Thanks to the generous support of Joy of Giving Something Foundation (JGS), Imagining America (IA) has awarded 57 students with college scholarships since the program was established by Howard Stein in 2011. The goal of the Fellows Program is to elevate photography and digital media as a pathway for students to pursue their careers and make a difference in their communities.

2017-2018 JGS FELLOWS

Delina (Dee) Auciello, Providence College  
Undergraduate Student, Double Major: Public Community Service & Global Studies, Minor: Black Studies

Ubuntu. “I am because we all are—my humanity is connected to yours because we are human.”  
Ubuntu is a word that has challenged me in relationship building ever since I learned it on a trip to Kenya my senior year of high school. Ubuntu is a term derived from Bantu languages, utilized by tribes throughout Africa to illustrate interconnectedness. As I have had the privilege of entering into diverse environments abroad I have striven to understand this term on a deeper level.

The most influential of these environments was Kidete, a small rural village in Tanzania where I lived and conducted research alongside community members for four months about their vision on the future development of their village. In my research, I struggled in deciding whose voices were important, and should be included in my paper. I began to search for an authentic way to share these stories that would uphold the vulnerability necessary in telling them.

Immediately, I looked down at my camera, and was brought back to Christmas morning ten years ago when I received my first pink digital camera. I started to reflect upon how photography was always something special for me growing up because it allowed me to capture meaningful moments.

“That was it,” I thought to myself—I would use my camera to conduct documentary research, instead of writing a paper.

Throughout the next four months I discovered I could connect my love for photography with my love for community engagement. I found that photography, much like engagement, is a shared and reciprocal construction—a co-creation. I learned that film amplified more than just the voices of those in my village, it gave them power and ownership of their stories. Through filmmaking I was able to connect authentically with those who shared deep parts of themselves with me, and others who have viewed my documentary have also felt this connection. It was here in Kidete that I found ubuntu in a new way: through the power of filmmaking in sharing the stories of others and building relationships of integrity.

Stills from documentary: Envisioning a Dream Community in the Village of Kidete
Chinen Aimi Bouillon, University of Maryland Baltimore County  
Master’s Student, Intermedia and Digital Arts

My research focuses on the intersections of gender, power and war (Feminist International Relations). They are big topics, but I feel it describes my resistance to everyday hegemony. As an artist, I work to produce a message that is larger than myself. I was born to a U.S. Marine father and an indigenous Ryukyuan mother; a by-product of the colonizer and colonized. In confronting myself with the circumstances of diaspora, I confront mindsets, systems and infrastructure which blindly maintain and perpetuate patriarchal behavior.

Efforts can be seen through The Feminist Art Project-Baltimore. As curator, I encourage artist-collaborators to analyze bureaucratic structures and languages that perpetuate imperial violence. Often, these structures are put into place by the ethnocentric dominant power that failed to imagine or learn from indigenous cultural systems.

The pivotal moment occurred when I learned about Thomas Hirschhorn with his motto, “ENERGY YES, QUALITY NO.” He makes art with materials that are accessible to show how everyone and anyone can be an artist by acting. We can all act and give voice to silenced communities.

Hirschhorn’s approaches allowed me to see art in ways I had long imagined: as an action that can influence and question the way we participate in the cultural paradigm. I’ve learned objects and materials can be the starting point to discussions which create time and space for sharing community. With his Monument project, even after the physical materials were disassembled, the energy that was put into sharing the philosophy of life was passed on, living through community members’ memories. The collective effort and energy that was shared created an imprint, leaving an invisible essence that could be felt by those who want to remember.

With Hirschhorn’s influences, we are working toward exhibitions opening this September called Feminism Fights Patriarchal Power (FFPP) that will create a space for critical dialogue by reimagining bureaucratic procedures with an intersectional feminist perspective. This project is a collaborative effort with peers and faculty from the Intermedia Digital Arts MFA program at University of Maryland Baltimore County and artists from the local Baltimore community. Playing on the military draft system, we created a self-selective service system called the Feminist Service for Genuine Security. We will guide community participants through this performative display of knowledge to become registered and certified as a self-selected feminist.


Rebekah, self selective Feminist Service for Genuine Security (FSGS) form, Feminism Fights Military Morals, Feminism Fights Patriarchal Power Exhibition 2017
Jeffrey L. Gangwisch, University of Maryland Baltimore County
Master’s Student, Intermedia and Digital Arts

Empowering communities with the tools of mass communication gives voice to otherwise unseen histories and realities. I began working with photography and cinematography at a young age to develop and share my own stories, and since receiving a BA in Filmmaking have worked with many different organizations to celebrate the stories of others and to foster their production skills to let their own voices grow. Whether through community television stations, new media projects, community theatre organizations, community arts organizations or private producers, I have collaborated on projects ranging from urban violence, local and national political issues, and sharing the work of local, national, and international musicians, artists, and civic leaders. Currently, as a Digital Media Specialist with Changing Media Group, a company “founded to provide mission-driven organizations with the tools to find their voice and tell their story in the digital age,” I work directly to assist New Lens Media, a youth-led non “a youth driven social justice organization that makes art and media about issues where a youth perspective can inspire change.”

Since beginning my MFA pursuits at UMBC (University of Maryland, Baltimore County), I have worked to develop my skills with interactive technologies and computer science. I have recently begun to work with Code in the Schools, a non-profit organization whose mission is “to expand learning opportunities for underrepresented youth in the field of computer science.” Furthermore, my community project POP-UP: An AR Platform for Democratized Public Art was recently chosen for development by the Saul Zaentz Innovation Fund. It is my hope that POP-UP would embolden and empower all people of Baltimore to create and display monumental visions otherwise impossible. The project as it exists currently has already enabled me to personally realize projects otherwise inconceivable, and I hope to deliver that outlet to artists and non-artists alike. Baltimore and its surrounding areas foster a thriving tech community, with accessible personalities and corporations creating exciting work in virtual reality and augmented reality. I am excited to continue my work in these disciplines newer to me through projects and communities that serve the city in which I’ve made my home.

AR Photograph Experiment
This is an experimental Augmented Reality Photography App Jeffrey developed in Spring 2017 for personal use. Its technology forms the basis for his current project, POP-UP.

The Symposium by Plato: An experimental theatre piece adapted, directed and produced by Jeffrey L. Gangwisch at Terrault Contemporary in February 2015.
Riana Gideon, New York University
Undergraduate Student, Photography and Imaging

In my current project, I am focusing on women and children who have been impacted by incarceration. Many of the women are re-entering the workforce and battling the stigmas that society imposes. My images, “Amy” and “Christina” were taken in April of 2017 at Hour Working Women Re-entry, an organization that provides ex-offenders with the hard and soft skills to manage a career and move forward. These women engage with their community by forging friendships that lead to support networks. I initially became aware of this organization when I was exploring mentor/mentee bonds. The organization also places the women's children with mentors from the community to act as role models and take them on excursions.

I went to dinner, events around the city, and to the homes of several matches, and soon I was gaining access to their stories and circles. One of my images, “Nyaliah,” was taken at a McDonald's near W4th street in Manhattan. She is the eldest of three daughters and has been paired with her mentor for almost five years. Beatrice, the mentor, acts as a second mother and helps these sisters realize their potential to aim for their aspirations. I started to realize how rewarding it was to interact with the matches for hours on end, and I soon learned that photographing them was no longer my sole focus - even though it was necessary for the project. I went on to meet Heidi, a mentor, and her mentee Carolina. Carolina and her family live in Corona, Queens, and I travelled to their home to meet them in early May. Johanna, Carolina’s mom, warmly greeted me at the door and invited me in. She was welcoming and outgoing, and I began taking photographs of Carolina with her. I spent the entire day with them, and went to dinner with Heidi and Carolina. On the train ride home, I started to think about how the project was changing shape and becoming more about extended or alternative families. I have kept in close touch with Johanna and she has invited me to photograph family and workplace events, which is how I got introduced to women who are re-entering the workforce.

Even though my project has taken many different shapes, and will continue to change over time, I am committed to continuing the work. I have learned the power of visual imagery and how it can activate change. My photographs have allowed me to start conversations that, otherwise, I would not have started, and I have been able to show my peers and others the harmful effects of stigmatization. For ex-offenders, it is more than challenging to re-enter the workforce… it is almost impossible. More than 30 percent of released prisoners enter prison again when they are not provided with the proper support and resources. In starting these conversations and remaining engaged with this community, one that I now feel indebted to, I am beginning to make connections and, hopefully, provide visibility.
Growing up in India, I was told that women shouldn’t draw too much attention to themselves. I was afraid of the repercussions my work or my opinions might have on my family. So naturally even from the moment I landed in America, I decidedly kept my head low. Erased my last name from my mailbox. Didn’t divulge too much information about my identity.

However, during my time in America, I noticed that no matter how hard I tried to distance myself from my identity, it always caught up with me. I couldn’t shake it off when I was writing or making films. I realized I was creating media born out of my experiences.

In March 2017, I volunteered for several organizations through Emerson’s Alternative Spring Break program. It was during this time that I met with a lot of immigrants; people from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds. As a filmmaker, my first instinct was to document them. My idea was to make a film that brought together stories of different Muslims in order to erase some of the secrecy surrounding their lives. Through some of the contacts I made as part of my volunteer work, I got in touch with an elderly Afghan couple, a Syrian student, and an Iraqi woman. I talked to them for hours in a mix of languages and spent time in their houses with their families. We talked about going to the mosque and celebrating Ramazan together. It was heartwarming to feel such a sense of community so far away from home.

Shortly after this, I started pre-production on my movie: I drew up schedules, treatments and tried to think of different narrative techniques that would best help tell their story. As I was finishing up this process, I received a slew of frantic texts and phone calls telling me that the people I had met with changed their minds about being on camera. They told me that these families felt apprehensive of talking about their personal lives to a potentially wide audience. As a filmmaker, I felt extremely frustrated on hitting a dead-end after weeks of work. I decided to switch gears and do something different. Something more accessible. Easier to do. It was only later when I stepped outside of myself as a filmmaker that I realized I was a lot like them. Just a few months prior to meeting them, I had walked away from a stranger who greeted me in Arabic because I was afraid she knew who I was. I didn’t want to dress or behave in a way that revealed my identity. Later on I realized it was okay and natural to feel afraid. So despite my initial frustration, I didn’t let their unwillingness to be on camera deter me. And after an initial lull, I started to look for work again.

In May 2017, I was presented with a wonderful opportunity. Since then, I have been working on creating a series of short documentaries that explore the lives of immigrants in Boston with a group of very motivated individuals from NAIP AmeriCorps. The process of filming was challenging, but also helped me learn a lot. Their candor and willingness to share information about their lives took me a long way in accepting my own identity. Now I feel that the experiences I’ve had so far have made me even stronger in my resolve to pursue this work.
Seeing how people interact and collaborate on various artworks fascinates me. This is especially true when they aren’t aware of their collaboration as a part of the project. I play with this phenomenon in my series, Watchers. These photos depict myself in public coupled with strangers caught in the act of looking at me. By capturing this quick glance otherwise noticed by only me, I am collaborating with a stranger simply by them happening to be in the right place at the right time. The photos capture the spectators’ true initial reaction to my presence, showing a glimpse of the collective mindset of the community leaking through an individual.

Identifying as gender queer, these photos are a way for me to place the audience in my shoes and expose them to what it’s like for someone that doesn’t fit into the societal norms. Because these are not staged, the aforementioned collaboration is with the overall community mindset itself, rather than simply a single human stranger. Shooting Watchers has helped me grow more than many of my other photography projects from the past, for it helped—and continues to help—me face my fears of public spaces that I may not fit into. As I continue to reflect on these watchers in my photos, I realize they aren’t meaning to stare out of hate, but rather of confusion. I typically detest these seemingly hateful strangers, but seeing these photos nurtures a sense of empathy within me for the unknown participants. I hope this empathy resonates with the audience as well.
Erroll Lomba, College Unbound
Undergraduate Student, Organizational Leadership and Change

I believe digital media is my tool to create real change in my community. I believe that it is imperative that we engage our youth in creating media; the type of digital media that reflects their experiences. To shed light on these lives and their truth is my motivation to remain engage in my community. At 19, I began work as a youth worker. I knew there was real power in us, the young generation. As I grew in my career, I welcomed the storyteller inside me. I honor the opportunities to help young people think through complex ideas by breaking down these ideas with concepts that are familiar to them, like capitalism through songs like C.R.E.A.M. by Wu Tang or the George W. Bush administration with scenes from the Star Wars prequels. I want to harness the power of digital media to tell my own stories and feel the need to help our youth create their own narratives as well.

Recently I started a video short with a group of youth. It is a part of a larger piece focusing on young people's experience with the education system and how it has failed them. The short focuses on the story of a young person who is seen as quiet and distant in class, making him the perfect target for bullies. As I sat with Manny, the protagonist of this story, to create his scene, he stated that his character's motivation was simple. He was taken away from his family by the court system. He talked about the real pain of being removed from his family and tossed from one foster family to the next family, and then from group home to group home, and my heart sank. This young person has lived through much pain, yet he isn't withdrawn like his character; and as we developed the scene he had the power of telling his own story. What I loved most about this process and the final product is the opportunity for the work to be genuine to his experience. I provide guidance and the rest of the team creates media that is powerful and dramatic, but not exploitative or demeaning. To create powerful narratives by and for the people who are heard from the least is my motivation to continue to work with digital media and young people.
Jordan Van Savage, Massachusetts College of Art and Design
Undergraduate Student, Photography

As a lover of making connections with people of different backgrounds, I use the act of breaking out of my comfort zone as motivation to use my photography to learn about the lives of people who are transitioning from homelessness to success.

As a Freshman at Goucher College in Maryland, I was encouraged to apply to be the photographer for just such an opportunity; a community engagement program called Earl’s Place. Earl’s Place is a transitional shelter for men in Baltimore, and a group of students and I went there every Thursday evening to create art with the residents. I was in an incredibly lucky position, for I not only had the opportunity to take photographs of everyone working together, but I was able to take part in creating with everyone as well.

I enjoy looking back on this time at Earl’s Place, and I like to recall capturing the joy created through art and now realize something very special that I was able to accomplish: capturing the growth of trust and mutual respect between the students and residents through my photography. Even as photographer of the group, I was nervous and I knew in order to capture the essence of Earl’s Place, I would have to strengthen my connections between these brand new people I had just met. The act of using my discomfort is incredibly important because it pushed me to introduce my camera as their friend, not just a documenter.

Through creating, thinking, and encouraging, we Goucher students emphasized the awareness of homelessness through art and the nurturing of relationships. The residents, too, displayed courage and hope toward healthier and better lives. Through our artwork, we made a minimalistic bond into a thriving relationship that fed off everyone’s creativity. I photographed smiles, hugs, communication, color, and mess – none of which are things that one usually thinks of when considering homelessness. The photographs I captured at Earl’s Place share a special story of the flourishing program between a small liberal arts college connecting with an Inner Baltimore community of men who were given a very important second chance. A second chance from pasts including arrests, drug abuse, violence, and especially homelessness. Nevertheless, the men still used these life experiences, their minds, and their hands to create unique art recognizing their pasts, but embracing themselves and the promise of their futures.