During the summer of 2009, I had the great honor and privilege to travel to the Kingdom of Bhutan where I served as an intern with the United Nations Development Programme. It was here that I really began to understand myself as a professional and as a person dedicated to international development. Not only did I have the chance to serve the United Nations and the great country of Bhutan, but also to create lasting memories and an eternal sense of self in a profession which can sweep one away by the strength of its current.

This internship has had major impacts on my academic, professional, and personal life. Academically, I have had the opportunity to see international relations theories put in practice. Professionally, I participated in the day-to-day processes of running a UNDP Country Office. Personally, I found a country in which I would be honored to work. My internship with UNDP Bhutan helped me to cement my personal and professional goals while giving me practical experience in international development.

As a student, I have taken my studies very seriously. I read every article assigned and think critically about theories presented. Unfortunately, this can make international relations seem very impractical. Working at UNDP Bhutan helped to actualize theories. I had the opportunity to apply what I learned in class to the practical environment and really began to understand how important it is to learn the theories and frameworks of IR. By having this internship, my second year in the Whitehead Program has been more informative and practical than the first merely because I can refer back to this experience.

Professionally, I learned about the type of work I wish to do. Even in the realm of international relations there are numerous organizations, programs, and topics. I had the privilege to focus my work in Bhutan on violence against women, which is supremely important and interesting to me. However, I also learned that working in a field office can be much like working in a headquarters. There is no implementation done by UNDP Bhutan, and therefore much of the work there is budgeting and coordination. If you imagine development work as passing bags of grain to starving children, that is a merely a romanticized view of what development can be—intense and productive, but often monotonous office work.

Personally, I had a life changing experience in Bhutan. I learned how to relax in my work, which is something I could never do before. While I am still efficient and diligent, I learned to leave work in the office. The Bhutanese are incredibly relaxed and stress-free. I took up meditation and find it helps focus me in other aspects, including my work life.
I also fell in love with the country. It is in an incredible transition as a new democracy. People are discussing government, rights, education, and welfare. They are still interested in parliament and voter turnout was 80 percent in the first election. They are testing democracy but the citizens still love and respect their king. This is very interesting for me as a student of international relations and as a citizen of a country which is still attempting to disengage from apathy. The Bhutanese government has an innovative way of approaching development which places happiness above income. While the policy of Gross National Happiness isn’t perfect, it is a beautiful ideal to which all countries should strive. The people of Bhutan are friendly and helpful; they know what is important in life, and I learned a great deal from them. It is certain that if I have the opportunity to return to this last kingdom of the Himalaya, I will.

Over my three months in Bhutan I grew in so many ways. I had the chance to perform research in a professional venue, which taught me about report writing and interviewing. I took responsibility for editing a major report, which helped me to build confidence in my own abilities. I took initiative to contact local organizations which brought me to volunteer at RENEW, a Bhutanese organization for battered women. Personally, I came back to myself. I felt more grounded there and much more prepared to venture out into the work force. Although I am older than many graduate students, and I have had professional experiences, I feel that my time in Bhutan actually defined me as a professional. I learned how I want to work and what I am passionate about. I learned how to balance work and life and to integrate the two. Above all, I learned the importance of breathing in and out all day long and being gentle with yourself in every task. Anyone who knows me will understand that this is the biggest lesson of all.

In working at UNDP, I gained more than knowledge of international organizations at the country level. I also learned about myself as a student, as an employee, and as a person. I discovered a renewed love of women’s issues and had the opportunity to work practically on these issues. I discovered for myself a country which I didn’t know before and met people who understand the importance of living life to the fullest. I learned who I am and what I need to do to become more myself. These are the accomplishments which matter the most, and these are the things which will most inform my academic, professional, and personal life for years to come.