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## Self-Preparation: From New England to the Mississippi Delta

Emily C. Wojtusik  
University of Rhode Island, EWojtusik@gmail.com

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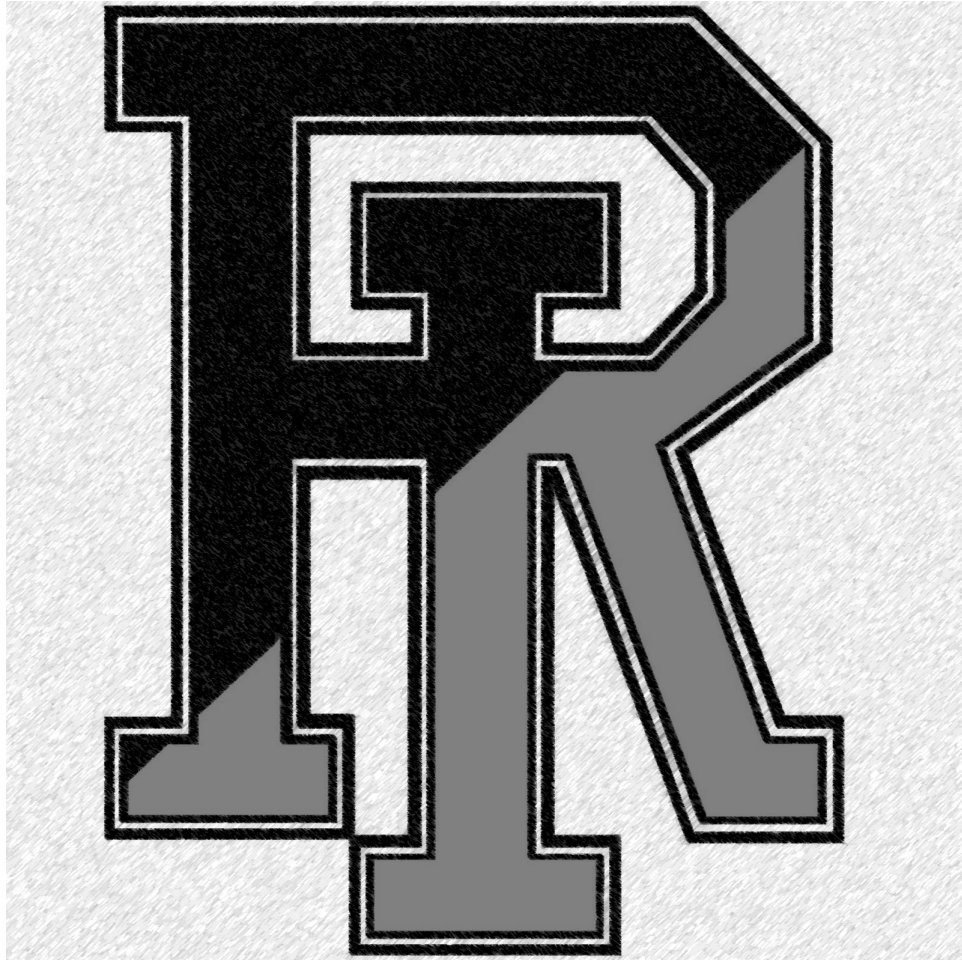
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*Senior Honors Project*



*University of Rhode Island*  
*Emily Wojtusik*

Personal Introduction

Emily C. Wojtusik

# *“Be The Change You Wish To See In The World” -Gandhi*

At the start of my Honors Project I was all over the place trying to decide where I wanted to focus my research. When I was accepted into Teach for America, I visited Carolyn Hames, once again and tried to figure out how I could incorporate my upcoming transition. After meeting with Carolyn, I then set up a meeting with Gail Faris, my unwavering faculty advisor, who saw me through all of my changing project ideas, agreeing to help me through each and every one of them. Gail and I together worked through all the bumps in the road; to formatting and set up, down to the last few weeks of emailing back and forth while I attempted to interpret all the material. The end product was more than I could have hoped for. In reading through this portfolio you will gain insight into the lives of some very unique people whom I interviewed, as well as my subsequent reaction to each and every one of their responses. The final product involves a power point that I used to present my project at the Senior Honors Research Conference. I hope that you enjoy the work as much as I enjoyed completing it.

How The Idea Began:  
*My Acceptance into Teach for America*

1. *Letter of Intent*

2. *Resume*

The coursework I have experienced throughout my undergraduate career at the University of Rhode Island has helped me to develop a deep self-awareness of the different types of disparities that occur throughout the United States as well as in other countries. I chose to apply for Teach for America because of its mission towards ending the inequality that exists within our public education system. My pathway towards service and activism at URI began with political science courses on urban problems, sociology courses on sex and gender, class and power, as well as crime and delinquency, and juvenile justice. Last spring, I was chosen to participate in the honor's colloquium entitled, 'Classroom Without Borders', which broadened my horizons to service opportunities after college. Currently, I'm enrolled in an independent study as a teaching assistant for Sociology 100, and next semester I will be completing my senior honor's project entitled, 'Service-Learning & Activism at URI'. After graduating in May, I hope that my pathway will persist onward by taking part in Teach for America.

Through Teach for America I would hope to accomplish creating a difference in children's lives in regards to their education. Many of my teachers throughout middle school and onwards into high school and now college have inspired me to develop a passion for schoolwork and learning. Aside from simply learning the importance of studying, my professors have also helped me to develop civic responsibility, and to understand my own potential to create change in the world, even if its in small amounts. It has thus become one of my goals to give this experience to the generations younger than me in the form of education. I have noticed what a gift it is to be allowed to mentor and teach others while working as a teaching assistant, and holding small review and study sessions for those who need extra help. I feel that within Teach for America I would be able to accomplish change through education, and continue to learn and grow from the experience while doing so.

If chosen to participate in Teach for America I would determine my success if my students developed higher views and values in their education by the end of the school year. I would also determine success by whether or not I feel that I did my best to create a positive change in the community in which I was working in. In volunteering for Habitat for Humanity in Birmingham, AL very far from my hometown in Connecticut, I learned the value of service work, and the amount it can impact others' lives in immense

ways. After I completed my two with Teach for America I would plan to continue my pathways towards remaining a leader and mentor for the youth in America hoping to make a positive impact on the remaining disparities in our public education system as well as our juvenile criminal justice system.

*Emily Wojtusik*

101 Baldwin Drive Bristol, CT 06010

Phone: (860) 424-7689 Email: EWojtusik@gmail.com

## EDUCATION

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- University of Rhode Island:** Kingston, RI **May 2011**
- **G.P.A.:** 3.5/4.0
  - **University of Rhode Island Honors Program**
    - Requirements to Graduate with Honors: Complete coursework at 100 level, 200 level (Honor's Colloquium), 300 level, 400 level (Senior Seminar), & Senior Honor's Project (Independent Research Project w/ Faculty Sponsor)
  - **Alpha Kappa Delta:** International Sociology Honor Society
    - Requirements: Cumulative G.P.A.: 3.4, Top 35% of University Class
  - **Golden Key Honor Society Invitation:**
    - Membership pending | Requirement: Top 15% of University Class

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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- Teach for America Summer Institute:** Cleveland, MS **Summer 2011**
- During the 5-week intensive training program, corps members stay at Delta State University and teach in one of our partner districts in Bolivar, Coahoma, Quitman, Sunflower, or Washington Counties. During this time they write daily objective driven lesson plans, teach summer school classes, and engage in a large scale of professional development activities, including seminars, discussion groups, workshops, and individual and group reflections under the direct supervision of veteran teachers from those respective school and experienced Teach for America staff members. Corps members receive feedback and improve on a daily basis.
- Introduction to Sociology 100 Teaching Assistant:** University of Rhode Island **Fall 2010**
- Oversee/facilitate 50-55 students during class group work
  - Hold office hours to meet with students, administer exams, or complete grading assignments
  - Hold group review sessions weekly for students who need extra assistance with class materials

## WORK EXPERIENCE

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- St. Mary's Hospital:** Waterbury, CT **May 2008- Present**
- Internship as Security Trainee: Summer '08 | Certified by State/Permanent Position Fall '08
- Patrol hospital grounds | Respond to codes/alarms within the hospital | Ensure safety of the parking lots/garages | Monitor entrance/waiting areas in the Emergency Department
- Pier One Imports:** Bristol, CT **Sept 2005- Feb 2008**
- Sales Associate
- Maintain and restock inventory | Customer service | Cashier | Greet customers at the entrance | Set-up/Take-down displays | Opening and closing duties alongside manager on duty
- Wojtusik's Nursery & Garden Center** **May 2004- Sept 2007**
- Sales Associate
- Maintain and restock inventory | Customer service | Cashier | Answer phones | Water greenhouse | Amateur florist arrangements | Display set-up and take-down

## COMMUNITY SERVICE EXPERIENCE

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- Habitat for Humanity:** Birmingham, AL **Spring 2010**
- Group Reflection Leader (Classroom without Borders)
- Friends Way Bereavement Center:** Warwick, RI **Fall 2008**
- The center provides peer support groups for grieving children, teens, young adults, and their families
- Volunteered in support groups with the program facilitators

## SKILLS/HOBBIES

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**Cheerleading:** I was a cheerleading throughout middle school, and high school, on school, and competitive teams, as well as a cheerleader for 3 years in college.

## REFERENCES

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Gail Faris, University of Rhode Island Professor | Director of Women's Center: Kingston, RI



Phone: (401) 874-5464 | Email: GailFaris@uri.edu

Mark Casey, St. Mary's Hospital | Director of Safety, Security & Emergency Preparedness: Waterbury, CT  
Phone: (203) 709-6459 | Email: M.Casey@stmh.org

Step One:  
*Application for Project Approval*

## *Supporting Documentation*

I am prepared to complete this Senior Honors Project with the assistance and guidance of my University of Rhode Island sponsor, Professor Gail Faris, as well as Professor Pisa. My project, currently titled, "My Journey Towards the Mississippi Delta" has been formulated as a direct result of my personal experience here at URI. These experiences are from, both from my current and previous coursework, as well as other student involvement groups listed below.

### **HPR 110: Nonviolence & Peace Studies**

- This was the first honors course I enrolled in at URI. It opened my eyes to awareness of options that were out there for me as a student, after I graduated such as the Peace Corp., Americorp, Teach for America, etc. It also educated me in regards to the types of trips and clubs that the university offers for students, which allow them to experience service and learning objectives alongside their professors.

### **HPR 119: Death & Dying in the Lives of Children & Adolescents**

- This particular course broached a subject that I had not previously encountered in school. It also opened my eyes to the types of sensitive subject matter that can be approached in a classroom setting, given the right atmosphere and personal group of students. It also involved volunteering at Friends Way, a bereavement center for children. This helped me to gain an awareness of how education and active participation can be partnered together.

### **HPR 107: Power of the Word**

- Professor Karen de Bruin and Reverend Sharon Key did a phenomenal job with this course. It created a creative process within myself that I never knew was possible, and gave way to emotions that I have never experienced within a classroom setting. Although the subjects we studied were not necessarily personal for me, i.e. The Holocaust, Rwandan Genocide, personal stories of prisoners in U.S. Prisons, etc. we were able to put ourselves into other shoes, and experience, in a lesser degree, how people could have felt. This course inspired me to always try to understand how others are feeling, what they are going through, even if I do not feel I can relate at first. It inspired me to look beyond academia at times, and seek a deeper awareness in each subject I study.

### **HPR 202S: Honors Colloquium: Classroom Without Borders**

- This course fully embodied a service-learning method of teaching. We spent the weeks leading up to Spring Break learning about poverty, education, social change, leadership models, the civil rights movement, etc. until we volunteered in Birmingham, AL with Habitat for Humanity. This experience is what led me towards becoming an active citizen, motivated towards social change, especially in relation to education. It gave me an awareness of myself, my goals, and ideas for my honors project, as well as an ability to see my own potential for change in the world. After spending time in Alabama, it also gave me the confidence, during the Teach for America application process, when picking my preferred regions to look towards areas of the south, i.e. Mississippi Delta, Alabama, Oklahoma, etc.

### **Sociology 100 Teaching Assistant:**

- As a senior sociology major I never realized what a rewarding experience it would be as a teaching assistant for a large section of Sociology 100. It gave me a new perspective to be a part of a course that I have previously taken, and be able to observe the study of sociology for the first time. Professor Pisa introduces topics such as gender identity, authenticity, social facts and norms, etc. some of which many of the incoming freshman have never previously discussed in a classroom. It was in this course that I began to research Teach for America, Americorp, the Peace Corp, etc. Ultimately, choosing to apply to Teach for America, and being chosen to become part of the 2011 Corp.

# *My Journey Towards the Mississippi Delta*

## **Background:**

- Basically, I have been recently accepted into the Teach for America 2011 Corp, in the Mississippi Delta teaching elementary education, K-8. I have grown up in New England, namely Connecticut, and have attended the University of Rhode Island for the past 4 years. After certain coursework at URI, especially my participation in Classroom Without Borders, I felt comfortable being placed in a Southern state, very different from my hometown. However, there is much that I wish to know before I arrive there for institute in June, and to begin teaching in my own classroom in August.
- The subject will be focused around social and political change, service-learning, and education both current and in the past in the Mississippi Delta region.

## **Aims & Objectives:**

- Four Components/Questions to the Project:
  1. How do URI students who have been in service-learning courses such as Classroom Without Borders, link their academic experience to their service experience especially as it relates to social and political action?
  2. What do current 2<sup>nd</sup> year Teach for America corp members working in the Mississippi Delta region report on the social and political aspects of their time and work in the Delta?
  3. What do native Mississippians and present Rhode Islanders, namely Melvin Wade, and Donald Cunnigan, report as to their personal, social and cultural experiences in Mississippi or specifically the Mississippi Delta?
  4. What is the Mississippi Delta looking for in Teach for America corp members? What is the geographic, historic, political, social, and educational climate of the Delta today? What is my role in the Delta and how has my URI education prepared me for that role?

## **Rationale:**

- College has been a building block in my life. It has been an experience that has lead me towards the development of my autonomous self, and has helped me to recognize a moral obligation to my community, not namely my hometown, but throughout the United States, within my field of study. I wish to gain information through this project, as it develops, to help me become educated and prepared to my best ability, allowing myself to become fully immersed in all aspects of the Mississippi Delta region.

## **Procedures:**

- Meetings: I have been meeting with my two sponsors for my project, Professor Faris, and Professor Pisa.
- Library Research: I have been doing background research in order to prepare properly for my interviews both with TFA corp members, as well as professors and those involved in programs at URI, who are native to Mississippi.

- Interviews: I will create semi-structured interviews conducted informally to those who are native to Mississippi and currently live in Rhode Island, as well as 2<sup>nd</sup> year corp members currently working for TFA in Mississippi.
- Field Work: Most of the field work is described briefly above in relation to the interviews I will be conducting, which will then be used as qualitative research methods in this project.

#### **Availability of Resources:**

- So far, all of my resources have been accessible, and seem to be attainable.

#### **Progress to Date:**

- So far, I have been meeting with both Professor Faris, as well as, Professor Pisa in developing the guidelines and components of the project.
- I have been communicating with Teach for America staff, and am beginning to set up current corp members that are willing to be interviewed for my project.
- I am also beginning to develop interview questions, both for Melvin Wade and Donald Cunnigan, as well as the TFA corp members. I am aware that I wish to gain information surrounding political and social change, and therefore am working to complete a set of interview questions, etc.
- Also, I am looking into recommended literature, or autobiographies on the area as background information into the region.

#### **Value of the Project:**

- This project will set me up for the future. URI has given me to motivation to strive towards applying for Teach for America, and now it will also help to be the most prepared that I can be upon graduation to continue my journey into teaching in a region so different from my hometown. I feel that additionally, I wish to obtain my masters degree in Criminology and Social Change and work with at risk juveniles, within the juvenile justice system. This knowledge regarding service-learning leadership methods and understanding how students make connections between readings and service is a tool I will treasure throughout my career, and life. My coursework at URI, and my professors who have encouraged me towards activism, social justice, and civic engagement have helped me to define/outline my goals for the future. In gaining a better understanding of that process, as well as first-hand information about the social and political action in the Delta, I can hopefully do the same for others.

## Step Two: Interviews

1. *Interview with Melvin Wade*
2. *Interview with TFA Alumni*
  - *Andy Malone*
  - *James Bacon*
  - *Sarah Franzen*
  - *Anonymous*
3. *Interview with Wendi Goodlin-Fahncke*

# Melvin Wade

## Background/Childhood:

Melvin grew up in Greenville, MS, part of the Mississippi Delta region. Both his parents were from Mound Bayou, his father from the Northern section, and his mother from the more Southern region. His mother's grandmother insisted she attend school there because at the time it was the best education that was available for African Americans. He remembers visiting his parents' hometown frequently as a child, and viewed it as a place of happiness, it was essentially a 'vacation spot' to him. He also commented, that although he was too young to fully understand the meaning behind the segregation that he lived in, Mound Bayou, unlike Greenville, had a black mayor. Melvin commented, 'there was something about going to a town during segregation where there was a black mayor'. He felt that some of his best childhood memories occurred on his grandparents land in Mound Bayou.

As a child Melvin was identified among his classmates as well as his parents, his mother being a teacher, and his father a printer, as being intelligent. He began participating in spelling bees and won 1<sup>st</sup> place three times in a row, at which time they informed him, he was no longer eligible to compete. This was upsetting, and discouraging, because not only was he succeeding but there was money given as a prize making it very competitive among the students involved. [This is almost like certain issues in education today... Teach for America stresses that it is not only important to teach children the material but also to teach in a way that highlights their success; i.e. setting goals that are achievable, and not only relying on standardized testing methods to determine whether one is successful or not.]

Melvin talked about how his parents when he was growing up chose to keep him sheltered, and didn't tell him 'ya know boy, you could die acting that way...'. He didn't necessarily realize at a young age what was going on in the black communities as far as lynch mobs, etc., which were rampant at the time in many areas in the Delta. He reflected on how, often, as a student he was encouraged by his teachers, who reinforced that he was a smart boy. He therefore did not understand why if he was so smart, he wasn't on the same level as everyone else, but mainly the white people. He stated a time in particular where he was with his mother in a store on a predominantly white shopping district, and she was very nervous buying him a suit. He got yelled at by her because he refused to keep the suit buttoned the way the clerk insisted; this he explained to me was when began to recognize the differences although it was never directly discussed in his family, or at school. [Possibly a follow up question could be to ask if you think that this type of sheltered community still exists in the Delta region? I know that it may be a stigma that people who often live in very small towns or communities are not aware of what is going on in other areas, but in some areas this may still rein true. Are people anxious to try and get out and move on, or are they unable to do so, or do not wish to do so?]

## Social & Political Aspects of the Delta:

There was much propaganda going on throughout the Delta, and the people who were behind it unfortunately were often times Police and Sheriffs who were members of the Citizen's Council and other organizations who would terrorize blacks and create an atmosphere of constant fear. The white population who were moderates, were influenced by the propaganda and movies such as the 'birth of a nation', which influenced them to no longer take any chances supporting the black movement out of fear that they too would face violent consequences, or they were convinced/brainwashed into thinking the messages that these tactics put out were indeed true. [These militant



ways that were often times started by radical groups, but also became commonplace for the police, are still seen in our society today through racial profiling tactics, the disparities in sentencing as well as in the general percentages of the prison population, not only in MS but in the US.]

Melvin reflected that although it is not always stated, AL and MS had by far the hardest time enforcing the laws that first freed the slaves, and later banned segregation. He revealed that MS did not see itself as part of the union, and believed that they had a right to continue to make their own laws, no matter how different they were from the federal rulings. Most of the areas did not have any African Americans in prominent positions such as mayor, etc, except for a few towns such as Mound Bayou, and therefore had no representation even in areas where they were the majority. There was no outside help to enforce this either.

When Melvin left Greenville in the mid 1960's it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city in MS, and unfortunately it seemed that under segregation in some ways it was better for African Americans than afterwards. He reflected that Nelson Street declined, where there were predominantly black businesses, and Washington Street continued to prosper where the white businesses were located. Greenville more recently has fallen on hard times, and the whites are the only ones who are able to get out of the area, making the poverty even greater among the African Americans who are left behind. He said that looking back these hard times were 'forecasted' when he was young; thinking back there was a railroad that was built through the town, and an air force base, when both of these became obsolete, so did the area. Today, they rely on agriculture, and somewhat on gambling. The area remains about 70-80% African American. [It's almost as though the poverty becomes a never ending cycle because the only people that begin to prosper get out of the area as fast as possible, not contributing to any success but rather continuing to leave behind those who are unable to rise above all the challenges they face.]

### **Past >> Becomes the Present:**

Melvin spoke about how the past, the slave era, the Jim Crow era, the civil rights movement, segregation, leads into the present day and translates very closely for black and white southerners. He stated how when I am there, if I pay attention to people, and the way they speak and address one another, especially those who are older generations the dialect is still there... whether it is using first names, or last names, or using ma'am or sir, etc. Many people are still rooted in the language and dialect they were forced to use when they were growing up throughout the segregated, and Jim Crow era. [This is a fascinating concept to look for when I am down in MS, although the history and respect that it is rooted in lies within slave-owning times, the fact that it is present in society today even in a small part, is somewhat maddening.]

Melvin also mentioned neo-segregation, which is evident in society today in the Delta region as well as here in the North. He stated that the private school system began as a way for white people to beat the integration in the school systems, and essentially maintain their children's education. Today, this is still true of the private school systems, where in MS outperform all the public schools by large margins. This separation that began right after integration never really ended, and these schools are still predominantly white whereas the public schools are predominantly black. Even at Ole Miss, they fought to try and change the name of the school mascot, which is the Rebels, and I believe it failed in doing so. Places outside the Delta are not so enclosed by poverty, or closed off from the outside so to speak. Areas like Biloxi are large tourist locations, due to the concerts, festivals, and the beaches. Greenville, and the

surrounding areas do not have any pull, although there is potential the drive behind it is not pursued and unfortunately most who leave the area, do not return.

### **Who Made All the Difference?:**

'Everyone in there life has angels,' he told me. He said that one of his was his mother's grandmother because she convinced my mother that education was important and made sure that she went to the best school system at the time in Mound Bayou. Another person was Mr. Bacon, a friend of his uncles (who attended Alcorn and later the University of Nebraska and became the most prominent black attorney in Tulsa, OK at the time). Mr. Bacon was a county extension agent (they went county to county, neighborhood to neighborhood, to teach lifestyle and survival values such as new farming techniques, or child-rearing tactics, and nutrition, etc). He knocked on the door on a Saturday, and then later on the window and woke Melvin up. He told him that his father had given him permission to bring him with him, they went to a Mound Bayou (his parents' hometown) and to a Masonic lodge where he met members of the oldest African American fraternity. His uncle was a member and so was Mr. Bacon, and today so is Melvin. He showed him what brotherhood meant, and taught him how the word 'brother' should be used in a fraternal way. Mr. Bacon brought Melvin to take entrance exams, and taught him to be observant. He made a lasting impression, and changed his entire perspective by showing so much faith in him.

Ultimately, Mr. Bacon was responsible for getting Melvin to and from exams, and meetings, and influential in getting him a scholarship to attend Oklahoma State University. There was an article written about him in the Delta Democratic Times, and as a result the newspaper issued him a scholarship as well. He reflected on Mr. Bacon's sense of community obligation, and how great his faith in Melvin impressed on him a positive sense of himself. Less than 5 other people from his high school class left the state, aside from the ones who left due to athletic purposes.

The notion of giving back, Mr. Bacon, gave that to Melvin and 'it is a gift that still impresses upon me today'. 'You can make a difference in so many ways,' Melvin tells me, Mr. Bacon may never have known how he felt about what he did for him, for he was deceased before he released how much he wished to thank him for all he did. [I feel that in a way certain courses that I have taken at URI, and certain professors who I have encountered and created a relationship with as a result have had these sorts of impacts upon my own life. I do not believe that I would be in the position I am today without the specific course of education I have received here in Rhode Island. Although I have always gravitated towards service work, this experience has given me perspective on so many other levels, more so than I could have ever predicted upon my acceptance here.]

### **Today in the Delta:**

Today, whites are leaving the communities and the blacks are left behind in poverty. It would be tremendously helpful if there were jobs in the area but there are very few, and they are low paying. Clarksdale, has preserved the blues music, but does not necessarily attract many tourists. Greenville is authentic to their musical heritage as well, but unlike Biloxi does not attract any tourists either. There is no outside pull towards the Delta region, and therefore not much outside assistance although greatly in need of it. Many people who have left do not return to the area. He states the even he is disheartened by the region, how poor the area has become, that he is often so saddened that he can not bring himself to go back and fight for change. He is in some ways scarred by MS and his 17 years that he spent there growing up, it isn't easy to forget the past, and the segregation he faced, it becomes a sort of love/hate relationship. MS did make him who he is today, however, it is not somewhere that he necessarily

wishes to return to today. It is sad to see that it is worse today than it was during his childhood in times of segregation; which is a pretty scary thought.

### **The Human Dream:**

'Those who are gritty or courageous enough to challenge the system are the dream' Melvin said to me. He was talking in regards to social justice, and said that he likes to call it a human dream, rather than an American dream, since the American dream is so stigmatized. 'We want to be a socially just world, but yet because you're a member of a certain group, doesn't mean you should stop your love from flowing to other people'. He was referencing how people only love those they respect, those who they identify with, not necessarily those they do not, and that does not create justice. King spoke about the human dream in a racial context because of his audience, however, he was speaking about communities in general and more specifically a 'beloved' community where everyone wants to see everyone achieve to their maximum.

### **A Few Words of Advice:**

Melvin mentioned that if open to religion, that church would be a great way to become part of the community. He recommended a predominantly African American church in the area that I chose to live with, maybe seeing if other Teach for America members are willing to join me, or to talk to those that live there already and see if they have a place they attend. He said this would be an opening point into a community, that is always welcoming new people, with little contribution or commitment. The area is still very fundamentalist, however church encourages social interaction, and creates connectedness within a community.

You must expect that, communities can be closed and open at the same time. However, make sure you try to recognize communication and interaction among people, which are rooted in African culture; they are present. Also, African Americans in the areas raised white children, and cooked all the food for the whites; therefore even the whites in MS reflect these customs without recognition at times.

'It important to be flexible, and not be naïve about your transitions,' Melvin stated. In this he meant that I make it a priority that the town I chose to live in was my place of solitude, and comfort, and that I enjoyed the area, and felt a peace in the neighborhood. There are many people who are fine with MS staying exactly where it is, holding on to the power just as it is today. The African Americans who live in poverty are on the other end of the spectrum. To be aware of the many issues they face with that, political, economic, educational, its not just education that is an issue for these families and that must be kept in mind. Many of which are dug so deep, that just ending slavery, or ending segregation did not end the problems. The remnants of these institutions is still present today, the damage still needs repair. [I have always felt that a church, no matter the religious affiliation, has been a place of solitude for me and I am enthused that Melvin suggested attending a congregation as a way to bond with the community I reside in/teach in. I also feel that it is important to recognize customs while I am in MS, and possibly even write about some of the predominant ones that I encounter. I think the idea that African culture is ever present, and mostly labeled as Southern, is fascinating, as well as how it was earlier mentioned that some dialect between the races can still be heard dating back to the segregated days of the Delta. I feel that in this interview, I am beginning to gain a perspective about what the people in this region may have encountered so far in there lives, as well as the many hardships they continue to face in regards to political, educational, and economic issues.]

## Interviews with TFA Alumni:

- *Andy Malone*
- *James Bacon*
- *Sarah Franzen*
- *Anonymous*

## Teach For America, Delta Corp Alumni Questionnaire

### **Andy Malone: TFA Program Director**

-Manages and develops corps members to ensure that they achieve ambitious academic goals with their students and will work directly with corps members to increase their effectiveness and to maximize their impact both in the classroom and beyond their corps experience.

*-Andy is proud to be a first-year Program Director in the Mississippi Delta. As a 2008 corps member, he taught third and fourth grade in Sunflower County, MS, where he now supports 29 teachers. During his corps years, he served as the Delta's upper elementary Learning Team Leader and his school's director of professional development. This past summer, he worked as a Corps Member Advisor at the Delta's inaugural summer training institute. Born and raised in Port Washington, NY, he graduated from Harvard College in 2008 with a degree in American History and Literature. He was named a regional finalist for the 2010 Sue Lehmann excellence in teaching award and received Harvard's 2008 Jonathan W. Levin Prize for Teaching and Social Justice.*

#### **A. What first interested you in Teach for America?**

Well, I think I had always had an interest in teaching and education; in college I participated in a program where I taught acting to students in Boston Public Schools, and I really loved developing curriculum and teaching in that program. But the bigger turning point for me was when I signed up to teach at a program called Breakthrough Collaborative, which runs summer programs for high-performing students in struggling urban districts. In 2006 and 2007, I taught at Providence Summerbridge (a branch of the program) at the Wheeler School. I taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade ELA and also ran the arts program. The program was incredible and completely changed my life. The students I worked with were brilliant and wonderful, but many could barely compose a paragraph and struggled to read fluently – and that was kind of where I first came face to face with the achievement gap. I realized that the system was failing kids; that they were being underserved because their academic abilities in no way reflected their potential. So this program is really what got me interested in the education reform movement. And then a recruiter from TFA took me out to dinner my senior year, and I realized that TFA was a way I could pursue this work with a broader network and community, and that really appealed to me.

Andy saw the achievement gap firsthand before he became involved in the educational reform movement. In thinking back, I can relate, just in my small participation in Birmingham, Alabama with Habitat for Humanity, I remember being overwhelmed at the immensity in which poverty exists in our country. I have obviously studied these types of issues in my sociology class, but to see and recognize them right in front of you, is a very different and humbling experience. There is a realization of a lack of social justice that I as well as Andy, felt compelled to in essence 'do something about'.

#### **a) What interested you in the Mississippi Delta region?**

In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I spent the whole year researching the 1961 Freedom Ride and creating a performance about it for a content called National History Day, and ever since then, I've really had a passion for civil rights and social justice. A lot of that Ride took place in Mississippi and the Delta, so that was the first thing, along with all the years I had spent studying the South following. My advisor at the time – who was really an inspiration to me – said that you could never understand race in this country without living in the south for a while. That comment really intrigued me and pushed me to consider the Delta even further. I had grown up in NY and gone to school outside of Boston, so I had never really left the urban Northeast; the prospect scared me but I also thought it was important for me to diversify my own experiences and perspectives. I spent a lot of time choosing between the Delta and DC, but ultimately my background in Southern history and personal desire to take a risk and push myself led me to the Delta.

**B. What were your expectations before your involvement in the Delta? (This can be in regards to teaching, living environment, institute, the community, etc.)**

Honestly I had very few expectations. I got in TFA around November and then put it out of my mind because I knew I had no idea what was in store. I looked at a few pictures of the Delta and expected it to be very very rural; I wondered if I would have Internet and what kind of housing I would be in. I thought that my students wouldn't have behavior problems because that was an urban issue. I expected to have small class sizes. But really I was expecting the unexpected.

[Without the opportunity to complete my senior honors project and this subsequent portfolio I would have been transitioning to Mississippi with much less information and outlook on the culture, academics, history, etc.](#)

**a) Were these expectations upheld? How so?**

The few expectations I had were not met at all. The Delta was actually less rural than I thought; we had internet, towns could be as big as 15,000, Walmart provided anything I really needed; I was actually shocked to find fast food there. I really was so uneducated about what rural America is really like (i.e., how fast food is everywhere and much more prominent than local restaurants). I quickly learned that the Delta actually had a reputation in TFA for particularly difficult classroom management, and my experience lived up to that – that was definitely my biggest struggle in my first year. I did have a small class size my first year (17) but it wasn't as small as I had heard (10-12). But I think the other interesting thing was how much everything kind of faded into the background and my #1 consuming priority was my students. I loved them and wanted to give them the best education possible and I was just focused on my classroom and my own teaching. So I rarely thought about the rural-ness until Thanksgiving, when I took my first break, and then I was like wow, my life has changed so much. But sometimes when you teach you just have this very outward focus – for the first time in your life, for some people – and that really changes the way you process the world around you.

**b) If not, what was the reality of these experiences?**

See above.

**C. What have you learned (that you regard as most important, or most valued) from your experience with Teach for America?**

I have learned so much. I mean, at the most obvious level, I learned what great teaching looks like and a ton of instructional practices. I learned a lot about all the different sorts of problems that contribute to the achievement gap, etc. I think we all learn that as we go through the two years. I learned a lot about each of my students and their families and their motivations.

At a deeper level, I've definitely come to believe that all students and families are thirsty for a quality education, and that the failures we see are systemic and historic. It really bothers me when people say, "oh it must be so hard for you to deal with those parents," because actually, "those parents" are dedicated people who will do anything for their kids. And what has been hard for me to learn is that it is just not true that in this country if you work hard you will succeed. I really used to believe that about America. Some school systems are so broken that even if you work incredibly hard in them and graduate you will still be levels behind your peers from better districts. I went to a school where if you worked hard, you did well, you ended up in 4-year college. That wasn't even a question. So it's been heartbreaking to realize how that is not the case for everyone. How the achievement gap is not only academic, but also economic, political, and social.

I think this is an insightful cultural bias that due to this interview I will be aware of before my transition to the Delta. The cultural stigma that centers on low-income parents in poverty-stricken communities is one that needs to be directly combated and overcome by those who understand the fault in this accusation. I hope that once I am in the Delta, and interacting with my own student's parents that I will, like Andy, advocate for a change in these types of bias in others that I encounter.

Personally, I learned that I'm far more resilient than I ever knew. The first year was a tremendous challenge every day, but I was able to pull through and do right by my students. I also found my life's work and became a lifelong advocate for educational equity.

**D. What did your experience mean for your future?**

**a) Did it change the path you had planned for yourself?**

It's hard to say. I didn't really have a path planned for myself, though I would have predicted service and/or teaching for sure. But the experience, at the very least, gave me 100 % conviction that my life's work will be in education reform. It also gave me a clearer picture of the different kind of roles I want to pursue. I'm starting a masters in educational leadership next summer because I believe that principals and school leaders

are the most important levers in the movement; teachers and students need incredible school environments to really thrive, and I want to be a person that builds that incredible school environment. I think TFA also made me really believe that ed reform is a MOVEMENT, a broad-scale movement for social justice, and that we are at a pivotal historical moment for that movement. Which has been very exciting and empowering.

**b) Did it change your beliefs, values? (Not necessarily religious, but any previous point of views that you may have had before that changed as a result)**

I don't think it changed my values, but it helped me understand them in a more nuanced way. I definitely became aware of my own "white"ness, my own privilege (I was kind of poor for where I grew up, but I realize now how lucky I was to be in a district with great schools); I still want the same things for our country in terms of equal opportunity, but I realize now that it is so much more complicated than I ever really understood – for example, in the Delta, a part of me wants to help my kids get out and go to great colleges elsewhere; but then a part of me feels like that is somewhat inconsiderate of the community and family ties – that's just one example of how complicated it is.

**E. Did you participate in any aspects of the community you lived in?**

**a) If so, what were they, how did you get involved? What did it mean for you?**

To some degree, though I wish I had more. Last year I partnered with a parent to run a community workshop on bullying in the schools, and I often tutored students after school or on the weekends. It was important to me that parents understood I wasn't just here to teach and get out, that I really cared about them and their students; and also I was eager to learn from them. This year I run an after-school acting program at the two schools where I taught, so that has been very rewarding because I feel more involved from the community aspect, hosting events where students paint/rehearse/etc., and ultimately putting together a show for the kids to perform. But I do think it's important for teachers, especially who don't come from the place where they are teaching, to be proactive about partnering with the community, because it can be so easy to become tunnel-visioned about your classroom and just focusing on that.

**b) How do the schools interact with the communities they reside in?**

The schools are definitely a huge part of the community, though I wish they had more capacity and funding to offer programming for families to come together and for adult education. Parents come to school a lot to check on students, meet with teachers, or deal with behavior issues that might arise during the day. Schools usually have a love of reading week where parents / community members can com read; holiday programs are very big, and then some special events like dad's day along the way. Usually the events are an evening or ½ a day and attendance really ranges depending on the topic.



Once again, these types of involvement and activities attest to the fallibility of the cultural stigma of low-income parents being uncaring about their child's education.

**F. Did you get involved with any aspect of social or political action in the area/community you taught and/or lived in?**

Well, my second year a group of parents organized a very successful boycott of the school district in which I taught because the superintendent was not enacting favorable policies. It was amazing to see. They were able to get 75 % of kids to stay home and the state responded immediately by sending up the state chair of education. I wasn't directly involved but I did speak to parents who wanted to let me know that their kid wouldn't be in school. I think you have to be careful as a teacher, someone very visible in the community, to think about the costs/benefits of publicly aligning yourself with a certain political party or candidate, per say. So I focused on making reforms kind of from the inside out, with my students and classroom and school.

This seems like an amazing type of social change that I would have enjoyed seeing occur. It shows that parents are not only invested in their child's education and academic future, but that they are willing to stand up and demand the type of excellent educational standards that are commonplace in other wealthier school districts and private or parochial schools.

# Teach For America, Delta Corp Alumni Questionnaire

## *James Bacon: TFA Program Director*

- He manages and develops corps members to ensure they achieve ambitious academic goals with their students and works directly with corps members to increase their effectiveness and maximize their impact both in the classroom and beyond their corp experience.

*James was born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He graduated from Wake Forest University with a major in Business and minor in Global Trade and Commerce. After college, he joined the Mississippi Delta corps where he taught 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra 1 at Lakeside Middle School in Lake Village, Arkansas. In addition to teaching, James led the school's Quiz Bowl team, took graduate courses in community development, facilitated a new teacher support group for new corp members in his area, and took a group of his students to Washington D.C., for a week. After living in the Delta for two years, James joined staff as a Program Director in Charlotte, North Carolina, and transferred back to the Delta this year to support corp members in Greenville, Mississippi, and Lake Village, Arkansas.*

### **A. What first interested you in Teach for America?**

The ability to work towards something I was very passionate about and felt like I was making a difference in doing.

#### **a) What interested you in the Mississippi Delta region?**

I had a friend that was doing TFA here and knew it was a high need region and had low cost of living (since I was on a teacher salary and had student loans).

### **B. What were your expectations before your involvement in the Delta? (This can be in regards to teaching, living environment, institute, the community, etc.)**

I don't think I knew what to expect. I knew it'd be hard (teaching). I knew cost of living would be cheap and hoped it'd be good. I had heard the community was very welcoming and friendly ahead of time but didn't have many expectations otherwise.

#### **a) Were these expectations upheld? How so?**

I would say that overall my expectations were upheld, with few exceptions listed below.

#### **b) If not, what was the reality of these experiences?**

I think teaching was probably harder than I expected it to be overall, especially the first semester and even the following year. I had not expected to teach during institute until I got there, which is likely the main expectation not upheld.

### **C. What have you learned (that you regard as most important, or most valued) from your experience with Teach for America?**

I have learned that students just need to be challenged and held to high expectations consistently over time to succeed and that we need more people to change their opinions of how low income students and people can learn. We also need more people working for this and high quality instructors and school leaders to make this happen consistently, because there is a HUGE human capital gap in education, especially in the delta (both in number and quality).

One of the concepts that after completing all of my interviews was to employ high attainable standards within my classroom, always holding my students to the highest level of achievement, and encouraging them towards success. I think that its also interesting to note that James also refers to a 'HUGE human capital gap in education'... as Melvin does in his interview it is an issue of humanity that we are facing today. If education defines an individual's life trajectory, then it should be in the interest of the entire country to make sure that every individual has equal opportunity in the form of education.

#### **D. What did your experience mean for your future?**

It meant that I could never stop advocating and working for my students and all the students that are being short-changed in our education system.

As my previous involvement with the honor's colloquium and my Habitat for Humanity involvement in Birmingham, I have affirmed my belief that no matter how many ways the path I am on changes, I will always feel a pull towards involvement in service, whether in the form of teaching in the Delta, or simple volunteer work at home.

##### **a) Did it change the path you had planned for yourself?**

I believe so. I now plan to stay in education for a long time, which I was not necessarily planning to do beforehand (though I don't think I had any specific, solid plan otherwise, other than being interested in doing Peace Corps and then going into Urban Planning, which might still happen way down the road).

##### **b) Did it change your beliefs, values? (Not necessarily religious, but any previous point of views that you may have had before that changed as a result)**

I think it mostly just solidified them, made me more passionate about them, and gave me much more context/concrete support for them instead of changing them.

#### **E. Did you participate in any aspects of the community you lived in?**

Yes. See below.

##### **a) If so, what were they, how did you get involved? What did it mean for you?**

I tutored students after school at the local McDonald's, attended many community functions/fundraisers, attended and volunteered at many local fairs/festivals, organized a trip to DC for some students (raised \$26,000, networked locally for much of the money), etc. it made me feel much more a part of the community, allowed me to get to know people in a new way, and made me feel like I was doing something for the community.

**b) How do the schools interact with the communities they reside in?**

In my situation, it depends, as I feel my town is comprised of two communities—the white and black communities. The school did not interact too much with either, but given the black community sent many more students to the school, they did interact with them through school functions (conferences, a dance, and athletic events). Our school also was located in Lake Village, AR but half the student body came from Eudora, AR after their school was shut down. The school definitely interacted more with the Lake Village community than Eudora but that was based more on proximity and existing ties (it was a recent merging) than anything in my opinion.

This seems like a difficult obstacle to overcome due to the merger being so recently occurred. It seems like another issues that could add to the adverse conditions that the children from the district that was farther away would have to face.

**F. Did you get involved with any aspect of social or political action in the area/community you taught and/or lived in?**

I don't think I'd consider any of my involvement social/political action.

**G. Please add any additional information you would like to tell me here...  
(These can be stories, advice, recommendations, etc.)**

Feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions, as I could talk for days! I love the delta. I was a corps member here for two years, then joined TFA staff and moved to Charlotte for a year before moving back to do the same thing here (I didn't fully realize how much I'd miss it until I wasn't there anymore).

## Teach For America, Delta Corp Alumni Questionnaire

### Sarah Franzen, TFA Program Director

- Manages and develops corps members to ensure they achieve ambitious academic goals with their students and will work directly with corps members to increase their effectiveness and to maximize their impact both in the classroom and beyond their corps experience.

Prior to joining Teach for America's staff as a Program Director for the 2009 school year, Sarah was a 2007 corps member at Shelby Middle School in Shelby, Mississippi where she taught middle school English and was one of the Delta regional finalists for the Sue Lehmann excellence in teaching award. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Georgia in International Affairs and is originally from Atlanta, GA. She currently supports a number of central Delta districts.

#### **G. What first interested you in Teach for America?**

I learned more about the achievement gap in college, and I decided I wanted to work to help end the inequality.

##### **a) What interested you in the Mississippi Delta region?**

I had friends already living and working with TFA in the Delta, and I liked the community when I went to visit.

This is different from the other people I had interviewed from TFA. Although many of them were recruited as undergraduates at their universities they did not have any direct connections to the area.

#### **H. What were your expectations before your involvement in the Delta? (This can be in regards to teaching, living environment, institute, the community, etc.)**

It's hard to disaggregate at this point, but I believe that I thought there wasn't much to do for leisure within the Delta. I honestly didn't have many expectations one way or another about the schools/ communities because I didn't know much about them ahead of time.

This response surprised me because having friends that participated and went to work with TFA in the Delta; I figured she would have inquired more about the region before deciding. It is also different because growing up in Georgia, she may have a different comfort level than others traveling from farther distances to teach there.

- a) Were these expectations upheld? How so?**
- b) If not, what was the reality of these experiences?**

They weren't upheld. In reality, I drive around the Delta a lot during the weekends to visit my significant other and friends, and there are so many opportunities for leisurely fun.

**I. What have you learned (that you regard as most important, or most valued) from your experience with Teach for America?**

I've learned that intelligent, integrity-filled, student-outcomes-oriented school leadership (at the school board, superintendent, principal, and teacher levels) is critical for schools to succeed in developing kids into adults who can intelligently and peacefully advocate for themselves and their communities.

**J. What did your experience mean for your future?**

**a) Did it change the path you had planned for yourself?**

Yes. I planned to attend law school after Teach For America. Now I've been a Program Director for Teach For America for two years, and I plan to re-enter the classroom/schools as a high school English teacher, literacy specialist, or principal.

**b) Did it change your beliefs, values? (Not necessarily religious, but any previous point of views that you may have had before that changed as a result)**

I think it strengthened my values of integrity and perseverance.

**K. Did you participate in any aspects of the community you lived in?**

**a) If so, what were they, how did you get involved? What did it mean for you?**

I tutored after school and led an art club after school my 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year teaching. As a program director, I've led a drama club at my former school. Next year I'm leading a competitive writing club.

**b) How do the schools interact with the communities they reside in?**

I don't fully understand this question. The school is the community. The town where I taught was so small. Many parents worked in and around the school.

I guess in instances where the town is very small, and the school is the only one residing there then it automatically interacts intimately with one another. However, at this question I was trying to get more at the heart of different programs, or outreach indications that schools may make to the parents, and families within their community.

**L. Did you get involved with any aspect of social or political action in the area/community you taught and/or lived in?**

No.

**M. Please add any additional information you would like to tell me here... (These can be stories, advice, recommendations, etc.)**

## Teach For America, Delta Corp Alumni Questionnaire

This participant is a TFA alumni of the Delta region, and wishes to remain anonymous with his/her responses.

### **N. What first interested you in Teach for America?**

I had several older friends who considered applying when I was a sophomore, and so when I was a senior studying poverty and human capability and political science I looked into it. I thought I wanted to be a public defender, but after working with a homeless young man the summer of my junior year who was in legal trouble I realized that I wished I could have helped him BEFORE he got into trouble rather than be a band aid afterwards. I thought education might be a more effective way to empower young people and keep them out of the legal system (since so many studies show that more education=lower incarceration rates) than working with them as a public defender after they had gotten into trouble with the legal system.

I think it is interesting that this participant chose to become part of a proactive movement, changing the issues that reside in our education system before they become too far along. It is interesting to think about however, that this type of mentality rests on the idea that once a person becomes entrapped in our system, the issues they face can in some ways be uncorrectable. I feel that this is something that I face each and everyday in studying the issues and disparities that arise in our criminal justice system especially in regard to the juvenile justice system.

This year after taking a course on juvenile justice I did a research literature review on truancy violations, the status offense of being absent from school. It is a status offense because after age 18, people cannot be charged for violating it. It was interesting that in my research I found that truancy is one of the top most predictors of a person's level of achievement, and subsequent grade-level in school. I think that this is another important aspect of our system that needs to be emphasized more in order to continue being proactive in our approaches.

### **a) What interested you in the Mississippi Delta region?**

I am originally from Mississippi and my mother grew up in the Delta, so I spent time here as a child. I felt truly compelled to make a difference where I lived than going to a new, different place...I guess my roots are what interested me.

This is pretty fantastic to me. I think its commendable that the place where this participant grew up is where she chose to come back to, and is one of the areas of highest need in the country. In speaking with Melvin, he talked about how when people succeed and leave the Delta, or areas like it that are so poverty-stricken, they do not always return, but in this case, the participant disproves this mentality, and is working to stop the cycle of poverty.

### **O. What were your expectations before your involvement in the Delta? (This can be in regards to teaching, living environment, institute, the community, etc.)**

I expected to be challenged daily by my teaching experience, I expected to make incredible friends who were as devoted to empowering students as I was, I expected to work hard and ultimately make a difference in students' lives as a teacher.

**a) Were these expectations upheld? How so?**

Yes, all of my expectations were met...TFA institute and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year were definitely a challenge, and one where I worked hard every day to become more effective. I made my closest friends in the corps...all of whom are still either working in education directly, or are committed to students and eliminating the achievement gap indirectly through other channels and although there is ALWAYS more success to be had, I did make differences in my kids lives and they did meet my goals for them through hard work.

**P. What have you learned (that you regard as most important, or most valued) from your experience with Teach for America?**

I learned to respect my own teachers even more than I ever did as a student, I learned that the children of the Mississippi delta deserve (and will get) an excellent education and that Mississippi school districts truly work hard, but doesn't always get things right to give it to them, I learned to value and take charge of my own education and development as a leader, and I learned that I am capable of meeting real challenges when other people are counting on me.

This comment can also relate to [Mr. Wade's interview](#) because it speaks about how sometimes there are influences in your life that you do not necessarily understand their importance until much later.

**Q. What did your experience mean for your future?**

**a) Did it change the path you had planned for yourself?**

Yes, as I mentioned I'd planned to go to law school and be a public defender. After the corps, I went to divinity school to study religious education and focused on service-learning and experiential education, and now am back in the Delta as a Program Director and plan to remain in education...most likely with Teach for America or in school/afterschool program administration. It's the BEST decision I've made.

**b) Did it change your beliefs, values? (Not necessarily religious, but any previous point of views that you may have had before that changed as a result)**

No. It may have strengthened my commitment to students and to closing the achievement gap since I saw it firsthand, but it wasn't a change of belief.

**R. Did you participate in any aspects of the community you lived in?**

**a) If so, what were they, how did you get involved? What did it mean for you?**

I was involved in the Quitman county arts council and helped to put on the gospel festival. I also worked with a local community magazine called Bayou Community Magazine as a graphic designer, and went to a local church. This gave me closer ties to



my kids' families and some credibility with local people as someone who cared about the arts (not just in the classroom, but outside of it as well).

This type of involvement is what I will strive for when I arrive in the Delta. I would like to get involved with a local church, most likely, the one that my students and their families attend, and participate in some type of events that way. It is important not only to reside somewhere but also to immerse yourself in the culture, and create social ties and connectedness.

**b) How do the schools interact with the communities they reside in?**

My school was very tied to the community...parents came in and out and many parents taught at the school. It was the center of social life during athletic events.

**S. Did you get involved with any aspect of social or political action in the area/community you taught and/or lived in?**

No, I didn't but I wish I had taken time to get involved with a community development organization in the town.

**T. Please add any additional information you would like to tell me here...  
(These can be stories, advice, recommendations, etc.)**

*Interview with Dr. Wendi  
Goodlin-Fahncke*

## *Dr. Wendi Goodlin-Fahncke*

Dr. Goodlin-Fahncke previously taught at University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg for 2 years. She is currently is a professor at University of Toledo in Ohio.

- **What interested you to teach in Mississippi?**
  - I was very impressed with the area of Hattiesburg as well as the Criminal Justice Department at The University of Southern Mississippi. Plus, the weather was nicer there when I originally applied compared to Ohio.
- **How do you think the people of the Delta, or Mississippi in general are going to receive me and the other Teach for America members?**
  - I am not quite sure I can answer this question completely for you. I was not in the Delta so from experience I cannot speak with regards to the people from the Delta. I do not think they will be rude or have a negative attitude towards Teach for America members.
- **I read that 60% of children in Mississippi are considered 'at risk' of not completing their education? (I know you taught at a University, but did you see any examples of this, what were the differences between MS and Ohio, etc.?)**
  - I can understand this being a high number. I did see some examples of this because the education is different in the South than in the North. However, the students were willing to work very hard and knew they had an opportunity that they did not want to take for granted.
- **How does it differ teaching in Toledo, compared to Hattiesburg? (Is there a different racial majority/minority? Does this make things different? If so, how?)**
  - I feel as if the students at USM did not take for granted the opportunity they had to get an education as opposed to the students at UT. As a result, I feel that the students at USM seemed to work a little bit harder on assignments and ask for help more often than at UT. The racial mix at USM and UT is very similar but racial tensions are still somewhat an issue in Mississippi so I noticed I had to earn the trust of some minority students more than others at USM. Also, the students at USM seemed to want to get to know me more and stopped by to see me more than the students at UT.

This alludes to the same sort of ideas that I spoke to Mr. Wade about in my previous interview. He stated how because not many people in the Delta, or in this case, Mississippi as a whole, cannot rise above their mitigating circumstances of poverty, when individuals do succeed they value that success. It is important to note that this also shows how the children that will make it to college, will not take their education for granted. However, it does not combat the issue that Melvin brought up about whether or not they return to their hometowns in an effort to 'do good' in a sense with the education

they have received. As Mr. Wade pointed out, most of the people, when they can leave the state after living in such despair, they do so immediately, and never look back. It would be interesting to follow up with Dr. Goodlin-Fahncke, and see if she noticed any of this type of action, possibly when speaking to her students about future plans.

- **In Sociology we often learn about the term ‘institutional racism’... is there certain types of profiling that take place, or specific sentencing disparities that minorities face in the justice system in Mississippi?**
  - As I stated above, there is still some racial tension still apparent in Mississippi. I think there is profiling by some (NOT ALL) no matter if you are black or white. I would have to take a look at the sentencing rates in order to tell you if there are sentencing disparities in Mississippi though.
- **What should I expect from people in the Delta, or in Mississippi in general, are they satisfied with their way of life, are they frustrated etc.?**
  - From my experience, a lot of this depends on the individual you are dealing with. As long as you give them respect and treat them as if they are a human being and not “a dumb Southerner” you will be fine. Make sure you say, “Yes ma’am, no ma’am” or “Yes sir, no sir” because they consider you to be rude if you do not say this (I found this out the hard way). They definitely find “Yankees” to be rude people!

These types of addresses that are commonplace in the southern way of exchanging words with one another are going to be something that I will have to adjust to. I do not speak with ma’am and sir often, however if this is something that is culturally accepted and considered respectful it is a practice that I will gladly employ.

- **How does class play a role in the Delta, or in Mississippi in general? Is there are large separation?**
  - There is a separation between classes and yes; I think this is apparent in the general population.
- **What have you learned from your experience teaching in Hattiesburg?**
  - I learned that I had some stereotypes when I went down there; some were supported and some were not supported. I did learn a lot about myself and that culture definitely influences behavior.
- **What did your experience at the University of Southern Mississippi mean for your future?**
  - It allowed me to have two years of teaching experience, which helped me get the job at UT. It also allowed me to meet a variety of people, many of whom I still speak with. I also had the experience of eating a variety of different foods, going different places I never would have been to (New Orleans), and I was able to do more research in the Mississippi prisons, which I never would have done had I not been at USM.

- **Did your path change that you had planned for yourself?**
  - My career path did not change because I am still a professor but my experiences there helped me become a better professor and person.
- **Did you participate in any aspects of the community you lived in?**
  - **If so, what were they, how did you get involved? What did it mean for you?**
    - My colleague and I collected a variety of items and donations for four different non-profit organizations. The organizations appreciated it and it was good for the CJ department at USM.
  - **How do the schools interact with the communities they reside in?**
    - USM interacted some with the communities surrounding it but it was more about individuals at USM interacting with the communities.
- **Did you get involved in any aspect of social and political action in the area/community you taught and/or lived in?**
  - No, I did not. Sorry!
- **Please add any additional information you would like to tell me here... (These can be stories, advice, recommendations, etc.)**
  - Beware of someone saying, “Bless your heart.” We may think it is sweet but it is more of a “disclaimer” than anything. ☺ I had somewhat of a hard time adjusting at first because I was a professor, not married (my boyfriend at the time...now my husband was in Ohio), and I did not have children. A lot of the individuals I worked with were married and had children so I sometimes felt like an outcast. Plus, a lot of my students were married with children so I had to take into account these circumstances when I was teaching. I think you will enjoy it if you are in Mississippi but it gets really hot down there! The food is really good and so is the sweet tea. As I stated above, treat everyone with respect and you should be fine. They may be a little unsure of you since you are a “Yankee” (since they think we are all rude) but they will come around!

Although not academically relevant to my project, Dr. Goodlin-Fahncke brings up a good point about certain cultural language barriers that may not be apparent to me. In speaking with Professor Costello, a Sociology professor at URI, who previously taught at Mississippi State University, she also warned of these types of interactions. Most likely, as Ric Macintyre pointed out during my presentation there are going to be both African Americans who are hesitant of my intentions, but also whites that are confused about why I would want to do what I will be doing with TFA. This is going to be a bridge I will have to work through as I arrive in the Delta, and begin my teaching experience.

I am not sure if I answered everything correctly so if I did not, please let me know. Good luck!

*Step Three:*  
*Final Abstract*

## **Self-Preparation: From New England to the Mississippi Delta**

Emily Wojtusik

Faculty Sponsor: Gail Faris, Women's Center

I have been accepted into the Teach for America (TFA) 2011 Corp, in the Mississippi Delta teaching elementary education. I was born and raised in Connecticut, and have attended the University of Rhode Island for the past 4 years. I have studied sociology with a concentration in criminology. This Senior Honors Project is both related to my areas of study and represents a slight departure that will prepare me for my teaching responsibilities in the Delta.

This project is a comprehensive study involving social and political action in the Delta from the past to the present. The four components are (1) investigation of regional history and statistics regarding jobs, education, housing, and healthcare, (2) interviews with a URI faculty member who is a Native Mississippian as well as those who have spent time teaching in Mississippi, (3) interviews with TFA alumni who have previously taught in the Delta region, and who currently remain active there, and (4) a reflection on how all of the information gathered has prepared me culturally, academically, and affectively to soon begin teaching in my own classroom in August.

By the time students from low-income communities reach eighth grade, they are on average 3 years behind their more affluent (and more often white) peers in math and reading. This gap widens to 4 years by grade twelve. One of the key ideas that TFA emphasizes as being at the heart of a new teacher's experience is 'building a strong knowledge base'. Before trying to develop this in children, I decided to build it in myself first. This project will show how the personal experiences of others can help me to create a foundation of knowledge before my transition to the Delta.

Additionally, TFA implies the importance of 'working to effect significant gains with respect and humility'. Relying on my first hand encounters, I will be learning about the struggles, diversity, and other key issues in regard to poverty and educational inequity. As a result, I hope to be better equipped to examine my own background and biases, and to capitalize on how these will affect my teaching and my students' learning.

College has been a building block in my life. The coursework I have experienced throughout my undergraduate career at URI has allowed me to develop empathy for the disenfranchised, and a maturing self-awareness. This combination led me to apply to TFA. In continuation, through TFA, I hope to be a catalyst in making a difference in children's lives regarding how they value and pursue education. This project is the first step toward that goal.



# *Step Four:*

*Honors Project Presentation*

*May 5, 2011*

*3:30-4:45*

*Lippitt Hall Room 402*

# **Self-Preparation: From New England to the Mississippi Delta**

Senior Honors Project Presentation  
Emily Wojtusik  
Faculty Advisor: Gail Faris

The title of my senior honors project is "Self-Preparation: From New England to the Mississippi Delta."

# Teach for America

“The core members, will work relentlessly to ensure that more students growing up today in our country’s lowest income communities are given the educational opportunities they deserve, working to ensure that all children can have an equal chance in life.”

–Wendy Kopp, Founder of Teach for America

## **Educational Inequity:**

By the time students from low-income communities reach 8th grade they are on average 3 years behind their more affluent peers in math, and reading. This gap widens to 4 years by grade 12.

In January of this year, I was accepted in the Teach for America 2011 Corp. TFA is a national corp. of recent college graduates of all academic majors and career interests who commit two years to teach in urban and rural schools in order to expand educational opportunities. Their mission is to eliminate educational inequity. They aim to do this by providing a critical source of well-trained teachers to areas that are plagued by a cycle of poverty.

# My Placement Region

## The Mississippi Delta

- Includes both Mississippi and Arkansas, stretching 300 miles from Cherry Valley, AR in the North to Hazlehurst, MS in the South.
- The largest Teach For America Corp consisting of about 500 members.



Upon my acceptance, I received a placement in the Mississippi Delta. This area stretches 300 miles from Cherry Valley, Arkansas to Hazlehurst, Mississippi, bordering the Mississippi River as it flows through the region. After completing a spring colloquium, through the honors program, that involved a trip to Birmingham, Alabama, to work with Habitat for Humanity, I felt comfortable with my placement in the 'deep south'. However, in never having been to Mississippi I knew there was much more I needed to know to prepare myself fully for this transition. I then made the decision to center my senior project on my subsequent preparation.

## 4 Main Components

1. Overview of the region's history and statistics
2. Interviews with Melvin Wade, Wendi Goodlin-Fahncke, and Leo Carroll
3. Interviews with Teach for America alumni of the Delta who currently remain active in the region
4. Cultural, academic, and affective implications of this information in regard to my upcoming transition

The four main components of my project are (1) regional history and statistics in regard to education, healthcare, jobs, and housing, (2) interviews with a URI faculty member, Melvin Wade, who is native to Mississippi, as well as Dr. Goodlin-Fahncke who taught at the University of Southern Mississippi, (3) interviews with TFA alumni of Delta who currently remain active in the region, and lastly (4) how all of this information has prepared me culturally, academically, and affectively to soon begin teaching in my own classroom in August.

## In Mississippi...

- The current unemployment rate is about 10.2%
  - 6th highest ranking in the United States
- Cost of living for 2 parents, 2 children is \$37,500
  - The maximum income for 2 adults working full-time minimum wage jobs is only \$27,800
- About 22% of the population is considered in low/poor health by federal standards
- About 32% of the population is considered obese by federal standards
- The crime rate is about 13% lower than the national average
  - The incarceration rate is 38% higher

In Mississippi, the current unemployment rate is 6th highest in the country, 22% of the population is considered in low or poor health, and even though the crime rate is 13% lower than the national average, the incarceration rate is 38% higher.

This means that probation and parole are less likely, and the criminal justice system is focused primarily on punitive, or 'get tough' methods of crime control and punishment.

# Education in the Delta

## Proficiency:

- Only 10% of 8th graders are proficient in math
- Only 12.5% of 8th graders are proficient in reading

## Overall:

- 60% of the children in the Delta are considered 'at risk' of not completing their education
- 80% of students in the Delta live below the poverty line
  - ♦ These students will have heard 30–40 million less words than those in more affluent homes

The educational needs of the Delta are immense, 60% of the children are 'at risk' of not completing their education, and 80% of the children live below the poverty line. Ultimately, children face dual obstacles of attending primarily segregated, underperforming schools while living in one of the most economically deprived areas of the nation. Teach for America did send me a multitude of information that has helped me to develop an understanding of the region, educational inequity as a whole, and other key principles that will be instrumental in becoming a successful teacher. However, all of this has become more meaningful as I have been able to supplement my learning with personal accounts.

# Cultural Implications

“Although it is not always stated, Alabama and Mississippi had by far the hardest time enforcing the laws that first freed the slaves, and later banned segregation.”

“Looking back these hard times the people of the Delta face today, were forecasted”

- Melvin Wade, Greenville, Mississippi Native, Current Director of the Multi-Cultural Center at URI

At the end of the Civil War, Mississippi did not see itself as part of the union. The state believed that they had a right to make their own laws no matter how different they were at the time from the federal court rulings. Melvin explained that when he left his hometown of Greenville, it was the third largest city in Mississippi. Today, it is the center of the TFA Delta region.

He stated that the poverty that exists there today was forecasted. There was a railroad while he was growing up that was built through the town. This was an important form of transportation and trade during this time period. Also, there was a prominent Air Force base. Both of these have become obsolete. This embodies the fact that poverty becomes a never-ending cycle. The only people, who begin to prosper, tend to get out of the area as fast as possible, leaving behind those who are unable to rise above the challenges they face.

This is something that I will need to be culturally aware of, allowing me to be empathetic to the hardships ingrained in the past that the people who reside in the Delta may have face, and are continuously trying to overcome. These are situations, which I will never have faced personally in my upbringing.



# Cultural Implications

- The failures we see are systemic and historic [...] It has been hard for me to learn that it is just not true that in this country if you work hard you will succeed. I really used to believe that about America. Some school systems are so broken that even if you work incredibly hard in them and graduate you will still be years behind your peers from better districts.”
- Andy Malone, 2008 Teach for America Delta Alumni, and current Program Director in the region

The concept of the ‘American Dream’ is that in this country, if you work hard enough you will succeed. Andy points out that although it is hard to acknowledge, the failures in our education system are system and historic, and disprove the idea of a meritocratic society. This concept of meritocracy is one that I have studied previously in Sociology, however it is not easy to face. I think that culturally, I need to try my best to understand the challenges that my students face outside of school, and at the same time work diligently to combat the stereotypes within my classroom -- holding them to the same standards of high-performing schools in adjacent districts, or the private schools in the same district.

## 'The Human Dream'

“Those who are gritty enough or courageous enough to challenge the system are the dream. [...] We want to be a socially just world, but yet because you're a member of a certain group, doesn't mean you should stop you love from flowing to other people.”

- Melvin Wade, Greenville, Mississippi Native, Current Director of the Multi-Cultural Center at URI

Mr. Wade rejects the 'American Dream' mentality for some of the same aforementioned reasons as Andy and I do. He refers to it instead as a 'Human Dream', one where people not only love those they respect due to similarities, but also those they do not necessarily, at first glance, identify with. These types of actions go beyond what an individual's inherent beliefs are and are the types of action that will create social justice in our society.

# Experiential Learning

Through his experience with Teach for America he has learned,

**“At a deeper level, I’ve definitely come to believe that all students and families are thirsty for a quality education, [...] It really bothers me when people say, “oh, it must be hard for you to deal with those parents,” because actually, “those parents” are dedicated people who will do anything for their kids”** –Andy Malone 2008 Teach for America Delta Alumni, and current Program Director in the region

**“Like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. often states, a beloved community is one where everyone wants to see everyone else achieve to their maximum”**

–Melvin Wade, Greenville, Mississippi Native, Current Program Director of the Multi-Cultural Center at URI

The stigma that exists in regard to parents of low-income areas is one that, due to my interview with Andy, I am already working to overcome. I think that whether low-income areas are deemed rural or urban there is a bias of lazy, uncaring, poverty-stricken people who in the harshest sense, ‘can’t get up on their own two-feet...’ In acknowledging that this type of cultural bias exists I hope that in experiencing firsthand the people of the Delta, and in my subsequent interactions with my own students’ parents I will also put to rest any miniscule reservations that I may have and like Andy abdicate for a change in this mentality.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated that a beloved community is one where everyone wants to see achievement by everyone else. Not only teachers, but parents, community members, counselors, grandparents, whoever may be residing in an area, or in one individual’s life need to come together and partner to achieve academic success. Dr. King was speaking in terms of racial equality. Today, I am applying it to educational inequity, which produces and recreates racial disparities since most of the children disadvantaged by the system are in fact minorities.

## Academic Implications

“I was identified among my classmates, as well as by my parents, my mother being a teacher, as being intelligent. [...] I did not necessarily realize at a young age what was going on in the black communities (my own community). As a student, my teachers who reinforced that I was a smart boy, encouraged me. I did not understand, however, why if I was so smart, I was not on the same level as everyone else, mainly the white people.”

–Melvin Wade, Greenville, Mississippi Native, Current Program Director of the Multi-Cultural Center at URI

There are two concepts I hope to employ in my own classroom. First, I want to develop an environment of safety and solitude for my students. While Melvin was growing up there was a multitude of violence occurring in the black communities by white hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, and the Citizen’s Council. Often times, these groups involved police officers and sheriffs making them exempt from any type of formal punishment. Although my students will not be facing these exact situations, they will be facing many adverse conditions of growing in poverty. I hope to make my classroom a place where they can feel safe, and escape from the hardships they may face both before and after the school day. Second, I want to develop a consistency of high expectations for achievement. If I insist on setting the bar high, expecting the best out of my students, while constantly reinforcing that they are capable of their goals, then maybe this will translate into academic success for most if not all of them.

## Additional Academic Implications

On the difference teaching in Toledo, compared to Hattiesburg, **“I feel as if the students at USM did not take for granted the opportunity they had to get an education as opposed to the students at UT. As a result, I feel that the students at USM seemed to work a little bit harder on assignments and ask for help more often than at UT.”**

- Dr. Wendi Goodlin-Fahncke, Professor at the University of Southern Mississippi for 2 years, and current Professor at the University of Toledo, in Ohio

I think that it is important to recognize that those who do make it to college from the Delta region, although most are limited to in-state colleges and universities, appreciate the strides they have made in regard to their education. I feel that these types of aspirations and attitudes toward education are what I will try my hardest to give to my students. If students are able to develop high levels of perceived self-efficacy at young ages it will enable them to achieve a continuum of academic success in their futures.

## Connecting Culture to Academics

“Last year I partnered with a parent to run a community workshop on bullying in the schools, and I often tutored students after school or on the weekends. It was important to me that parents understood I wasn’t just here to teach and get out, that I really cared about them, and their students; and also I was eager to learn from them. [...] I think it’s important for teachers, especially who don’t come from the place where they are teaching, to be proactive about partnering with the community because it can be so easy to become tunnel-visioned about your classroom and just focusing in that.”

- Andy Malone, 2008 Teach for America Delta Alumni, and current Program Director in the region

It is important to connect cultural and academic aspects of teaching in the Delta. Andy shows that although it is important that my classroom is a safe environment and has all the vital aspects that foster high achievement among my students, I cannot forget about the parents, and my student’s lives beyond the classroom.

This brings me to my third academic concept that I hope to employ in my classroom, developing a personal connection for each of my individual students to their schoolwork.

## Affective Implications

“It is important to be flexible, not be naïve about your transitions. [...] There are many people who are fine with Mississippi staying exactly where it is, holding on to power just as it is today. The African Americans who live in poverty are on the other side of the spectrum. [...] If open to religion, joining a church would be a great way to become part of the community. Church encourages social interaction and creates a connectedness within a community.”

- Melvin Wade, Greenville, Mississippi Native, Program Director of the Multi-Cultural Center at URI

Mr. Wade emphasized while talking with me that I should find a town, a place to call home, that is somewhere of solitude and comfort, where I feel at peace in the neighborhood. He also suggested that beyond just joining a church in the community, joining one that will be predominantly African America, and if possible the one that most of my students and their families will attend. This type of involvement would foster social interaction that could provide an opening point and connectedness to the community.

# Affective Aspirations

“Everyone in their life has angels. [...] I had my mother’s grandmother, and Mr. Bacon”

On Mr. Bacon’s involvement in his life,

**“He made a lasting impression on me, that changed my entire perspective by showing so much faith in me.”**

- Melvin Wade, Greenville, Mississippi Native, Program Director of the Multicultural Center at URI

Mr. Wade’s grandmother convinced his mother that education was important and made sure that she went to the best school system, leading her to become a teacher, a job that was well respected for an African American female during the time period in which he was growing up in. This led his mother to encourage him academically throughout his upbringing.

Mr. Bacon was a friend of his uncle’s who attended Alcorn and later the University of Nebraska, becoming a prominent African American attorney in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He was ultimately responsible for bringing Mr. Wade to entrance exams for college and universities and teaching him to be observant of his surroundings. Because of Mr. Bacon’s involvement, Mr. Wade was written about in the Delta Democratic Times, received a scholarship from the newspaper, and along with the scholarship he received from Oklahoma State, was able to attend college. Less than 5 other people from his high school class left the state, aside from the ones that did so due to athletics.



# Future Implications

“The notion of giving back that Mr. Bacon gave to me is a gift that still impresses upon me today.”

“You can make a difference in so many ways, Mr. Bacon may never have known how I felt about what he did for me, he was deceased before I realized how much I wished to thank him for all he did.”

- Melvin Wade, Greenville, Mississippi Native, Program Director of the Multi-Cultural Center at URI

My move to Mississippi in the next couple weeks is a journey that I am embarking on very soon, and I hope to do so with humility and respect. Affectively, I hope that I can make a difference for a least some of the students that will be in my classroom during my two years teaching in the Delta if not all of them. Even if I am unaware of how my influence as a teacher will help my students that is okay with me. Throughout my teaching, I will be learning, each and every day, and I feel that as much as I may be giving to my students, they will also be giving back to me.

Carolyn Hames, when I first came into her office, somewhat like a whirlwind, to discuss the many ideas I had regarding my final project, was adamant that it was beneficial and meaningful to us as graduating honors students, mine has been all that and more. I'm grateful for this opportunity and the learning and preparation that I have acquired as a result.

# Closing Statement

*A Special Thank You To:*  
Gail Faris

Melvin Wade & Dr. Wendi Goodlin-Fahncke

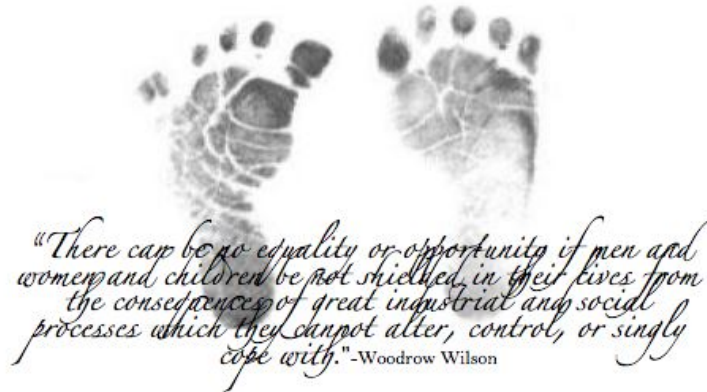
Andy Malone & Teach for America Alumni Participants

Carolyn Hames & The Honor's Department Staff

My Family Members & Friends

In conclusion, I would just like to say a special thank you to my advisor Gail Faris for not only guiding me through this entire project, but also first opening my eyes to service-learning, as well as everyone who participated in my interviews, especially Mr. Melvin Wade. Lastly, all of my family and friends who came to see me present today, I would not be where I am today without each and every one of you. Thank you.

## Final Remarks



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When I first read this quote it hit straight to my heart. In taking many sociology courses, especially those that involve sex and gender, or class and power, paired with political science classes on urban problems, and the civil rights movement I made the dedication with Teach for America to fight for the impoverished youth in our nation plagued by educational inequity. The children who are born in poverty are not any less intelligent than those born to more affluent families, and the parents of children are just as invested in their hope for their children to gain a quality education no matter what their socioeconomic status is. In completing this Senior Honors Project, I have prepared myself to the best of my ability upon leaving URI to head down to the Mississippi Delta. Obviously, I do not know of what experiences I shall have while teaching in the Delta, and there will be many obstacles that I may not be prepared for, however I have gained the humility and respect that I will need to begin to overcome anything I may face in the future.

I guess my final thought is that I cannot wait to being this journey, and I am thankful for the knowledge that this project has given me. I have met people who will become a fantastic support system while I am in the Delta. Mr. Melvin Wade, Gail Faris, and other honors department staff, as well as my own sociology department professors (Jill Doerner, Leo Carrol, Barbara Costello) who are not only rooting for my success but will when I struggle or face obstacles be there as a backboard for 'what to do next.' As I embark on this journey I will be writing reflections on my experiences and updates on my progress in a blog that will remain open for the public to not only read but also comment on. It is located on a popular site for different blogs on various topics, and the link is: [http://www.thoughts.com/Emily\\_Wojtusik](http://www.thoughts.com/Emily_Wojtusik). I hope you have enjoyed my portfolio as much as I have enjoyed making it.