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**Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship 2011-2012**  
Scholarship Final Report, District 7230- District 1250

*“There’s no one thing that is true. They’re all true.” – Ernst Hemingway*

To be honest, when I first set off for England, I was not really sure that I *wanted* to be there. I knew it made sense intellectually, and surely I was grateful – with the travel ban on Madagascar, it really would be the ideal way to honor to my commitments. I felt humbled to be able to study alongside Madagascar’s foremost conservation hero, Alison Jolly, who paved the way for international involvement, as Madagascar’s first foreign researcher in 1963. And I knew that I was incredibly fortunate to be sponsored to pursue a master’s degree in International Education and Development under leading academics in my field. But I had no idea that my experience with Rotary would change *me* forever.

I was a bit exhausted after five years of fighting to get back to Madagascar, and began to believe that this was yet another of my wild leaps into the unknown without any sight of Madagascar. I was even heartbroken to leave teaching—the idea of a year away from children terrified me. So I set one foot before the other, since, with that momentary loss of balance is the physical reminder that life is still moving forward. Thankfully, those steps were no longer only *my dream*, but because of Rotary, became my responsibility. And because of Rotary, I could see that this platform was not there for me to represent myself, but to become a voice for others: in Madagascar, New York, and now England.

Being in the right place at the right time has a lot to do with this story. Once I arrived in England, education seemed to finally be on the Madagascar conservation agenda. Alison Jolly and I were able to pull together the first conference for Madagascar’s environmental education (with representatives from about twenty groups, including UNICEF), hosted by my MA program, and concluding with the formation of an official alliance in the capital of Madagascar. I was later invited to lead a seminar on environmental education for the Primate Conservation MSc at Oxford Brookes University. I then received a fellowship on behalf of a fellow course-mate to do her summer research in Madagascar. And with the travel ban released, I too, made it to Madagascar to pursue my summer research. After two months in the field (as opposed to the recommended two weeks) with surprising turns every step of the way, I was floored to break away from my thesis with a solid ‘A’.

Those were the clear and tangible academic gains that any scholar would hope to achieve, but it’s actually those slightly less tangible things that really changed me as a person. As I slowly stopped wondering whether the obstacles would fade away, I eventually came to learn that these are my obstacles, I chose them, and it’s because of the Rotary that I may have the space and credibility to face these challenges not just for a year, but possibly a lifetime. Each time I got up in front of a group of Rotarians, I was reminded that I had friends cheering on my success that I had never met, and how incredibly lucky was I to have a captive audience to share with and renew my dedication to Madagascar. My goals for Madagascar no longer belonged to me alone, but began to acquire countless allies.

It began to dawn on me what a serious responsibility it is to represent views on my host and sponsor countries. As for Madagascar, I already felt all too sensitive to the reality that my representation of the country could open doors for exploitation, or even lead others to conclude that challenges are beyond hope. My words became carefully chosen, and I began to appreciate that diplomacy is not in hiding the truth, but telling all truths in a way that honors those lives that lead these new hopes and challenges to the periphery. It became clear that the only way to represent a place with authenticity would be through sharing the story of my growing relationship and perspective within these living places.

Until living in England, I knew it for its quaintness, charming accents, and rich histories. Living in the youthful seaside city of Brighton, I found that it was breathing life like any other place that I have ever lived, and my experiences would not be defined by its historic sites, but in subtle nuances that would shape its daily movement. I found myself talking less, saying more, while still finding the friendly coffee shop owner good for daily check-ins, the instant best mate with her infectious energy and open mindset, and the subtle change from coffee to tea or brunch to English breakfast that would orient daily life. England, like all the places that I lived in over the last six years, also came to be about education in Madagascar – learning the roots of its past and planning for its future.

I also came to appreciate New York in a way I had never been able to. Rotary audiences would offer enthusiasm, ready for an exciting account of the famously viewed sites and sounds. But I only really knew of the life that responds to that New York, the daily lives that are shaped by it. I noticed that despite many years trying to find refuge away from the *idea* of New York, it was a part of my identity, particularly my imagination that holds firmly to the idea that anything is possible. I began to appreciate New York as the teacher that showed me to face the world, responding to its chaos with creative resiliency. For the first time, I could see that even when I leave it, I am and always will be a New Yorker.

Rotary became a platform for becoming a voice for those often unheard. My talks would draw attention to missing voices from the Madagascar community. Through my growing relationships with these places, I would try to contextualize the role of the international community in defining the educational opportunities for the Malagasy people to be able to care for their future. Since the premise for decades of foreign involvement has been rooted in the idea that the Malagasy people are committing “ecological suicide”, I would try to deconstruct the myth that it is a choice and offer insights on communities’ interest and capabilities to participate in creating a healthy and more sustainable Madagascar.

I spent much of this year actively trying to open the space for local involvement, through diplomatic engagement across fields, namely: conservation, education and development. By bringing fields together for much needed exchange and dialogue, we built friendship across interdependent fields that traditionally function in isolation. While conservation education efforts have existed across the island, many have been informed by biology over social science, leading many conservationists to see education as a weak investment, and more of a publicity tool than a transformational one. As I encountered obstacles and tensions, I approached the Madagascar world as a Rotary Scholar, by living the four-way test, to help in navigating the advancement of world understanding, goodwill and peace.

As an ambassador of goodwill, I had the privilege to straddle across fields. This summer in Madagascar, I studied a new initiative that partners UNICEF with conservation sites to support an empowered youth network for conservation. While ideologically, partners were enthusiastic about this new bridge, in practice, neither UNICEF nor my study site could envision a thorough approach to actualize these goals – assuming the other was denying the expertise and commitment necessary to make these programs succeed. Since this emergent bridge is the area of my expertise, I found myself in an unusual position to negotiate across both partners and open a constructive dialogue on missing engagement from all ends, while drawing in background to reinforce that these goals are achievable. Being aligned but not employed by both the education and conservation communities, I offered neutrality, and gratefully attribute my power in these conversations to the Rotary.

These conversations were informed by ongoing dialogue with the Malagasy education director, who called me his granddaughter and put his hope for Madagascar in my hands. We developed an incredible bond, which often led to his tears over finding a real ally. This education director, Florent, was in the hospital during the inception of the UNICEF model, and his wisdom will be key to approaching a well-rooted adaptation plan. He is centrally responsible for the social mission of this rainforest park, and has seen the value of local involvement for bridging conservation and sustainable development, well before the world was ready for it. He changed my life, and by imagining lofty ideas and being his voice, I know that I changed his. Since we began working together he could feel his energy coming back, and I have heard his health is noticeably better than in many years.

Rotary supports scholars for their capacity to contribute to goodwill in the world. What other organization is a social network willing to develop your legitimacy, in order to help you contribute to global goodwill with friendship and exchange, instead of competition? The Ambassadorial Scholarship felt like a shield of invincibility to pursue goodwill and platform voices that should be heard, and form my perspective and professional identity. The Rotary mission, the four-way test, and the philosophy on the worthiness of all fields became the fundamental pillars that gave way to any of my accomplishments this year.

In Madagascar, there is an old proverb: be like the chameleon, look forward but observe behind. It is about the chameleon that used to win all the races, and as the other animals noticed his success, they painted glue to the track, and ever since the chameleon began to move as it really does, which is why its eyes can observe behind, while looking ahead. As my leverage among influential outlets became more and more public, so did insincerity that I would encounter in newly competitive colleagues. But because of Rotary, I had the public platform and allies I needed to work towards goodwill without losing any footing.

The orientation and materials offer a strong comprehensive view of the responsibilities in becoming a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar. I am especially grateful for the Scholar Link Weekend in the United Kingdom, for the opportunity to spend time with fellow scholars and discover what commonalities we all had as scholars. However, while I felt prepared for my diplomatic role, I hope the Rotary will better prepare future scholars to deal with the lack of diplomacy sometimes faced on the other end – particularly regarding gender.

It was uncomfortable to confront the inappropriate comments and suggestions, especially given the scholar's core responsibility to build friendship across districts as a gracious guest. I would often encounter homophobia after mentioning my residing city in England. I would love for training to pay greater attention to gender, and encourage both male and female scholars to elucidate for Rotary audiences how their scholarship journey reflects and even furthers the Rotary, rather than charm audiences with 'cute' culture markers. Perhaps, the host counselors can also receive a cultural and gender sensitivity training.

To any scholar, I would advise them to take advantage of the opportunity to visit clubs and accept speaking invitations, as it can thoroughly transform every part of their life. And I recommend they say something, not that sounds convincing or heartwarming, but that thing that hits them in the heart and makes them vulnerable, terrified and inspired. And regardless of the people in the room, a Rotary Ambassador should pay diplomatic respect to the people whose careers opened doors for their global outlook. Their audience is also worthy of gratitude, as it is a great privilege to have the Rotary behind you. And if a scholar can do it with cultural sensitivity, spirit and sincerity, I think they should be set.

As for me, this is only the beginning of my story. After returning to District 7230, I have been active in events – talking to inbound scholars about giving talks at their orientation, attending Rotary UN Day, and spending a fair amount of meetings with my sponsor club, as well as beginning to give return talks to other clubs in the district, including Rotaract. Since the fall, I have also been following up on my thesis findings with various parties. And I just returned from a week in England where I attended graduation, gave a guest lecture, and began seriously plotting the next major moves in my Madagascar journey. No longer just my dream, I end this year a member of an idyllic professional community.

I would love for the Rotary to continue to be a part of our next steps in Madagascar. We are currently planning a literacy project to root community involvement in conservation and sustainable development at the local level, through intergenerational exchange and educational training for children's clubs, youth leadership, teacher training, and youth-led action research. The hope is to bridge scientific and local knowledge with a synergetic exchange of perspectives through stories from both the elders and scientific community. Non-western views on the environment are rarely included in environmental education, and honoring multiple views for ecological identity will help root involvement locally.

The Rotary has set the foundation for my life around a core of friendship and exchange. Thank you to all for a life-changing year. And particular thanks to my host counselor, Jim Hatfield and his wife, Jean Hatfield, for sharing their quirky lens on England, kindly taking me into their family and world, and generously supporting my many roles all year.

For photo documentation of my year with the Rotary and details on my accomplishments as an Ambassadorial Scholar, please visit: <http://daniellagoestobrighton.wordpress.com>

*Warm Rotary Regards,*  
Daniella Rabino