

Surabhi Mahajan: Biology sophomore

“Challenging assumptions about community health through place based education”

Throughout an experience such as college—or living at a boarding school—students may undergo one large or several small clarifying moments that can change the way they may want to live their life at that moment and even change their life path. These moments are central to understanding political education because it is through these clarifying moments that students come to understand the competing narratives that provide a backdrop to their education. By exploring the different stories that they encounter about themselves, the things they are studying, or the world around them, students’ lives can be transformed.

As a biology major, I am interested in transforming people’s lives through medicine. I plan to pursue a medical degree, so that I can work to refute the dominant narratives in Western culture about personal and public health. Eventually, I want to combine what I learn through medical school with an understanding of traditional herbal remedies and lifestyle choices to teach others about alternative pathways to good health. As a first step on this path I would like to establish a medicinal herb garden at Zena Farm.

In *The Sand County Almanac*, Leopold writes, “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.” I would add, respectfully, that it is also dangerous to believe that medicine comes from the pharmacy. Zena Farm already provides an alternative narrative for sustainable living through the production of food. With the addition of a medicinal herb garden, we could add to that narrative by bringing native plants that have both food and medicinal uses into the experiences of students who visit the farm. This would help students understand that there are alternative choices to industrial foods and medicines—and that both are essential to good health.

I would like to establish the medicinal herb garden at Zena with input from students at the Chemawa Indian Boarding School and study how their relationship with this project and their interactions with the medicinal herb garden itself can bring clarifying moments that influence their understanding of “good health.” As a tutor at the Chemawa Indian Boarding School, I currently take a weekly class with Prof. Dobkins where I learn about the history of the Chemawa Indian School and about how to effectively tutor the kids at Chemawa. Along with tutoring, I also serve on a special task force that is working with students who qualify to complete applications to 5 colleges. As part of this process, I helped organize a service learning project for the Chemawa students at Zena Farm this past October.

Through interviews and surveys, I would like to assess what narratives the Chemawa students are guided by when considering personal health choices. I would then like to assess their current recognition of native plants and natural medicines at Zena. The next step in this research project would be to understand how students from the Chemawa Indian School interact with the native plants and natural medicines we plant in our medicinal herb garden. Through gaining recognition of the actual plant and of its ethnobotanic properties, the Chemawa students might experience a clarifying moment that will illuminate not only a shift in understanding about pathways to good health, but also potentially a shift in understanding about their own history with these plants.

While my initial project is intended to be with Chemawa students, this work can be extended to Willamette students and others who visit the medicinal herb garden at Zena Farm.