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Albert Schweitzer Fellowship- Detroit 2025-2026

### **When Breath Becomes Just Air**

The title of my Albert Schweitzer Fellowship project reads as “When Breath Becomes Just Air.” This title derives from a prominent literary work known as “When Breath Becomes Air,” which chronicles the life and experiences of Dr. Paul Kalanithi as he battled stage four lung cancer. This book was one catalyst for me coming to terms with the limitless bounds of passion, and how regardless of ones stage in life, aspiring for something more is paramount. It is a book that has propelled me forward to apply for fellowships such as these. I included “Just” in the title because it serves as a double entendre. I am fueled by a passion for clean air quality and my project proposes the need for that equality. Our access to “just” or fair and appropriate air is a human right. Further, Just Air is the company that I was originally supposed to work with for my project before the pieces fell before us.

My original project idea was born out of a love for environmental health. Our exposure to the Earth is an experience that is an especially unique to each of us. It behooves me that the environment we are exposed to can affect each of us differently, and in some ways, negatively depending on where chance takes you. Powered by this understanding, I chose to create an environmentally based project, which would study air pollutants, such as particulate matter, in different zip codes across Detroit to better understand which areas of Detroit have been affected by worse air quality. As it has long been touted, poor air quality can lead to asthma exacerbations. I wanted to analyze the aforementioned data and work with schools to help create asthma action plans, so every student can have their fair chance at success without their

environment providing issue. With that, I chose to work with an organization known as the Green Door Initiative, which partnered with Just Air. Unfortunately, within a couple months of beginning our project, budget cuts led to the collapse of the organization and a new course was to be set. My project struggled in both identity and logistics at this point. I knew I wanted to help children understand the world around them, but also did not have a platform to figure out which neighborhoods were disproportionately affected. After calling and emailing many institutions looking for answers and opportunities, I came across an agreement with three organizations- the MAPI clinic, Hope Academy, as well as The Primary Care Center.

The MAPI clinic is a clinic based in Metro Detroit, which is known as the Michigan Association of Physicians of Indian Origin. The many physicians within this group voluntarily run a clinic for uninsured members of Detroit on Saturdays. I spent many Saturdays over the course of the year learning with and from the volunteers as well as patients. I was able to come to an understanding about the asthma risk factors many residents in Detroit face, their understanding of asthma, as well as if they would be open to any referral for further evaluation. I accomplished this using a questionnaire that I would work through with every patient. The second organization, Hope Academy, is a pre-K through 8th grade public charter school in Detroit that aims to produce future visionaries and thought leaders in the world. After working with these students, the name “Hope” instilled in me just that. I was filled with so much hope about what the students and learners at the youngest level are capable of when they are given a platform to showcase their talents. Working with those students provided some of the happiest and most insightful days in my life. At Hope Academy, I was able to use creative methods to help the students understand what asthma truly is and how the world around them contributes to its

onset. An example of a game we would play is basketball, where two students would compete for a “three-pointer” and the basketball signified an allergen (pollen, dust, smog, etc.) that they were trying to get rid of. This activity fostered light competition, but was truly used as a way for the students to piece together what pollutants are and create an understanding of what they can actively do to rid the world of them. These activities spanned kindergarten through the 8th grade, where each student offered so much hope, joy, and excitement about their plans for the future and all that they will inevitably contribute. The name Hope Academy truly lives up to its name.

The goals that I initially established for the fellowship centered around a certain focus of data gathering and uncovering empirical truth about the disproportionate impact of air quality on Detroit’s inhabitants. However, with the change in my host site, my project changed from using published data as the foundation for my project, to speaking with community members about their experiences with air quality and guiding youth to an understanding of it as well. I frankly much prefer the latter. I was able to resonate with many people across various settings and see the direct impact of air quality on their quality of life, in instances where they did not even recognize such an effect was occurring. Initial goals I had were to lead an asthma and environmental education initiative with embedded youth engagement, air quality tracking, and policy advocacy. I believe I was able to accomplish this goal in terms of youth engagement. However, I was unable to track air quality across the city in a concrete manner using the air quality monitors that I initially planned on using with Just Air. I anticipate being able to engage in policy advocacy as my career progresses. I want to pursue child and adolescent psychiatry, with the addition of a specific subset of psychiatry known as environmental psychiatry, where the relation with one’s environment contributes to their mental health and wellbeing. In an

increasingly industrial society, I find that it is prudent to take on such a task. Further goals I had were to interview 100+ families with my survey and conduct 3+ workshops. I was able to interview many patients and families in the Detroit area, although I have not fully quantified it yet as the work is ongoing, I anticipate it being in the range of >100. Further, I was able to conduct >3 workshops with the students, which have been truly remarkable for my development and cadence as I move forward with my career as a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Pictured below is an example of the survey that I used:

**Section A: Breathing Symptoms (Check all that apply)**

- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Chronic cough (lasting more than 8 weeks)
- Chest tightness
- Symptoms worse at night or early morning
- No breathing symptoms

**Section B: Home Environment (Yes / No / Unsure)**

- Use down or feather pillows or blankets
- Visible mold or musty smell in home
- Regular humidifier use
- Lived in current home less than 1 year

**Section C: Environmental & Occupational Exposures (Check all that apply)**

- Work involving dust, fumes, or chemicals
- Exposure to construction sites, factories, or power plants
- Exposure to birds
- Exposure to rodents or cockroaches
- Hot tub or indoor pool use
- None of the above

**Section D: Smoking & Vaping (Check all that apply)**

- Never smoked
- Current cigarette smoker
- Former cigarette smoker
- Vape or e-cigarette use
- Marijuana (smoked or vaped)
- None of the above

**Section E: Medical History (Yes / No / Unsure)**

- Ever diagnosed with asthma
- Hospitalized for breathing problems
- Breathing improves away from home or work

**Optional Context Questions**

- Age range: <18, 18–30, 31–50, 51–65, >65
- Zip code (first 3 digits only)

Attached is a picture of the MAPI clinic where I volunteered interviewing uninsured members of the Detroit community.



I would say the impact of my project has been multifactorial. In many regards the success of my project resides in how it has internally changed me and externally changed the world. The impact I have seen internally is that it changed my outlook for my entire career. I want many aspects of my career to be the same, including working in the medical education space, but I want to become a child and adolescent but also environmental psychiatrist. I believe the point of the Schweitzer Fellowship is to revitalize purpose in the minds of graduate students as they embark on their careers. This fellowship offered me exactly that- I see the world from a new lens, one that is not opacified by this structured, predefined path towards success, but rather one where I can put myself out of my comfort zone and engage with the communities I hope to serve. This recognition was one that I came to through the trial and error that was inherent to this fellowship year. I thought it would be a total leap of faith to figure out how to explain to children how asthma occurs and progresses as a result of the environment, but this fellowship pushed me to put myself in that situation and use creativity to solve it. What it offered me was a renewed understanding of my own confidence and hope for my career as well as the future generation. On the other side, I believe many families I spoke with began to understand the impact of air quality on lung health and the importance of asthma awareness. Many families and students I met needed inhalers, but did not find it medically necessary or have the access necessary to attain them. This systemic issue was one that was born out of structural racism and inequity and was a main driving force for my project. I knew there were unnecessary barriers in the healthcare system and gaps in health literacy that were underlying this. However, working with these students and families to the level where they understood the message I was trying to convey felt like a palpable impact in itself.

Another particular focus for me with my sessions is the idea of mentorship. I tried to center the discussions with students about what they envision their careers could be and offer them the opportunity to say they wanted a career in anything from medicine to art. Providing a platform for students to express and manifest their careers is something of profound significance as it helps students recognize and internalize their potential. Many students said they wanted to become physicians, which I was extremely happy about. That discussion and confidence building starts now, especially in communities that are underrepresented in medicine. The impact is merely at its beginning, though. I would like to continue this project and volunteer at Hope Academy, specifically with helping students with high-risk for uncontrolled asthma and faculty with their asthma action plan. I would also like to continue working with students and schools across Detroit about helping them understand environmental health and instill in them the confidence and enthusiasm to care for the world around them. I am in discussion with Hope Academy and its nurse clinician to arrange these efforts.

The recommendations I have for serving this community if one were to inherit this project would be to focus keenly on finding a consistent host site where you can make a progressive impact on families and students. It would be helpful to have more than one institutional partnership with consistent meetings at all sites. People learn best when they are consistently exposed to ideas. Further, I would recommend taking the time to understand the demographics that you will be working with and tailoring interventions that is in line with the specific environmental context and needs as well as grade level. I would also recommend tracking survey data as well as lesson planning to better quantify your impact as the year progresses. This project is an especially unique one in that it calls for much creativity in your

pedagogical approach, but if done correctly and with astute planning, it can be a remarkably productive endeavor for all.

It is without question that this fellowship year has changed the course of my life. It offered me a concrete opportunity to not simply be a dreamer with high aspirations, but to enact any ideas I have. That renewed sense of self is revitalizing. My belief that I embarked on a lifetime of medicine has never felt more like the correct course than now as I sit and reflect on my time as a Schweitzer fellow. I am elated to carry the motto of my middle and high school alma mater forward during a lifetime of servitude and the pursuit of deeper meaning: Men for Others.