

2014 Plastino Scholars

Summaries for Projects

Becky Bronstein

Jocelyn Moore

Mark Rucci

Elana Berk

Cristian Vitale

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Becky Bronstein
2014 Plastino Scholar Project

Communities Will Power the World: How We Can Harness Each Other's Energy

“Passionate about sustainability and fascinated by community, my Plastino Experience includes visiting several world-renowned communities to explore the most effective themes and characteristics involved with cooperative living. With a 23-pound pack on my back and a passport with empty pages in my hand, I left Newark, New Jersey for Reykjavik, Iceland.” This is an excerpt from Plastino Scholar, Becky Bronstein, who was fortunate to gain insight into sustainable societies of Iceland. Traveling to Solheimar, the “world’s first ecovillage,” Becky interacted with the local people and worked for their environment education services, greenhouse, and bakery. In addition to Iceland, she also visited Scotland, where she worked with the Findhorn Foundation. Through this program she was able to learn more about ecovillages and the community in Iceland. Last, through visiting Kinsale, Ireland, Becky volunteered with the Transition Town Kinsale (TTK) to work on local farms and community shops in an effort to increase the sustainability of the town. Finally, Becky visited the Seneca Treehouse Project in South Carolina to gain an American perspective on cooperative living. This Plastino project created life-long friendships and a learning experience only possible due to the support from the Plastino Scholar’s Program.

Jocelyn Moore
2014 Plastino Scholar Project, Summary

Understanding Freedom Makers: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Inner Workings of Anti-Trafficking Organizations

Plastino Scholar Jocelyn Moore's interest in anti-trafficking stemmed from documentaries, eye-opening videos, and candid testimonies. Wanting more than second-hand views about this issue, Jocelyn designed a Plastino Scholar experience that would put her on the front lines of work with human trafficking victims. Jocelyn's experience began at Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) in New York City where she had first-hand experience with victim care. She learned the importance of words and communities in creating safe havens for survivors. Jocelyn then spent time at the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) where she interviewed staff members and considered legal matters and policy reform issues. She also learned about efforts geared toward prevention. Finally, Jocelyn visited the International Justice Mission (IJM) where she participated in interviews, meetings, presentations, and prayer. Her work with the Government Relations and Advocacy (GRA) department at IJM helped her recognize the power of grassroots advocacy. Finally, Jocelyn arranged a meeting with staff from Senator Chris Coons' office, and Senator Coons ended up signing S1249, the Human Trafficking Prioritization Act. Jocelyn writes that she had never before felt like such an agent of change.

Mark Rucci
2014 Plastino Scholar Project, Summary

Kids Deserve a SNAC: A Path to the Community Eligibility Option

As a Plastino Scholar, Mark Rucci was able to learn how child hunger in poverty-stricken communities impacts education. During his journey, Mark spent time working for low-income schools where he witnessed how hunger can negatively affect a child's ability to learn. From his observations Mark concluded that, "Being fed does not make you a good student, but if your stomach aches, then it is hard to be a good student." Furthermore, Mark traveled to states such as West Virginia, Georgia, Illinois, and Massachusetts, where he interacted with elected officials and learned about Community Eligibility, the governmental program these states have implemented to attenuate these issues. Mark's desire to learn about child hunger in public education systems quickly transpired into advocacy efforts for his home state, New Jersey. In his final statements made following completion of his project he wrote, "I am currently in an ongoing dialogue with officials in the Wildwood Public School District on the implementation strategy for Community Eligibility. I am attempting to address questions related to funding, operations, and program management with the District Superintendent and Senior Business Administrator." Mark hopes that through continuing efforts, he can persuade district officials to implement changes in the financial support allotted for school meal plans, and ultimately abrogate the effects of poverty in New Jersey's public schools.

Plastino Summary
Elana Berk
Beyond the Mesa - 2015

The idea for Beyond the Mesa was inspired by a Santo Domingo artist I met years ago in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He sold exceptionally beautiful silver and stone jewelry outside on a blanket on the ground in front of the Governor's Palace. During one of our casual daily conversations, he mentioned when tourism slows during the off-season, he needed to resort to farming in order to survive. I was absolutely floored. How could someone with so much talent not be able to earn a living? I also wondered how many young Santo Domingo would want to learn silversmithing if it wasn't providing a stable income. I wondered if his jewelry were available for purchase on the internet, surely his talent alone could provide an income year round! With the inspiration and a naive confidence that I could teach internet sales, I submitted my proposal to the Plastino committee. After a seemingly endless series of phone calls and emails, I was eventually connected with Roy Talahaftewa, a world famous Hopi silversmith and teacher to aspiring Hopi artists. On January first, 2015, I was on a plane en route to First Mesa, Hopi, Arizona.

Online business offers an option for anyone to learn traditional art (silversmithing, wood carving, pottery, etc), participate in their culture, speak their language, and most importantly, offer a way to be financially successful while staying on the reservation. I spent everyday meeting one-on-one with artists to photograph and set up a web presence they were comfortable maintaining. The most successful were a group of brothers (about my age) that set their Etsy site and Facebook up with me. They already had the computer skills; they just needed a little push in marketing. I'm incredibly proud to say they made two sales and have nearly 600 likes on Facebook within their first month. These are the people who are keeping Hopi culture alive.

As much as I tried to give in Hopi, I think in the end it was me who received the most. I learned an immeasurable amount about myself, about people, culture and about what's actually important in the vast, colorful, and perplexing tapestry that is life. I am extraordinarily fortunate for the opportunities in my life and I'm excited to venture beyond my own mesa.

Cristian Vitale
2014 Plastino Experience Summary

Finding Power in Powerless Situations: How Cambodian Buddhism Brings Light

After arriving into Phnom Penh I spend my time visiting temples, schools and local markets in an attempt to interact with that come from different social backgrounds. This was important to my research as my work seeks to explore the ways we as human create connections with one another as well as with the ones who has passed away. While in Phnom Penh I also visited islands and mountains that were the home of important Buddhist temples. I made my way into the northwestern region, into Pursat where I was able to visit family run shops. Here artisans sculpted religious images out of stone and wood with minimal tools and space. I was able to learn some techniques about carving both wood and stone. My last few week were spent around Siem Reap and the Angkorian temple complexes, where I was able to study the architecture and reliefs carving styles, while meeting monks and people that shared in their story and relationship to the temples.