

TAA AWARD FUND

Ioulia Fenton - Case Study

Guatemala (June-September 2011).

Although I loved my training in psychology at the undergraduate level, I left my studies feeling that I wanted to know so much more about the broader human condition. I spent two years working in London to save up for a Master's program and to figure out what the perfect program would look like. Within a few weeks of beginning my MSc Development Studies program at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in October of 2009, I realized that food and agriculture was a lens through which many of the world's most pressing problems and solutions could be viewed: while much human conflict revolved around natural resources and the production of food, nothing seemed more personally rebellious than consciously choosing the food on our plates.

This fascinated me and I chose to study livelihoods and food security of indigenous people in Guatemala's Western Highlands, a fieldwork experience that would not have been possible without the TAAF Master's grant. I was broadly interested to see how links between rural and urban areas facilitated or debilitated people's ability to earn an income, secure enough nutritious food to sustain their families, and keep healthy. I used the funds to purchase my airfare and to employ a couple of translators-cum-research-assistants who helped me navigate the complexities of languages being spoken and lived in the area: Spanish, Quiche, Kaq'chikel and Tzutujul being just four examples.



I spent most of my time interviewing vendors and customers of a local regional market in a small town called Sololá, grappling with the rural characteristics of the seemingly urban center, and surveying the availability of 'industrial' food products and pervasiveness of advertising and marketing by soft drink and fast food companies. My research revealed that the health of people in the area was severely negatively impacted by a number of external forces that have made junk foods cheaper, more widely available, and more acutely desirable than healthier, local, alternatives and that people's ability to grow and make their own food is increasingly diminished by unequal land distribution and the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in the production process.

Upon finishing my degree, I continued to live in Guatemala for another year or so, using that time to consult for NGOs in Central America, write for development magazines, and develop a PhD research proposal. TAAF was once again instrumental to me when one of the members had raised an important question in a virtual talk I delivered at SOAS: "How did you use your findings to help the Sololá community?" he asked.

Truth be told, I had not integrated such public engagement into my research design and I frequently felt the frustration of this oversight, when inevitably my interviewees would ask me how I could help them overcome the difficulties they faced. Being asked outright about it during my talk helped cement in my mind that I would not make the same mistake again.



The experiences, facilitated by the TAAF grant, had helped me put together a research proposal that secured a position in the Anthropology PhD program at Emory University, which I started in the autumn of 2013. During the summer of 2014 I plan to return to Lake Atitlan and work with a health center set up by an NGO to research and identify the driving structural causes of ill health in two different communities and use those findings to help design better prevention programs and curative initiatives. None of these things would have been possible without both the financial and the intellectual support provided by the TAAF grant and I will remain eternally grateful for the opportunities that it facilitated.