy should be focused.
Outcomes

The outcomes from this project were visible to me in multiple stages. However, to make things easier to explain, I have divided the outcomes into two stages.

The first stage of the outcome was visible when I was working for the project. As I mentioned earlier, this project was an epiphany for me. While working on the project, I was able to weigh my leadership capabilities. I was able to see how far I had come and what it took me to be able to reach where I was at that moment. I was also able to acknowledge my direct affiliation with HWS Leads. The instructions given during the HWS Leads Reader’s College were not only visible but also extremely helpful. The ability to ask myself questions about what a good leader would do and what I was doing was definitely a direct outcome of what I had learned during my Reader’s College class. I was even more appreciative of the fellowship when I saw my words come into action, saw my dreams turn into reality and experienced a practical implementation of leadership theory and a liberal arts education. The immediate outcome of the project, I would say, was to work as a connecting wire that brought together my past and my present and showed me a direction for the future.

As someone who is interested in the field of Computer Science, I always had a dream of either working for, or starting a tech company in Silicon Valley. However, this project left me with a realization that I have always been interested and invested more in people than machines. As much as I love machines and appreciate them, all my life I have been involved with people oriented activities more. Either it is my involvement with The Red-Cross starting as early as third grade or the successful first step towards the establishment of Technology Resource Center, almost everything I have done with passion has been directed and invested towards people. This
realization was strong enough for me to move out of Computer Science. Because of this, I have completely geared myself towards International Relations with a focus on Global Security, Human Rights and Peace & Conflict Resolution.

Having been through a war for ten long years only to see my own countrymen destroy my country, I had almost given up all the hopes for the future. However, after working to establish libraries I was left with a realization that those dead hopes can indeed be brought back to life and the wounds of the war can slowly be healed. Nevertheless, that still left me confused as to what to do next. The process of establishing the Technology Resource Center was my answer to those questions. Even though there are judicial methods to tackle post-conflict societies, mine was a social experiment far from the books of law and an unintentional project that was meant to bridge the gap of education between a war torn village and metros of the world. Words do not do justice to the amount of positivity this project was able to spread among the residents of Pokharathok. This project has convinced me that social investments might as well be more effective in bringing back the hopes lost because of armed conflict. Moving forward, I have decided to keep myself in the academia and pursue an advanced degree in something associated with the process of injecting and sustaining peace in war torn areas. I have also decided to continue to look into possibilities of opening a non-profit organization that works to uplift the social scenario in war-torn areas around the world.

The second phase of the outcome started to show up once I came back to the US. Halfway through March, I received a call from the Principal of the school in Pokharathok. He informed me that they had just secured a funding from the Ministry of Education to buy another computer for the school. They were able to present my work as an example and argue with the Ministry to support the growth of Technology at their school. This also made them, according to
the Principal, the only community school in the district to be connected to the internet and one of only three schools in the district with computer literates. Once the funding was used to purchase the third computer for the Technology Resource Center, members of Serving Souls Nepal traveled to the school site and helped set up the new computer. According to my information, they currently use one of the computers as a dedicated server and monitor all the activities from there. This has made the monitoring of the internet much better and easier. Likewise, the school administration has decided to dedicate one of the rooms in a building that is currently under construction for the Technology Resource Center. They are building it in a way so that the room can handle at least 15 computers and has readily available accessories to install new computers such as: in-built wall plugs for Ethernet, computer tables, a whiteboard to hold classes, space for projector holder etc.

All in all, I would say, the fellowship, following research, interactions, implementation and following results have been nothing but positive. All of them have contributed heavily and positively towards my experience of recognizing myself as a leader and acknowledging my capabilities. They have played an extremely important role in shaping me and have given a big boost to my positivity. The whole experience has been instrumental in sharpening my skills of patience and appreciation and has also put me in the track I should have long been on. In short, it has showed me a direction for the future.
Future

As an individual, I have always tried my best to see everything around me from a positive perspective. Because of this attitude, the future of Pokharathok, and several other war torn areas of Nepal look positive to me. Going forward from here, I want to apply for another fellowship in near future and expand this particular Technology Resource Center so that it can hold at least 10 computers, hold an HD projector, utilize a dedicated server, and can act as a digital classroom. However, it doesn’t just end here. I have also realized that once the Technology Resource Center becomes complete, it should act as a public information center so that members of community can enjoy the benefits too.

Eventually, I imagine a volunteer program being run via the Center for Global Education in this village where students from HWS can travel to and provide their services during winter break. Currently, Cornell University is the only educational institution in the US that has a formal study-abroad program to Nepal. Even though there are some volunteer programs like Peace Corps that send students to Nepal, there aren’t any that give opportunity to explore the culture and provide service within a short interval of time. Being an innovative liberal arts college with motto of creating Global Citizens and led by President Mark Gearan, who previously served as the director of Peace Corps, I believe there will be a positive response from Hobart and William Smith Colleges for my proposal to create a volunteer program in Nepal, especially Pokharathok. I see a bright future for Pokharathok and I see it becoming an exemplary volunteer village in a global scale.
Photographs

This section contains photographs associated with the project.

Southern face of Vishnu Uchha Madhyamik Vidhyalaya
Early morning view of Pokharathok from the room where the computers are housed.
Me, presenting the goals of the project to students, faculty and board of directors.
Attendees of the installation program. The crowd included students, parents and educators from across the district.
The white device held by a metal rod is the antenna used to connect the school to the internet.
This picture was taken from the roof where the antenna was set up. The town of Tansen, where the internet was being repeated from, is visible on the farthest hill in this picture.
Me, with the installed computers
One of the training sessions in progress.
Expenses

The following table demonstrates the total expenditure of the project.

I was awarded a total of US $1400.00 for the fellowship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the business</th>
<th>Receipt Number</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Total price in Nepali Rupees</th>
<th>Exchange Rate 1 US $ equals</th>
<th>Equivalent in USD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Patan Point Solutions</em></td>
<td>303884532</td>
<td>Desktop Computer Set with: Core i3 Processor, Intel Motherboard, 2GB DDR 3 RAM, 500 GB SATA Hard Drive, Disk Drive, DVD RW Drive, ATX Casing, 18.5 &quot; LED Monitor, Ethernet Cable, DSL Router TPLink N300</td>
<td>2 Sets of Computers</td>
<td>75,200</td>
<td>Rs. 83.75</td>
<td>$897.91</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Narayani Travels</em></td>
<td>133322</td>
<td>Travel Package for 10 days consisting food and lodging service from Kathmandu to Palpa and back</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>25,000.00</td>
<td>Rs. 85.21</td>
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<td><em>Lumbini Net Pvt. Ltd</em></td>
<td>540</td>
<td>Internet Package Purchase with Internet Dish</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>18306</td>
<td>Rs. 83.00</td>
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Notes:

1. The internet at the school was purchased with the help of the fellowship for the first year. After the first year, the school administration has agreed to buy an annual internet package.
2. Serving Souls Nepal is a Non-profit based in Kathmandu, Nepal. I was one of the founders of Serving Souls in 2011 and served as founding Vice President of the organization.
3. A Nepali Keyboard is essentially the regular English keyboard but has both Devanagari and English font printed on the keys. Devanagari is the script used by Nepali language.
4. The school has a provision where around 30 students are assigned to a teacher. The students can be from different grade levels. The teacher acts as an adviser to these students.

To learn more about me or the project:

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