2026 NEC Fellows Reflection Essays

CONNECTICUT

Annika Stimac – Connecticut Foodshare

When I remember my time at Connecticut Foodshare, I will remember kindness. I will remember feeling connected—to the team, to my state, to the people around me. I have lived in Ellington, Connecticut most of my life. I have always loved Connecticut, and this summer has shown me that I love it because people like those who work at Connecticut Foodshare and its many partner organizations are part of my state. People who care—who look at the bad in society and decide to do better.

My name is Annika Stimac, and I currently study Political Science and English at Colgate University. One day I hope to pursue a career in law, government relations, or politics so that I can continue to help those in need. I first became interested in working for Connecticut Foodshare after attending an event at a partner food pantry while working for Congressman Joe Courtney. Understanding the needs and fears of those in my community showed me that the human rights issues I sought to address at the international level were also in my hometown. I became a finalist for the Harry S. Truman Scholarship the following spring, having written my policy piece on food insecurity in Connecticut. So when I saw an opportunity to work in government relations on the very policy issue that had consumed my brain for the past year, I was so excited.

This fellowship opportunity has been a dream come true. This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to help lobby politicians to increase funding for crucial food insecurity programs in Connecticut. Throughout this journey, I have learned so much about interacting with legislators, building relationships and community, and being an active participant in my society. Where part of the job meant compiling statistics, talking to legislators, creating grassroots advocacy help guides and toolkits, and working on arguments, the other part of the job meant stacking boxes with an enthusiastic five-year old volunteer at a mobile distribution center, or listening to the life story of a woman who had an organ transplant last year and was just so grateful she could still do her part to help her community. I loved the chance to be a bridge between both sides; to translate these stories into the grassroots advocacy toolkits I created, and to help legislators understand what their state needed, because I had had the chance to listen and understand.

Throughout this fellowship, I have learned how to formulate an argument tailored to a specific audience, feel confident voicing my opinion and advocating for others, and analyze

policy and policy priorities. I have also learned how to create materials that are accessible and educational for the general public.

Working for Connecticut Foodshare through this fellowship has impacted my academic and career goals by reinforcing my desire to do good. This fellowship has cemented my career goal of being a link between the public and government, working to shape a better future out of institutions, laws, and policies. Academically, this summer has inspired me to consider a master's in public policy or public administration to better understand the grey area that exists between people and politics. Ultimately, I hope to be kind. The care that Connecticut Foodshare emits into the world is something that I hope to emulate wherever I go next.

I am so grateful to Connecticut Foodshare for the opportunity to learn from them and be part of their team, and I am so grateful to the New England Council for supporting this fellowship. Truly, it has, and will forever, mean the world to me.

Jamella Weir – The iQuilt Partnership

My name is Jamella Weir, and I was born and raised in Hartford, Connecticut. I attended Watkinson School before enrolling at Northeastern University, where I am majoring in Finance with a minor in Communication. My long-term goal is to pursue a career in financial advising, specifically wealth management. I thrive in client-facing roles because I enjoy connecting with people, learning about their individual needs, and developing solutions that fit their unique circumstances. Wealth management combines that interest with my desire to understand the complexities of finance.

I first learned about the iQuilt Partnership through Hartford Youth Scholars, a program that has supported me throughout my academic journey. Although I had never worked for a nonprofit organization before, I have always been interested in giving back to my community. As someone who grew up in Hartford, I was excited by the opportunity to contribute to projects focused on improving the city. I believed my connection to Hartford, interest in community development, and willingness to learn would make me a strong fit for the organization.

During my fellowship, I supported several of iQuilt's community development and infrastructure initiatives, particularly the RiverLink project. One of my main responsibilities was researching more than 40 properties along the proposed RiverLink corridor. I used GIS technology, Hartford's property database, and records from the city's tax assessor and licensing offices to gather information about ownership, property values, permits, and possible alternative sites. I organized my findings in Excel and developed analyses identifying properties that deserved further consideration. I also researched funding opportunities, reviewed project studies, improved community surveys, organized outreach information, and created newsletters using Mailchimp. These newsletters highlighted Hartford events and educated residents about iQuilt's projects. Additionally, I attended meetings with city officials, CTDOT, engineers, and community partners. A major highlight

for me was seeing how large public projects progress from an initial idea toward implementation. I learned how decisions involving funding, procurement, transportation, property ownership, design, and community feedback all influence a project's development. I also valued reconnecting with hometown and building relationships with professionals working there.

Throughout the fellowship, I can confidently say I strengthened both my technical and interpersonal skills. I became more confident using Excel, pivot tables, GIS tools, property databases, Mailchimp, and project-management platforms. My research and analytical abilities improved as I learned how to evaluate property, demographic, traffic, and funding information and turn that data into useful recommendations. I also strengthened my writing by creating newsletters, project summaries, and community-facing content. Attending meetings and networking events improved my communication, professionalism, and confidence. I learned how to introduce myself, ask meaningful questions, communicate with different stakeholders, and follow up with new professional connections. Most importantly, I learned to examine a problem from several perspectives before recommending a solution.

Overall, this fellowship helped to understand how finance applies beyond traditional banks and investment firms. Through conversations about project funding, budgeting, procurement, donors, and public investment, I saw how financial decisions directly affect communities. The experience reinforced my interest in financial advising because I enjoyed building relationships, researching complex situations, and identifying solutions. It also showed me that finance and communication skills can be valuable in nonprofit, government, and community-development settings. Academically, the fellowship encouraged me to continue strengthening both areas so I can become a knowledgeable and well-rounded client-facing professional.

MAINE

Grace Boucher – Dempsey Center for Cancer Care

My name is Grace Boucher. I am from Scarborough, Maine, and just graduated from the University of Delaware with a Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Dietetics. I will be returning this fall to complete my Master of Science in Human Nutrition and Public Health. I am interested in pursuing a career as a Registered Dietitian to educate individuals about the food we consume to help improve quality of life. This summer, I had the opportunity to serve as the Nutrition Fellow at the Dempsey Center for Cancer Care. The fellowship provided an invaluable opportunity to apply my academic background in a community-based setting while gaining a deeper understanding of the role nutrition plays in cancer care.

I was particularly drawn to the Dempsey Center because of its holistic approach to supporting individuals and families affected by cancer. Rather than focusing on medical treatments, the Center recognizes the importance of addressing the physical, emotional, and practical challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis. As a nutrition student, I am interested in exploring how evidence-based nutrition education could be translated into

accessible and meaningful practices for individuals outside of a traditional clinical environment.

As a Nutrition Fellow, I developed and implemented a program in two locations that connected nutrition education with the availability of fresh, center-grown produce. I worked with our volunteers who maintained and harvested the produce each week. This was transformed into easy and healthy recipes to be used in interactive cooking demonstrations. My responsibilities extended from program development and logistical planning to recipe selection, preparation, educational content, and client engagement. Being involved throughout the entire program allowed me to understand the many considerations involved in taking a program from an initial concept to a successful implementation.

One of the most meaningful aspects of the fellowship was seeing the programs come to life. Each stage- planning, preparing, and presenting was beyond rewarding. I will forever value the opportunity to interact directly with clients and demonstrate that nutrition does not have to be complicated or prescriptive. By incorporating fresh produce, cooking skills, and practical nutrition information, I was able to create programming that was both educational and approachable.

The fellowship also challenged me to develop skills that extend beyond the technical knowledge I have gained through my coursework. Public speaking was never something natural to me. During my participation and leadership in the cooking demonstrations, I was able to learn to communicate nutrition concepts and confidently adapt to my audience.

This experience has strengthened my academic and professional goals by broadening my perspective on the role of a nutrition professional. I entered the fellowship with a passion for nutrition education, and I leave with a greater appreciation for the impact that community-based programming can have on individuals affected by cancer. The fellowship demonstrated that nutrition professionals can contribute meaningfully not only through clinical care, but also through education, programs, and engagement.

My time at the Dempsey Center allowed me to connect the classroom and real-world experiences. I am leaving the fellowship with greater confidence in my ability to communicate nutrition information, develop meaningful programs, and create lasting connections. Most importantly, I gained a clearer understanding of the kind of nutrition professional I hope to become: one who combines scientific knowledge with empathy, creativity, and a commitment to making nutrition accessible to my communities.

Biser Igov – Avesta Housing

Introduction and Career Interests

My name is Biser Igov, and I am an international student from Bulgaria, a small country in Eastern Europe that is home to many marginalized communities. I am currently living in South Portland, Maine, and am a PhD student studying Computer Science at the National University with a specialization in AI. I am especially interested in researching and developing customized AI tools with minimal cybersecurity exposure. The New England Council provided a fellowship program that took place at Avesta Housing, one of the largest nonprofit organizations in New England dedicated to providing safe and affordable housing to communities in need, based in Portland, Maine. My position there was AI Innovation and Integration Fellow.

What Sparked Your Interest in Working for the Host Organization?

I became interested in working with Avesta Housing because of its mission to support vulnerable communities. With my background in computer science, my experience in fast-paced operational environments, and my growing focus on artificial intelligence, I wanted to apply technical problem-solving to real organizational challenges. Avesta's openness to innovation, its community-centered values, and its willingness to explore AI solutions made it an ideal place for me to contribute meaningfully while learning how technology can strengthen nonprofit operations.

Overview of Your Fellowship: Responsibilities and Highlights

During my fellowship, I strengthened my skills in artificial intelligence, project management, research, and professional presentations. My first responsibility was to analyze each management team's job description, workflow, and daily challenges through custom surveys and team meetings. Based on this data, I researched existing and potential AI solutions to support their operational needs.

The highlights of my experience involved translating this research into tangible tools. I built a prototype application using Microsoft Power Apps and Power Automate, demonstrated through a capital assessment project. This application boosted productivity for the team by reducing a six-step workflow by 50% and transforming a fragmented data flow into a streamlined system. Building on that work, I used Microsoft Copilot Studio to create a prototype AI intake agent that collects information, organizes documents, and responds to user inquiries. I performed live demonstrations of both tools' functionalities. Finally, I delivered a PowerPoint presentation to share my findings and proposed AI solutions with leadership. This entire discovery and development phase showed me how informed technology decisions are made and how much cross-department collaboration an enterprise project requires.

What Kinds of Skills Did You Develop During Your Fellowship?

This fellowship strengthened skills I will carry into my future research and career. Technically, I gained hands-on experience with low-code AI platforms, including Power

Apps, Power Automate, and Copilot Studio, and applied research skills to evaluate which AI solutions were realistic for a nonprofit's operational needs. Interpersonally, I strengthened my ability to conduct stakeholder interviews, design effective surveys, manage a multi-phase project from discovery through prototype delivery, and communicate technical work clearly to non-technical audiences through my presentations to Avesta's leadership.

How Did This Fellowship Impact Your Academic or Career Goals?

Avesta Housing helped me build a solid understanding of how a nonprofit organization can use AI tools to improve its affordable housing operations. This experience also shaped my future career goals. Working on AI integration projects and collaborating across departments inspired me to explore research topics such as how nonprofit healthcare organizations use AI to improve patient-doctor interactions, or how AI and humanoid robots may influence workload distribution and staffing within nonprofits.

Through the New England Council's fellowship sessions, I gained a multifaceted understanding of how different nonprofit and mission-driven organizations contribute to public impact. The Arc of Massachusetts showed how advocacy organizations translate community needs into policy change through legislative strategy and lived-experience storytelling. The Castle Group demonstrated how PR firms strengthen nonprofit visibility through media relations and crisis communication. Rasky Partners illustrated how public affairs firms build relationships with policymakers and guide organizations through complex governmental landscapes. Together, these sessions revealed how advocacy, communications, and public affairs each play a vital role in ensuring marginalized communities are heard by local and state leaders.

MASSACHSUETTS

Oza Nunnally – Freedom House

Hi, I'm Oza Nunnally, and I'm from Springfield, Massachusetts. I am currently pursuing a Master's degree in Urban Planning and Community Development at the University of Massachusetts Boston. My academic and career interests are centered around affordable housing development, affordable housing policy, and community development. I hope to build a career in one of these fields, ideally in a role where they intersect. My long-term goal is to help create more equitable communities, particularly for communities of color, by expanding access to resources, stable housing, and economic opportunities. I believe that this work can help reduce intergenerational poverty, increase economic mobility, and contribute to stronger and more stable neighborhoods.

What sparked my interest in working with my host organization, Freedom House, Inc., was its deep connection to the Civil Rights Movement and its continued commitment to supporting young people in the Boston area. Youth development is one of my personal passions, so I was excited about the opportunity to work with an organization that takes a holistic approach to supporting young people. I especially appreciated that Freedom House provides scholars with opportunities that extend beyond academics. Their programming can include life skills, music, mental health, career exploration, and trade-

based opportunities. Freedom House also compensates scholars for their participation, which I found particularly meaningful because it recognizes young people's time and creates an additional pathway for workforce development.

Throughout my fellowship, my responsibilities included facilitating workshops and activities, supervising and supporting our Junior Coach cohort, managing timesheets, and providing case management to approximately 9–10 scholars. I worked closely with students to support their personal, academic, and professional development while also helping create a positive and structured environment for them to grow.

One of the highlights of my summer was participating in a scavenger hunt throughout Boston. Scholars had approximately ten clues and destinations located throughout the North End and Downtown Boston area. The purpose of the activity was to expose scholars to different parts of the city, especially because some may not regularly have opportunities to travel beyond their own neighborhoods. What made the experience especially memorable was being able to explore the city alongside my scholars and creating a scrapbook to document our destinations and experiences. To make it even better, my coaching group won first place!

This fellowship also helped me develop several skills that I know will be valuable throughout my career. I became more confident in my leadership and supervision abilities and learned to trust my instincts when making decisions. I learned that being a leader sometimes means providing structure, setting boundaries, and having difficult conversations because those responsibilities are ultimately connected to supporting someone's growth and development. I also strengthened my delegation, problem-solving, time-management, and culturally responsive communication

skills. Working with young people from different backgrounds taught me how important it is to listen, adapt my approach, and meet people where they are.

Most importantly, this fellowship helped connect my academic interests to real-world community work. Although my graduate studies focus on urban planning and community development, this experience reminded me that creating equitable communities is not only about buildings, policies, or neighborhoods. It is also about investing in people. My experience at Freedom House strengthened my interest in pursuing a career focused on equitable community development and reinforced my belief that meaningful change requires both community investment and opportunities for individuals to thrive.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Nicea Armstrong – Disability Rights Center of NH

My name is Nicea Armstrong, and I was honored to be selected as a New England Fellow in the 2026 summer session. I am from Hopkinton, New Hampshire, and am a fourth-year college student at Middlebury College in Vermont. I major in History and double-minor in Global Health and Studio Art. Although I intend to pursue law, my broader aim is to make a lasting impact in human-centered services.

Growing up alongside a sibling with autism, learning disabilities, and sensory and anxiety disorders who required many treatments and was often bullied taught me to prioritize communication and inclusion. My experience as a sibling led me to my host organization under the NEC, the Disability Rights Center in New Hampshire. I have seen systems and policies fail the most at-risk people in our population. I recognized how my older sister's treatments were not covered by insurance, for example, and that her school was short on teacher's aids; for years, I tutored her in anything that her school failed to. This summer, I wanted to delve into these kinds of policies and how to transform them.

As an intern for the Communications Department at DRC-NH, I had a variety of responsibilities. I updated the organization's brand kit, researched accessibility in media, created scripts for social media videos, created a launch plan for a DRC Instagram account campaign based on research for reaching certain audiences, and produced FaceBook posts. Additionally, I created a campaign for DRC's annual funding week, using a content-sensitive theme with visual aids, links, branding, and client stories. Beyond social media, I was also tasked with researching useful, accessible, and engaging reports by legal centers and other organizations to guide me in making a visual template for two upcoming news reports that DRC would be developing after completing investigation. This project constituted the majority of my time with DRC, as I developed the programmatic layout myself entirely. This included using my original hand-drawn artwork for the reports, as relevant photographs taken by DRC were sensitive to clients' families. Further, I researched education toolkits made for Special Education services by Protection and Advocacy Agencies around the country to inform a new "stop-and-shop" for SPED for DRC's clients and their families. Finally, I wrote articles on the Americans with Disabilities Act for its anniversary as well as news from the Trump Administration on the future of Special Education. These articles were posted on the DRC website and e-newsletter.

As a result, I developed a broad range of skills in strategic communications, legal and policy research, disability advocacy, accessibility, visual communication, and project management. Overall, the internship strengthened my writing, critical thinking, research, adaptability, attention to detail, and ability to approach complex issues with empathy, inclusivity, and a human-centered perspective.

As I prepare for law school and additional nonprofit work, my time at DRC has been profoundly informative for my undergraduate and postgraduate career. Academically, the fellowship encouraged me to think more critically about how historical and institutional systems shape access and opportunity. Not only was I able to think through my tasks with a historical or public health-driven lens, but was also given the opportunity to advocate through visual art, which I study at length in school. Professionally, this internship gave me practical experience in research, writing, advocacy, communications, and independent project development. Most importantly, the fellowship affirmed my desire to pursue a career in which I can use my education and legal training to advocate for more equitable and accessible systems.

Natalie Gaschits – Meals on Wheels of Hillsborough County

My name is Natalie Gaschits. I am from Amherst, New Hampshire. I have an Associate of Science in Information Technology from Nashua Community College and I am starting at UMass Lowell this fall to study electrical engineering. My career interests include space exploration, optical and quantum communication, and STEM education. This summer, I worked with Meals on Wheels of Hillsborough County (HCMOW).

When I saw the fellowship job listing and looked into HCMOW, I found that I really resonated with their mission. I wanted to be a part of the operation that helps thousands of people in New Hampshire lead better lives through meal deliveries and community events. I had been seeking summer jobs that combined my IT education with my desire to get more involved in helping my community, and this fellowship gave me the unique opportunity I was looking for.

During my time with HCMOW, my responsibilities included creating and improving user manuals for employees using the Salesforce system, developing reports containing large amounts of data for grants, funding, and more, and helping with various site management tasks such as packing meals for drivers, tracking deliveries, and managing client menu choices.

The biggest highlight of my experience was the shift in perspective I had. Learning about the reach that HCMOW has and all the ways in which connection is fostered broadened my views on how we can help one another. The care and kindness at HCMOW inspires me to get involved with causes in my community and explore more opportunities to help others. A few other highlights of my experience include being able to see the noticeable difference I made with my work, expanding my knowledge of technical systems, and working in a positive environment with a hard-working team.

I developed a couple of important skills during my fellowship. This was my first time working in a formal office setting, and as such, I greatly improved my professional communication skills. I was always reflecting on how I can better communicate my ideas and thoughts to my colleagues, and I have become more confident in my ability to do so. Writing user manuals also helped develop this skill. As an aspiring engineer, it is imperative that I can explain technical concepts and information properly. I had to convey Salesforce processes and features in a way that every user could follow, no matter their experience level. I also sought my colleagues' feedback so I could further improve the clarity and quality of the user manuals.

In a technical context, I learned how to work with a large amount of data through reports. I had to find ways to manipulate what kind of data I was seeing so HCMOW could use the reports efficiently. This taught me the valuable skill of seeing data systems in a comprehensive way so I could apply specific filters and get the desired result. I also learned the ins and outs of a very popular customer management database, which is expertise that I was lacking. These skills will be very valuable for my future endeavors where I will be working with a lot of aggregated data, potentially for a client or sponsor.

I am inspired to support nonprofits in the future, whether it be through volunteering, donating, or working for them. There is a surprisingly large crossover between nonprofits and engineering disciplines. I plan to seek out these nonprofits as I pursue my degree with the hope of continuing to make an impact on various communities around my state and greater New England region. I also plan to volunteer at HCMOW whenever possible.

RHODE ISLAND

Natalia Perez – College Visions

My name is Natalia Perez, a West Warwick native, and rising senior at the College of the Holy Cross double majoring in psychology and neuroscience. If you were to tell high school junior year me that this is how I would introduce myself today, I don't think I would have believed you. Not because I doubted my abilities, but because I didn't know this life was possible for someone from my background. Navigating the college process as a low-income, first-generation student was overwhelming, but College Visions showed me the way forward. It is why when returning to do this work over the summer, it wasn't just a role for me, it was a full-circle moment, because I used to be the student looking for that same guidance.

College Visions helps students realize that their current circumstances don't limit their future possibilities. Their mission is opening students' minds to higher education, showing them that with the right support, succeeding in college and beyond is fully within their reach. During the CV Summer Prep Program, I worked with 25 students from Woonsocket with diverse backgrounds, inspiring stories, and above all, shared a common drive to transform their own lives and uplift their communities.

Over the course of five weeks, we guided them through every step of the college readiness process from building college lists and writing personal essays to crafting resumes, drafting cover letters, and exploring financial aid and future careers. While I wasn't the lead instructor, I worked in close partnership with her, essentially co-teaching the class. Through this, I gained invaluable experience as an educator, learning how crucial it is to keep students engaged and motivated to show up every day. Beyond the curriculum, we deliberately cultivated a tight-knit, supportive community. One of our highlights was our weekly 'circle ups,' where students gave 'flowers' to a peer who had stood out to them. Simple moments like these created a culture of appreciation and belonging in our classroom.

"It feels surreal that five weeks have passed since we last saw each other during orientation day. I can still recall that first morning. The shared nerves in the room, the quiet hesitation, and my own anxiety about co-leading a College Visions Summer Prep Program for the very first time. But looking back now, what makes this moment so surreal isn't just how fast the time flew; it's the incredible growth and transformation I have seen in every single one of you."

These were the opening words of my graduation speech. Even though five weeks is a short time, I came to know these students deeply. Through one-on-one advising, working

alongside them during work time, and pushing them to reach their full potential, I had a front-row seat to their growth. Nowhere was this more evident than during mock interviews. Watching them go all nervous before and coming back with pride afterwards as they shared with me their high scores was one of the most rewarding moments of the summer. Ultimately, the students were the ones who put in the hard work; as staff, we simply guided them and encouraged them to bring out the best in one another.

Reflecting on it now, it was truly a summer to remember. Being given my own 'flowers' whether through student speakers acknowledging my guidance, handwritten letters, or sticky notes of appreciation, it is something I will cherish forever.

To be honest, before this experience, I hadn't planned on working with young people. However, my time with these students fundamentally shifted my perspective. While I still aim to pursue clinical psychology, neuropsychology, or perhaps case management, my exact path is still taking shape. But if there is one thing this summer made certain, it is my unwavering commitment to empowering and supporting others.

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to the New England Council for making this experience possible. It has been an incredible journey, and I am deeply inspired by the work and support you dedicate to these organizations. I especially valued the opportunity to connect with my fellow fellows and build relationships with such amazing professionals in the field. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for this transformative experience.

Edwin Samoya – Pawtucket Central Falls Development

My name is Edwin Samayoa, and I am from Guatemala but I live in Warwick, Rhode Island. I am a student at the University of Rhode Island, where I am majoring in Graphic Design with a minor in Web Design. My career goal is to become a professional graphic designer or web designer and use creativity and design to make a positive impact on communities and organizations. I am especially interested in opportunities that allow me to grow professionally while giving back to others.

I became interested in working with PCF Development because of its mission and the positive impact it has on the Pawtucket and Central Falls communities. PCF Development focuses on creating opportunities for individuals and families through housing, financial education, resources, and community development. I was excited to work with an organization whose mission is focused on helping people build brighter futures.

During my fellowship, I worked on several design and marketing projects for PCF Development. My responsibilities included creating window graphics and flyers. One of my main projects was designing materials that communicated messages about buying a home, building financial confidence, connecting with resources, and growing stronger communities. I also worked on bilingual content in English and Spanish to make the organization's message more accessible to a wider audience.

One of the highlights of my experience was seeing how my designs could be used to support a real organization and its community. I learned that graphic design is not only about making something visually attractive. It is also about communicating information

clearly and helping people connect with important resources. I enjoyed working on projects that represented PCF Development's mission and helped make the organization more visible and welcoming.

Throughout the fellowship, I developed both creative and professional skills. I improved my abilities in graphic design, layout, typography, branding, and creating designs for different formats. I also gained experience in communicating with clients and team members, receiving feedback, making revisions, time management, and presenting my work. Working on real projects helped me become more confident in explaining my design choices and understanding how design can support an organization's goals.

This fellowship also had a positive impact on my academic and career goals. It gave me valuable professional experience and helped me better understand what it is like to work as a designer for a mission driven organization. The experience showed me that my skills in graphic design and web design can be used to help communities and make information more accessible. It also motivated me to continue building my portfolio and improving my skills as I prepare for my future career.

Overall, my experience with PCF Development and the New England Council Fellowship was an important part of my professional and personal growth. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute my creativity, learn from real world experience, and work with an organization that is making a difference in the community. This fellowship has strengthened my confidence and helped me see how I can use design to create meaningful and positive change.

VERMONT

Donald Jackson – Southern Vermont Center for the Arts

My name is Donald Jackson and I am currently based in Bennington, VT. I'm wrapping up an associate's degree at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, NY. My associate's degree will be in Liberal Arts and Sciences, with a focus on Art History and Gallery Studies. I've been working in the arts for a few years, and my career aspiration is to become a curator at an arts institution when I complete my education. Though most of my experience working in the arts thus far has been centered on contemporary works, I find myself more drawn to historical curation.

My experience with the Southern Vermont Arts Center began in January, when Danny Volk, SVAC's Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, took me on as a curatorial intern for college credit. I worked at SVAC 8 hours per week, mostly fulfilling small administrative tasks for the Exhibitions department. Towards the end of my internship, Danny approached me about possibly staying on over the summer as New England Council Fellow. This would allow me to continue on at the arts center in an expanded capacity, and would provide me with the opportunity to assist with the curation of a then-upcoming exhibition titled *Active Objects*. I eagerly agreed!

During my 10-week fellowship at SVAC, I focused my time on assisting with the curation of *Active Objects*. This involved studio visits with some of the artists, creating and organizing

checklists of proposed works for exhibition, helping to plan the layout of the exhibition, and many other administrative tasks. The themes of the exhibition involve the separation of the three practices of art, craft, and design, and the exhibition features the work of six makers whose practices blur the lines between those three seemingly-distinct practices. As part of my work on *Active Objects*, I drafted a historical research essay on the topic of the separation of art, craft, and design, which I used as source material for writing the didactic wall panels present in the exhibition. This research and writing process was my favorite part of my work on the exhibition.

I accrued and honed many skills during my fellowship at SVAC. The experience allowed me to gain proficiency in building rapport with artists, exhibition planning, administration, and helped me refine my research and writing skills. I was able to attend the opening reception party for members, which gave me experience working an exhibition opening. I was able to give staff tours of the exhibition prior-to and just after the opening of the exhibition to educate SVAC staff members on the artists and their work, which allowed me to improve my skills as an orator and educational resource. Additionally, I gained experience working in a medium-sized arts organization, which will serve to benefit me as I continue to forge a career in the arts.

In the end, I found my time working as a New England Council Fellow at SVAC to be immensely beneficial, educational, and inspiring. I'm proud to say that following the conclusion of my fellowship, SVAC has offered to keep me on as a permanent employee. I will continue to work closely with Danny in the Exhibitions department, however my focus will shift towards artwork sales. My official title will Exhibitions Sales Coordinator, and I will be responsible for soliciting sales from local collectors. This will allow me to continue working at SVAC in a new and expanded capacity, and will provide me with further work experience as I continue to pursue my educational goals.

Malena Lombardo – US Committee on Refugees and Immigrants

My name is Malena Lombardo and I am originally from Chelmsford, Massachusetts. I am currently an undergraduate at the University of Vermont with a major in Political Science and a minor in Global Studies concentrating in Latin America. My academic and professional interests lie in humanitarian work, conflict resolution, and international relations. I have gained valuable experience through government and field work opportunities, both domestically and abroad. Looking ahead, I hope to use my skills and passion in the NGO sector, working to alleviate humanitarian challenges worldwide.

This Summer I was a Fellow at the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) located in Colchester, Vermont. As I have always been interested in international affairs, specifically about the journeys of refugees and immigrants, the Fall semester before the internship, I researched organizations around my university that worked with the community. In my search, I found USCRI, an admirable organization whose mission is to successfully resettle refugees into the Vermont community. Originally, I was a volunteer with USCRI where I helped tutor a Ukrainian refugee in English. This experience was enlightening, as I heard much about her life in the U.S. and in Ukraine as well as the

struggles she and her family have endured and continued to endure. Her pure gratitude and appreciation towards my mediocre English tutoring skills along with the progress I was able to see her make in such a short time, allowed me to feel a completely different life than the privileged one I have experienced. Although I was only with her for one semester as I studied in Barcelona, Spain in the Spring, I continued to keep USCRI in mind for future work. When late spring rolled around, I reached out to a contact at USCRI to see if they had any opportunities for me in the Summer. They were excited to hear from me and sent the information for the New England Council Fellowship.

The NEC Fellowship position encompassed a wide range of responsibilities, where I helped out where the busy employees needed assistance the most. My first couple weeks, I had the privilege to shadow both the Housing Liaison and the Job Developer. Both weeks, I interacted with clients in completely different ways. With the Housing Liaison, I attended an eviction hearing at the local court, where I heard the family's struggles through a translator. Shortly after the hearing, we spent days moving the family of 13 out of their house and into a storage unit not knowing exactly where they were to go that night, as the housing crisis in Burlington, Vermont continues to be an extreme struggle. With the Job Developer, I was able to see a more positive side of refugee resettlement through attending a Job Interview for a young mother. Also conducted via a translator, the mother expressed her desire for work, any work, and her experiences and qualifications as a homemaker. It was inspiring to see how employers are motivated and want to help the refugee community through hiring them to be a part of their team. Amongst these experiences, I completed administrative tasks where needed, including organizing legal documents for green card appointments, supporting intake processes, and co-facilitating a two week Summer Camp for refugee Youth.

My experience with USCRI showed me the pretty and not so pretty sides of refugee resettlement. Although I was able to see happiness and relief through celebrations like World Refugee Day, hope for the youth through the Summer Camp, and joy through simple, giggling interactions with clients, I was also exposed to the stress, struggles, and barriers that make organizations like USCRI so important. Direct service work is one of the most difficult, draining, and underappreciated parts of non-profit work. Not only is the work physically exhausting and time-consuming, but it is mentally draining to face client's traumas, battles, and overall realities. Even with the recent government barriers to refugee resettlement, the employees at USCRI were continuously supportive and upbeat, acknowledging the negatives and ordeals of the job, but persevering through these struggles understanding their work makes a difference. Refugee work is almost as admirable as a refugee's journey, and I will never forget the eye-opening experience and exposure to a completely different side of life. This Fellowship only furthered my passion for refugees and immigrants, pushing me to look into further opportunities in that sector for my future. Thank you the New England Council for supporting non-profits and NGO's important work, while also providing students the opportunity to become involved in their important work.