

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: POLITICAL ECONOMY, MEDICINE, AND THE PANDEMIC



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I work as an Impact Specialist for Healing Fields Foundation, an NGO that seeds women as health agents of change in India's rural villages. I think about how we scale, evolve, measure, and communicate our impact.

Most of my colleagues come from a health background, so I leave the technicalities of medical determinants of health to their expertise. Where my political economy background serves as a strength is in addressing the social determinants of health. Poverty and lack of agency are cross-cutting challenges, and education in the systems that drive them has allowed me to think strategically about designing solutions that can work at scale.

I structured my activities in and outside of the classroom while at Tulane around environmental justice. It was in this space that I learned how to center the solutions and voices of those most deeply impacted by a problem

I am from Louisiana, but I am not a member of the frontline communities that bear the brunt of industrial development activities in the state. I am a woman, but I do not face the extreme marginalization and lack of resources that those in rural Indian villages experience. I am not directly impacted, but I can support and uplift those who are. The construction of the Bayou Bridge Pipeline (the final leg of the pipeline that initiated the Standing Rock protests) was underway while I was completing my studies. I was active in community organizing and protest activities. At the same time, we were learning about the political and economic patterns behind Louisiana's Cancer Alley and other environmental justice tragedies in my classes. Through internships with the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic and the Gulf Restoration Network (now Healthy Gulf), I experienced engaging in these battles through institutions. In both public health and environmental justice, change requires resources and tools that may not be abundant in the affected communities but can be catalyzed by organizations. This is where I see scope for hard work on the part of allies and institutions.

I came to Hyderabad, India for a year-long internship at the organization where I currently work through a serendipitous and somewhat random combination of contacts and events. After that year, I took a position at The Energy and Resources Institute in New Delhi to return to what I saw as my "real passion": environmental work.

When Healing Fields called at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, needing all hands on deck to address the unfolding public health and humanitarian crisis, I answered. An unprecedented global health crisis was an extremely difficult time to have unprecedented personal responsibility for leading interventions. I was under-qualified and overwhelmed.

I discovered that in addressing deep global challenges, emotion and commitment are as crucial as any skills and qualifications. Traditional academia and institutions ask us to be highly skilled and rigorous in the application of objectivity, logic, and evidence towards a goal. I frequently fall short. I find a deeper understanding when approaching analysis through an emotional lens. I was lucky to have professors in my political economy courses and professional mentors who validated and celebrated that approach. Now I work building health ecosystems through empowered women in some of the poorest and most secluded villages of India. This goal feels both totally impossible and completely necessary. The knife-edge of can't and must is a difficult place to balance. Objective and logical analysis would leave me stuck in the impossible, unable to make a difference. Deep emotional understanding of the work opens up the stamina and creativity necessary to find new paths. Joy, anger, grief, and love build the communities and solutions that can move us into the future.