Bilzikian Fellowship Essays

Candace Saunders:

What does it mean to work towards peace in times like these, when violence is omnipresent? Peace is a beautiful idea—and a beautiful experience, in those small, quiet moments when it appears. It's bad luck to tell you my birthday wishes, but here's a hint: they're embarrassing and a little cliché and quite global in scope. But wishing won't get us very far along the path towards peace. We need to get organized. On March 11 of this year, myself and a few friends are hosting the Olympia Anti-Authoritarian Convergence here at Evergreen. We seek to bring together a diversity of local folks to help forge connections between the region's various communities of resistance. The event is grounded by the four roots of egalitarian society: Mutual Aid, Self-Defense, Community Health, and Eco-Defense. The attacks on marginalized groups that have accompanied the Trump regime's ascent to power have sewn anxiety and despair into far too many hearts. This event is about regaining control of our own lives. How can we organize to meet the growing needs of our communities of resistance? How can we act in solidarity with those threatened by racism, repression, and deportation? We will outline our needs and then go about fulfilling them, together, directly, as a community. Peace requires learning how to collectively shield ourselves from violence and to heal each other when we are harmed. This past weekend, the Black Cottonwood Collective hosted a 20-Hour Street Medic Training. Twenty folks concerned about police violence and retaliatory violence from the alt-Right went into the training and twenty street medics, myself included, emerged on the other side. Peace requires preparation, organization, and commitment to the long haul. This is my commitment—to stick with it, as I have since my fellow teenage student activists taught me a new way to see the world. My interest in the MES program stems from my desire to learn how to restore balance and harmony to these stolen, paved, and polluted lands. I believe the program will give me the technical knowledge and connections I need to help create community-based solutions to climate change and the loss of biodiversity. I won't pretend to feel confident that we can defeat climate change—the tides are already turning. But we can adapt to these new conditions. We can protect what is left of the wild, restore what has been lost, and organize our communities to protect the most vulnerable among us. I want to help my fellow floundering humans reconnect with the land and water, either through working with an existing organization or by nurturing something new from the roots up. I have spent over a decade working alongside the sweet peaceniks and angry revolutionaries that make up social change movements. I've experimented, stumbled, failed completely, and, on rare occasion, experienced heart-swelling moments of unified resistance to the war on the planet. I can't stop now.

Amy Irons

My name is Amy Rose Irons and I am an enrolled member of the Chukchansi Tribe. My academic and future career goals are a direct result of my beliefs that Indigenous people need increased access to traditional materials and foods. As an undergraduate my capstone project was focused on quantifying invertebrate species diversity on an ancient clam garden site in Salt Spring Island B.C. Clam gardens are an ancient form of beach modification practiced by First Nations people, a rock wall is built to retain sediment and modify the slope of the beach. This rock wall structure increases clam habitat and also increases the diversity of other invertebrate species. These monumental structures are examples of how Indigenous people coupled with the environment creates positive impacts that are socially, culturally, and ecologically important. During my undergraduate degree at Northwest Indian College I have volunteered in several restoration and youth education outreach events. These projects have included but are not limited to: forest restoration in the greater Seattle area with Nature Consortium, working with the Lummi Nation youth Reef Net Camp, student mentoring and being an in the field educator, and clam garden rock wall restoration. These experiences have shown me how important it is to participate in community projects and learn from others, and pass on what we know to create more awareness of important social and environmental issues. As a graduate student in the MES program I want to continue to work with Indigenous people to learn more about the history and current barriers that prevent Indigenous peoples’ access to traditional foods, materials, and practices. As a Native woman I want to expand my knowledge and experience so that I can be an effective leader in the field of natural resources and work with Tribal communities of the Pacific Northwest. My lifelong goal is to start a natural resources department with my own tribe, this will enable us to manage and increase our access to our traditional foods and materials. These practices allow the transmission of the knowledge of our ancestors and preserve our identity as Native people. Environmental health is of paramount importance so that these resources will be available for future generations. The Bilezikian scholarship will enable me to succeed as a student in the Masters of Environmental Studies program at the Evergreen State College. Financial support is necessary for me to attend graduate school so that I can achieve my dreams of working with Tribal

Emily Barbour:

I have had the privilege to work with several organizations striving to increase equitable access to fresh food for low-income populations and have learned a great deal from these experiences. During my time at Smith I took every available opportunity to engage in environmental work on campus, in the surrounding community, and abroad. The most impactful experience of community service I had at Smith was my internship with Rachel’s Table, collecting seconds and leading gleaning groups. In one summer I delivered over 10,000 pounds of quality produce to local hunger relief organizations. During my time in AmeriCorps I learned what it is like to live at the poverty line (though still with more privilege than most) and how that changes how you interact with the food system. At NUBIA and Food For Free I have learned about urban agriculture and urban food systems, equitable access to fresh food, and how to engage community members in this work. Many of the efforts I have been a part of, however, are being carried out on a small scale, mostly by non-profit organizations. I would be interested in looking into how we can best begin to close the loop on a larger scale, minimizing food waste while simultaneously making high-quality fresh produce more accessible and affordable. I am also interested in studying the barriers that keep many low-income people from utilizing those resources already in place to help them access fresh produce. In my experience at my current job, though the city of Boston’s matching program is a great way to make farmers’ market produce more affordable, a very small number of our customers use SNAP cards, and those who do generally don’t know about the program. While the city has tried several campaigns to raise awareness, utilization of the Bounty Bucks program remains relatively low. Research into how best to raise awareness and use of programs like this could help to increase the effectiveness of food access programs and connect more people to affordable, healthy, and local food. I am excited by the opportunity to explore these and other issues with a group of diverse and passionate individuals.

Anna Farb:

I thank you in advance for consideration for the Sara Ann Bilezikian Fellowship; after reading about her, I aim to honor her legacy regardless of whether I am chosen. In this tumultuous political moment, the need for respect for women and peace has resurged as a driving motivation in my life. Since we do not have Sara with us right now, women like her will have to step up, as I believe I can do throughout pursuing my degree at Evergreen State and beyond. I first truly saw environmental injustice during a field semester course at Dickinson College I took as a sophomore. We visited “Cancer Alley” in Louisiana while traveling around the Mississippi River watershed. One African American community we saw, among many that were directly adjacent to the chemical refinery, exposed to thousands of pounds of air pollution, fought vigorously to be funded for relocation. I continued to seek out understanding of how environmental injustice happens and what I could do. Thus, I studied abroad at the Arava Institute in Israel, a program that brings together Israelis, Arabs and international students (primarily from North America). While practicing active listening for peacekeeping leadership, we visited Israeli settlements, Palestinian tent camps, and Arab sections of Jerusalem that could not get access to clean water. Surprisingly, my takeaway from this time was that, at least at the time, collaboration was more likely to happen than war over limited water resources. My attraction toward bringing different populations together over environmental initiatives started here. I just returned from a month of volunteering in Tanzania with the nonprofit International Collaborative, which provides employment opportunities and training to the Maasai community, centering on women. This mission intersects with the organization’s environmental goal to install efficient cook stoves and solar power in their neighborhoods. I am currently helping with some targeted fundraising to help women get through an awful drought. For the past year, I have worked for a program called Restoring the Environment and Developing Youth (READY) as the native plant nursery manager. The nursery is on the grounds of the county detention center, and I supervise a small crew of inmates. Even those new to gardening appreciate the value of using the plants in gardens to decrease the amount of water running off directly from impervious surfaces into tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. The inmates can get days off their sentences, and we are planning a horticulture training course. Evergreen’s focus on community engagement aligns well with my path. I would certainly incorporate internships into my degree, such as working with Sustainability in Prisons Project. After obtaining my degree, I aspire to work on habitat restoration/planning for a nonprofit, government entity, small business, or an arboretum. I will always reach out to folks of different backgrounds, and an interdisciplinary education from Evergreen would help me to be able to understand their interests, and incorporate those into common environmental goals and projects.

Karimot Afolabi:

Most human activities depend on water usage; the importance of water to human life can never be over emphasized. Over the years people in my community, Nigeria to be precise do not have access to potable water and this has exposed them to life threatening diseases and even death in some cases, simply because of the sources of water used for cooking, bathing, drinking and for other domestic purposes. These sources vary from rain water fetched from asbestos and rusted aluminum roofing sheet which is toxic to human health, fetching from river which often times is polluted with human faeces and fetching from well in a society where soak-away system is still the order of the day. These are my experiences in my early years that motivated me to study Environmental Management and Toxicology for my Bachelors degree. This was the beginning of my quest to find solution to the water pollution problem in my immediate society. My research area for my Bachelors degree was on water treatment and my relentless environmental protection desire led me to Masters Degree in Environmental Chemistry and Pollution Control. I continued my research on sustainable water treatment because my childhood goal was to find a modern and better way of removing pollutants from water that is used commonly by local residents and create awareness on it. I had my Internship at my State Environmental Protection Agency to ensure I can reach out to people and create awareness about the risks associated with the use of polluted water. I have been an advocate of environmental protection especially as it relates to water since my teenage years and the passion for the environment has kept me on the path as I intend to use my academic knowledge to further alleviate this societal problem and save lives of many. A global perspective and desire to perfectly improve our practices back home led me to Evergreen State College which has the core areas I intend to focus on. I am particularly interested in some core areas of study at Evergreen which include Water Management and Environmental Education and to further improve my current research on water treatment through adsorption of metals and my environmental advocacy. It will be a dream come true to see reduction of water borne diseases and death of children and adult. It will be a lifetime achievement when each and every person in my community understands the risks of polluted water and refrain from it. As an academician working in University environment in a developing country like Nigeria, funds is a determinant factor between success and failure in the research world. Given this golden opportunity, it will broaden my horizon and knowledge, positively impact the students that I teach and also expose me to modern or better ways of solving the water pollution problem plaguing our society. The multiplier effects will be felt by hundreds of thousands of people back home in Nigeria that will benefit upon the completion of my studies .