

Growing up, I always heard, “It takes a village to raise a child.”, but I didn’t understand what that meant. I lived with my three brothers, sister, mother, and grandmother. As I grew older, I finally began to grasp the concept of the phrase “community.” Community isn’t just the people where you live but also the support that is given and received from everyone there. I saw community when I could go to my neighbor’s house, help them move items around their house, play with their kids, and enjoy a meal. I began to grasp community better when I would go to church to see how the members would celebrate birthdays and accomplishments, visit and pray for the sick and shut-in, and help any of the members in need. In my eyes, community is the network of support that can be given and received by those who are a part of that group. Each person in the community has different needs and will come together to help fill gaps. So, I learned that community was essential, but I did not know to what extent until last year.

In January 2022, my grandma became hospitalized due to COVID-19. I could not see her due to starting my spring semester at college. She was able to leave the hospital, go to rehab, and go back home within two months with around-the-clock supervision, thanks to the help of her children. However, this caused a significant strain on the family, who had to make constant travels and stop work to come to take care of her. I witnessed how much community and support are needed after a person’s capability shifts for everyone involved. It is heart-wrenching to watch someone you care about in a different state than they were before and recover their life with them simultaneously. Figuratively, it is a new life for them. This premise is not talked about as much, but it should be. Though my grandmother became differently abled, as expected with her age, others undergo these transitions (disabilities) at a young age unexpectedly and may need the same amount, if not more, support. With that, I will say that I am forever grateful for everyone there to support my grandmother in person, as I physically could not.

I wish I could say she is going strong; unfortunately, a month later, went to be with her husband, son, and the Lord. It rocked the whole family and my world because the woman I grew up with is now gone. I remember when I would sit there and listen to her tell the same story multiple times, count her money, go to the bank with her, go grocery shopping with her, help her with her medications, and more. I also remember she would help with my hair, encourage me, and talk to me, and still, to this day, I can hear her say, “You guys [her grandchildren] are the only reason that I keep on going.” It makes me realize the importance that each generation has on one another. The support of the elders gives a mental insight that is needed by our generation to understand the progress and obstacles to be overcome. Each generation is crucial to the wellness of our society. I wish it did not take her passing away for me to fully understand this. It is difficult to this day to keep on continuing, but as she wished alive, I had to “keep on with my education.”

Right before my grandma’s passing, my college offered me an opportunity to do a semester abroad in South Korea. I always wanted to study abroad because it would challenge and enlighten me in ways I cannot obtain in the States. On top of that, it helped me become self-aware of how I come off to others who are not from my area and how I can improve my multicultural and interpersonal communication skills. I went to Korea because it aligned with my premise of self-improvement but also with my classes and finances. I felt that it was perfectly timed because it flipped over into a new chapter of my life. In Korea, I realized how vital a support group is to people. We had a Korean buddy who was there to help us adjust to being in a

foreign area. This, in addition to pairing up American students, greatly enhanced the overall experience. Though we did hang out with other international and local students, the fact that we could fall back on each other for support gave it a boost. Our Korean buddy was also excellent in support, making me feel at home in another country. It gave me reassurance and a peace that I couldn't explain if I were to have been by myself from the beginning. I want to be that for other people. When I reflect on those moments in Korea, I come to an epiphany that a support group is a type of community.

I feel another piece of the puzzle was added to my purpose when I was able to visit Fukuoka, Japan, during my study abroad experience. I met a local Fukuokan who was explaining how hard it is to care for her parents because she has to take an hour train ride every week to go and check up on them. It was hard for her to go back and forth, but the fear of anything happening to her parents kept her going. She also mentioned how it is getting harder for many older adults and disabled people to be looked after due to the upcoming national labor shortage. Many citizens must work long hours to make ends meet while attempting to be caretakers for their parents. Hearing those statements reminded me that elder care is a universal issue that would be coming for my generation next with the low birth rates, upcoming employee shortage, and insufficient welfare income for the older generation. According to economists, analysts, and politicians, this challenge is projected to keep growing. It reminded me of what my mother and aunts had to endure; it reminded me of my grandmother. I started to think that building a community to bridge our socioeconomic gaps would be the best solution, but I could not figure out how that would be feasible.

A potential solution came into my mind when I began my summer internship at the counseling organization CARE. CARE stands for Coordination and Related Expertise; it encompasses how a medical professional can be both a support pillar and team coordinator for their patients. While there, I first learned about the concept of intentional community. An intentional community is a voluntary community that emphasizes social cohesion and teamwork to fill in the needs within that area. This creates a safe space for the vulnerable population and an area for supporters (friends, family, professionals) to help in their safety. Vulnerable populations could include veterans, the disabled, the elderly, and low-income people. I became invested in this concept because I believe it would alleviate our socioeconomic problems, and I have seen how communities can help others succeed. If people could have the support that I was given in their day-to-day lives, I know it would lead to a better world.

With the opportunity of the Watson Fellowship, I can fully explore this concept in a truly global setting. The Watson would be transformative to me because my findings will inch our society in the right direction to a community suitable for all people, regardless of nationality. I want to take the findings of my Watson year and be able to imagine implementing them in every situation I encounter, big or small. Not only that, but I also know that it would help ground me in my future endeavors and fulfill my calling of providing support and a sense of community for others.

Though I had study abroad experience, what would make this travel unique and also challenging is that I would be doing this without strict guidance or external structure. I know that it will increase my adaptability skills because I would need to be understanding of last-minute changes

from events and others. The Watson would be seen as a more volatile journey than a study abroad. Yet, it will be one of the most fulfilling things that I will ever do in my life.

In summary, the Watson Fellowship would help me better prepare for the world ahead. This journey will build me into becoming a solid pillar of support for others with cultural sensitivity. It is the grandest way for me to cope and honor my grandmother's life by engaging in the world that we live in.