

Journal of past volunteers

Hayden Kantor

Dear Prospective Volunteer,

Namaste!

My name is Hayden Kantor. I'm currently living in Jodhpur and working for GRAVIS as a Research Associate. I am on a one-year post-graduate Hart Fellowship from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. I graduated from Duke in May 2005 as a Political Science major. I'm interested in sustainable development, specifically how to empower local communities to become self-reliant. I'm 22 years-old and originally from New York. I will be working for GRAVIS for ten months, from July 2005 to May 2006.

As a Research Associate, I am currently writing a book for GRAVIS that examines the 22-year history of the organization. I will be interviewing staff members, field workers, and beneficiaries about GRAVIS' accomplishments, challenges, and goals for the future. This book will help improve the institutional memory of the organization and plot a way forward for the next ten years. After I complete this book, I will be conducting some original field research (for GRAVIS and my Hart Fellowship) about the role of the Village Development Committees that GRAVIS sets up in each village.

A day in the life:

We work six days a week, Monday to Saturday, from 10am to 6pm. Some days are reading and writing days, where we work in the cool office. Lunch is served at 2pm by the caring staff, and there is great camaraderie amongst everyone who works here. After work, I have a daily Hindi lesson for an hour; I'm making some progress and the locals are really pleased to hear me speak their language. After my lesson, I head into the city for some dinner, to check my e-mail, or to hang out with some of the friends I've made here. Sometimes at night I like to go for a run, when the heat has cooled off a bit.

On other days, we make field visits to some of GRAVIS' ten field centers and the surrounding villages. These often last overnight and it's wonderful to spend extended time in the desert. The staff at the field centers is so friendly, as are the villagers. It's a great opportunity to learn about what life is like for the villagers and see the results of GRAVIS' activities first-hand. This is important for my research and in the fact that this is where the main work of the organization occurs. Being in the desert is a peaceful experience, and provides a dramatic contrast to the bustling city. In this way, you get a diverse taste of India.

A little about Jodhpur:

Jodhpur is a safe, friendly city of about one million people. It's centrally located in Rajasthan, and it is a good base from which to explore many of the nearby attractions. Within the city itself, the Meherangahr Fort, Jaswant Thanda, and the Old City (with the market centered around the Clock Tower) are the main attractions. I enjoy just exploring the city, riding the buses, wandering around, and meeting people. The weather is quite hot at the moment, but it's a dry heat. It's by no means unbearable and it should cool off a bit soon. The important thing is to stay well-hydrated. I also eat, as a new vegetarian in India, quite well. There are a bunch of great restaurants in town, and the food is cheap and delicious.

A note about expenses and logistics:

Because of my fellowship, I have a stipend to cover my expenses during my time here. I am currently living in a guesthouse in the city of Jodhpur, a few kilometers away from the office. It is nice to have my own space so I do not become too much of a burden on the GRAVIS staff. I estimate that it costs roughly US \$300 per month (or even less) to live here very comfortably. You could certainly get by on much less. My guesthouse has AC, I eat in restaurants for dinner, and ride buses instead of autorickshaws (you'll see why). Banks and ATMs are located through Jodhpur, and they are easy to access. There are several good hospitals in the city (and GRAVIS runs its own field hospital), but luckily I haven't had to test them out since I haven't been sick.

Two more things I think you should know about working for GRAVIS:

Two of the biggest qualms I had about coming to an NGO were 1) would it be well-run? and 2) what type of work would I be doing for them?

1) GRAVIS is a special organization. It has made a real difference in the life of the villagers of the Thar. It is well-run and the people here are passionate about what they do. Coming to work each day is inspiring. I feel lucky to be based with an NGO whose mission and guiding philosophy is Gandhian, as this is one of the only Gandhian movements working in Rajasthan. Through my past experiences, I have come in contact with other NGOs that are mismanaged. That can be a very frustrating experience when you see need around you and want to help people. But that's not the case here: GRAVIS has been doing excellent work in the desert region for over twenty years. They have extensive experience with volunteers so they know how to help you get going quickly. This organization is rightfully proud of the progress that's been made.

2) You get to do real stuff here. I am writing a book! And conducting my own research! It's so great to have a job/internship/volunteer experience where you gain practical skills and make a meaningful contribution at the same time. I've definitely had previous experiences where I felt like I was wasting my time and not really helping. But here I learn a lot every day about NGO work, rural development, and Indian culture. GRAVIS can always use dedicated volunteers who can write well in English because it needs to produce publications that educate outsiders about its work. Every volunteer that comes here has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to this organization. So I definitely feel like what I'm doing is valuable, and that's a really nice feeling.

Finally, if you have any questions, I encourage you to contact me at hsk6@duke.edu or check out my website at <http://www.pubpol.duke.edu/centers/hlp/programs/fellows/>

I am thrilled to be a part of this organization and hope that you will consider joining us.

Good luck, Hayden

haydenkantor@gmail.com

Aurelie

Namaste!

"My name is Aurélie. I come from France and I am volunteering with GRAVIS since January 2006. I am a newly qualified health economist, and therefore the practical experience at GRAVIS gives me an amazing amount of knowledge and hands-on skills in all aspects of community development. Regularly going to the fields to meet the community members, orienting your research according to the existing needs you have seen and identified, trying to change effectively the daily reality of these people and alleviate their difficulties have brought me to the most enriched part of my life. Along with work, life among the GRAVIS family is also an intense sharing of never-forget moments. Those people are so concerned of your well-being, so protective and cheering. As life is organized in respect with Gandhi's principles you can feel a total renewal of your way to act and be. And this is also for me an important part of the gift I gain in joining GRAVIS. You must keep in mind that first weeks here won't be the easiest. Few people are well aware of English language which is a strong barrier when for your work you want to meet people. Food and climate are also elements that are going to influence broadly your life. But with time and good care of your health soon India will reveal all its spells. So, good luck! "

Carine

Bonjour,

My name is Carine, I come from France and have spent 3 months as a volunteer at GRAVIS. Qualified in Right and practice of the International solidarity, (Master 2, Institute of peace and development right (IDPD), University of Nice), I wrote a training manual for the mineworkers. This training manual approaches different fields concerning mineworkers' life: their rights, their work in the mines, their health and their environment. It was a very interesting work and thanks to GRAVIS, I could understand the different problems encountered by these workers and their family. I was glad to do an effective and useful work for them. Gravis gives a real opportunity to their volunteers who can discover all its actions, the Thar Desert and meet lot of people in the field. A volunteer can learn so many things from the experience of GRAVIS staff. It's a so enriching experience when during these months you discover the life in the Thar Desert, the Indian's culture but also the difficulty to live in a very hot country and to eat chilli every day. A volunteer has to have a good stomach and to drink a lot of water (safe water). But finally the food is good, every day Sundari Bai prepares good vegetables and you can eat continental food in some restaurants, like Ajit Bhawan (the best, a bit expensive, around Rs. 300, but it's really good) or the Omelettes shop near Clock Tower (only Rs. 25). Jodhpur is a safe place and not a very big city, you can find everything and go everywhere from Jodhpur, like Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan and Jaisalmer or Udaipur.

Laura Simos, Finland
August-October 2007

I am Laura from Finland and I was volunteering for GRAVIS from August till October 2007. Before volunteering I already knew the organization. I had been working and volunteering for a partner NGO of GRAVIS', a Finnish student organization Tamy, for several years and I had visited GRAVIS for the first time already 3 years before. However, this time I did not come to GRAVIS as a representative of a foreign NGO but as a student and as a volunteer. I first contacted GRAVIS since I wanted to write my Master's Thesis on Self-Help Groups and ended up volunteering for it at the same time.

The voluntary work was really interesting and I learned more that I thought about GRAVIS as organization as well as about its activities. Since I knew already GRAVIS quite an extent I was happy to be given some challenging tasks by the team. I made a budget proposal for a development project, updated the website and helped editing the GRAVIS' Year Report 2007. However, the most interesting task was writing a report on Self-Help Groups, SHGs and micro-credit being in fact strongly related to my thesis topic.

The two months that I spent with GRAVIS were unforgettable and the only thing I regret is that I did not stay for longer time. I had a great chance to visit marginalized rural communities living in the Thar Desert, discuss with the inhabitants and learn more about their everyday life, joys and sorrows. I could also assist several meetings and seminars where I met some interesting persons working in development sector. But the people that I'm going to miss the most are those men and women working for GRAVIS with whom I shared my meals every day, my free time after office hours and with whom I had the most fruitful conversations. They are the ones that made my stay a real experience!

If you're interested in volunteering for GRAVIS and have some additional questions, please, do not hesitate to contact me (laura.simos@uta.fi).

Laura

Evelyn Harvey, UK

Email: evelyn@hdnet.org Volunteer - October 2004-March 2005 In collaboration with GRAVIS staff I wrote a review of their extensive work in public health, entitled 'Community Health in the Thar Desert.' It was also intended to be a resource for newly arriving staff and donors. It included a survey of health awareness in village women, which showed the efficacy of many of Gravis' projects, in particular immunization campaigns. I enjoyed my time with GRAVIS greatly and I feel that it taught me a lot about development and health, more than I could ever learn through a 'course' or studying. The village health workers and midwives were amazing, I still miss working in the villages, and the Tyagis and all GRAVIS staff were welcoming and supportive throughout. I also enjoyed working with GRAVIS supporters, especially their colleagues from Wells for India. The only thing I found difficult was the impatience and disconnection of a few other Western aid workers I met while in India. I think they needed to live in a GRAVIS village for a while! Traveling alone in India also had its own challenges but overall I had a great time. My piece of advice to new volunteers would be drop all your assumptions and expectations, open your eyes, ears and heart and learn from the people who are living their own development with GRAVIS' help. Thank you! Best wishes, Evelyn

Shelly Agarwal, USA

agarwal.sh@gmail.com

June - August 2005

I Finished writing and designed the Annual Report of GRAVIS for 2004-05. There was little to not like, very much to like. The people, the field visits, the organization, the work, and the city are all among what I liked, and what I remember to this day. The only regret I have is that I wish I had spent more time in the field, talking to people myself.

The lifestyle in Jodhpur is very different from most places on this Earth. Get ready for the heat and a changed diet, for starters. Bring clothes that are thin and can protect you from the heat. Make sure you know the major routes around the city, and how much they cost by rickshaw, as they don't always run by the meter (from what I remember). It is also a lot of fun to ride the buses and shared rickshaws around the city, so I would definitely recommend learning those routes. The people are very helpful, so you should be able to talk to the driver or passengers if you get lost. Before coming, or while you are there, I would also recommend reading a little bit about Gandhi and his principles, just so you have a better understanding of the organization and its philosophy.

Shelly Agarwal

Sandhya Tillotson

Namaste Prospective Volunteer!

My name is Sandhya Tillotson. I am a 21 year old American student taking one semester away from my Environmental Science undergraduate studies at The Colorado College. Originally from California, I have long been interested in sustainability, water issues, and the environment. I have been volunteering with GRAVIS from January – May 2008, for about 3.5 months. Rather than do a traditional study-abroad program, I decided to find an organization on my own so that I could have a direct impact in rural development and environmental issues.

I wanted to gain experience in the NGO sphere and do something beneficial. I could have ended up in one of the many irresponsible, corrupt, NGO's in India, but thankfully I ended up with GRAVIS. I have found GRAVIS to be a completely transparent and devoted organization that is making real change in the lives of thousands of people in the Thar Desert.

I was drawn to GRAVIS's roots in Gandhian principles, such as Sarvodaya "all rising but the last first", and have found that this principle continues to be exemplified by needy villagers being chosen first to benefit from projects.

I spent my time here working on several projects. I developed a curriculum on Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, and Education for Desert Schools (WASHED) which will be implemented next year in the primary schools built and run by GRAVIS. It was a stimulating project because I was able to create activities, cartoons and lessons to teach children basics about keeping clean and healthy. At first I envisioned this project being fairly short, but as I got more into it I ended up spending quite a bit of my time working on developing this curriculum. Don't worry if you don't have an idea for a project before hand, Prakash Ji will have plenty of options for you!

I was expecting to do more hands on work with GRAVIS, such as digging water tanks and working directly out in the desert with pick and shovel. This is not what I ended up doing. Mostly I worked in the main office in Jodhpur with my computer. At first I was disappointed, until I realized that requiring villagers themselves to build the rainwater harvesting structures, desilt community ponds, or construct earthen bunds in agricultural fields, allowed the villagers take much more ownership over the projects, ensuring their long-term sustainability. If a bunch of foreign students came and built the projects in a village, the local people would not have as much interest in maintaining the projects. GRAVIS truly helps communities become as self reliant as possible, with trainings, workshops and village committees, rather than handing out free aid. Foreign students are usually most helpful to GRAVIS by making use of their academic research, project development, and computer skills.

Don't let this discourage you. The amount of time that volunteers spend in the desert is very much determined by your own interest / persistence or how much your project necessitates it. I went into the Field countless times, stayed at many of GRAVIS's field centers and lived in the desert for a couple days at a time. I met with communities and village elders to discuss my second research project on community pasturelands. At a community meeting we drew the village in the sand with colorful powders, the villagers pointing out different resources and discussing issues that faced their daily lives.

I walked through the desert for 2.5 days in February for GRAVIS's Jal Yatra, or Water March, spreading the word of water conservation to remote areas. I formed wonderful friendships with GRAVIS staff as we walked along through the sands together, trying our best to communicate in the limited Hindi-English overlap. The staff at the main office speak English very well, so this was never a problem, but when travelling to the field I always needed a coworker to translate.

I feel my work has been beneficial to GRAVIS and I have gained immeasurably as well. I have learned about local Indian culture directly, understood more about how the NGO world works, developed my research and project planning skills, and come to realize the tremendous effort required in making lasting change towards development. It takes time, some infrastructure, organizing people and incredible dedication. GRAVIS has shown what is possible in such a rural area. The most transformative times for me have simply been sitting in the sand with villagers, sharing smiles and laughter with them, and being amazed by their humor and hospitality despite of the harshness of their lives.

About working at GRAVIS:

You will find all of the GRAVIS staff to be very helpful, friendly and committed to their work. After a couple weeks you will fit into the way things work and feel part of the family.

I am donating a Laptop to GRAVIS for volunteers to use when they come. Ask if it is available for your use. This way if you do some travelling around India before or after your volunteering (which I highly recommend) you don't have to lug around a computer. You might want to bring your own pen drive (USB memory stick), or buy one in Jodhpur.

Try to learn some Hindi before coming if you can, I didn't and wished I had. Or bring a Hindi-English dictionary which you can refer to when you're here.

About living in Jodhpur:

See Hayden's journal below, it's has very good insight on Jodhpur. I'll just add a couple things:

I heartily enjoyed running and walking before or after work at CAZRI (The Central Arid Zone Regional Institute) which is only a kilometer or so from GRAVIS. GRAVIS works closely with some of their scientists, but I enjoyed getting some exercise around their agricultural fields on the roads. It's a popular spot for locals to come walking too and is open every day.

Merangarh Fort is excellent! It takes a full afternoon to make it through the whole museum.

Sardarpura Market is the closest big marketplace to Milk Man Colony where you can find everything. It's more local and not so touristy as the Clock Tower area. Ras Raj is a great restaurant. National Handloom shops here and in other locations around town are good Indian style department stores.

Check out Shastri Circle, which is fairly close to Milk Man Colony and puts on a fun light and water show. Get into the inner circular park before 7 to avoid paying the 5 Rs fee.

You can find all the toiletries, cell phone shops, and fresh fruits and veggies you need on every Jodhpur corner.

Helpful Hints on Transportation Costs:

Current rate: 40 INR = 1 USD

Taking bus #1 to from Milk Man Colony to Sardarpura Mkt = 5 Rs

Depending on your bargaining skills, level of Hindi and ability to walk away from a bad deal, the amount you pay for an autorickshaw will vary. These prices are what I seemed to work out fairly consistently, with the current gas prices being: 50 Rs per liter for petrol and 35 Rs per liter for diesel (autorickshaws use diesel).

Authorickshaw from Milk Man Colony to:

Sardarpura Mkt= 15 to 20 Rs

Clocktower/ Sardar Mkt= 30 to 35 Rs

Merangarh Fort= 100 Rs (it's up a big hill, so it uses a lot of gas)

Umaid Palace= 50 Rs

If you are out about town and coming back to Milk Man Colony after dark, keep in mind that prices will increase at night. Drivers can't guarantee that they will have a passenger on the way back from Milk Man Colony to the main part of town, and they also know that you are more desperate for a ride. Prices should be about 5 Rs more after dark.

Final Note:

I cannot say enough good things about GRAVIS or the work the organization is doing. I feel honored to have become part of this community and hope you may share in it as well. If you have any questions or concerns, whether they are big or small, please don't hesitate to email me:

sandhya.tillotson@gmail.com

You can also look at the blog that I kept while working for GRAVIS and adventuring in India at:

<http://sandhyatillotson.blogspot.com>

It contains stories, photos and videos. Check out the Blog Entry titled "Marwari Song" especially.

Namaste!

-Sandhya

Eva Schmitt, Germany

July-August, 2008

I stayed with GRAVIS for just under 2 months in July and August 2008, and came here independent from any organization as I had briefly interacted with GRAVIS during my research in Jodhpur the year before.

My task here was mainly to make a proposal for a sustainability award which suited my interest a lot, and it was very interesting because I had to interact with different people from GRAVIS to write this long proposal. It also gave me good insight in the organizational structure and different aspects of planning and implementation apart from different programs run by GRAVIS. I can say I was able to learn much about GRAVIS, the area it works in, how an NGO is optimally run, and last but not least, I learned a lot about myself.

In the beginning, there were two more volunteers here with me, but I personally found it a better and deeper experience being the only volunteer here, because I think like this I had a chance to become part of the GRAVIS family much more than before.

In case you are thinking about becoming a GRAVIS volunteer, you might want to consider the following points:

- In case you stay with GRAVIS between April and October, be prepared for really hot weather, although it is very pleasant inside the office. Field visits and nights can be hot though.
- You should be able to stay away from -or optimally not take at all- any alcoholic beverages, tobacco or non-vegetarian food.
- Good English skills are essential, so you can produce documents in English and communicate with your colleagues. I myself do not speak Hindi, and it is not required to work here, but I wished many times I could understand it for social aspects and to show respect to the people I work with.
- Physical interventions that are popularly known to be "development aid" tasks, are usually not preformed by volunteers (you will not dig wells or similar).
- GRAVIS website gives you a good overview of the fields GRAVIS works in. I think, a deep interest in any or several of these fields is essential to contribute to and enjoy the work here. After all, you work 8 hours a day, 6 days a week and it is so much more pleasant if you like and are committed to what you are doing.

I am enjoying my last days here, and I can only say that I am very happy that I had a chance to work and live here. The working atmosphere here is different from what I know from Europe: colleagues are treated as family members and there is no gossiping behind people's backs, which makes you feel respected. Colleagues are very helpful and assist you in completing your tasks as well as giving information on anything regarding your free-time, but it is also down to you to take the initiative for completing your assignment and ask for the input you need. If you seek open discourse here, you will soon find yourself engaged in a relationship of mutual learning.

Eva Schmitt

Ashish Asopa

November-December, 2008

I am Ashish Asopa, a postgraduate student of Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication. As we all know that Media and society go hand in hand, this makes it utmost necessary for any Media trainee to become associated with any organisation dedicatedly working for the society. The same thought had gone through the minds of our institution administrators who brought out this concept of having an internship in any of the NGO's of our country. I deeply appreciate this idea. I am a resident of Jodhpur, so the best option to me was to get associated with GRAVIS. So here I am in GRAVIS for a two months internship.

A day for them starts at 9:00 AM sharp and goes till 6 PM. While on work you won't find anybody killing time or lounging here and there uselessly. They have a deep passion for their work. Their dedication for the noble cause they work for is tremendous.

Visit to Gagadi –

During my time over here I tried to contribute in the work of GRAVIS as much as I could. I went to a training camp on “Naturopathy” at one of their most active sub centre Gagadi. It was basically a motivation camp for the coordinators of GRAVIS to get familiar with Naturopathy, use it in day-to-day life and most importantly take Naturopathy to the villagers and give them an opportunity to bask in the miracles of it. I too took many tips from that training for everyone in my relation and of course for myself.

Visit to Eye Screening Camp, Ketu Kala –

I also went to the eye screening camp held by GRAVIS in Ketu Kala about 140 km from Jodhpur. It was also a great learning experience. I actually saw that how vulnerable are these villagers to the diseases of eye like cataract and how much myth is rife about this disease. It was a very successful camp where the final turn up was about 130 out of which about 30 needy ones chose to get operated in the GRAVIS Hospital.

Office work –

Besides getting the privilege of visiting the field, I also got an opportunity to design a brochure for GRAVIS which in the words Dr. Prakash Tyagi, Director, is a “souvenir” which will remind them of me after I have gone. Indeed it was an ecstatic experience for me as well.

Word of thanks –

In the end I would like to warmly thank the whole GRAVIS family and wish them all the best for drawing even higher standards for themselves and living up to those and for making The Thar a prosperous and a happy place to live.

Special Thanks –

I might not leave GRAVIS for visiting again before giving special thanks to -

Dr. Prakash Tyagi - The Director (for continuously giving me the opportunities to contribute and being so nice to me; I am grateful to him)

Mr. Rajendra Kumar - Project Coordinator (for sharing his knowledge with me, for taking care of me during the camp visits and of course for occasionally lending his computer to me)

ALL THE BEST FOR ALL THEIR ENDEAVOURS...!!!

**Ashish Asopa
India**

**Susanna Lehtimäki, Finland
November, 2008**

Namaste!

My name is Susanna and I visited GRAVIS for two weeks in winter 2008. I am a member of a steering group of a Finnish student union, Tamy, which is one of the many international partners of GRAVIS. The main aim of this trip was to deepen the co-operation between these two NGO's, but I also had personal interests concerning the development work in rural areas. My previous occupation is public health nurse and at the moment I am continuing my studies in the fields of Public Health and Sociology at the University of Tampere. I have worked as a communal nurse in maternal and child care for a few years, and my main interests are maternal problems and health care.

Two weeks is a short time, but in this case I would say I learnt more than I could ever have imagined. Tyagi family and other GRAVIS people were genuine and hospitable, they showed us many places and activities and it was always easy to get further information. Also the visits in villages were unforgettable, now I have memories of drinking "chai" in comfortable huts surrounded by friendly people, whose language I didn't understand, but still I could communicate with them. I also learnt about grass-root-level work after visiting, for example, an antenatal-camp and village health workers' training and many families, who have gained better harvest and livestock due to methods and help of GRAVIS.

In this journal past volunteers say that their visit was too short. I can fully agree. After this short experience, I feel more enthusiastic about India and I feel more confident about moving abroad after my studies, so Thank You GRAVIS people for the pleasant visit!

Susanna

Ruchi Kapoor
Feb.-March, 2008

Hello, my name is Ruchi Kapoor and I'm a MD-PhD student in New York who got very tired of academia and wanted to do something more meaningful with my time for a bit. I came to GRAVIS in Feb-Mar 2008, and co-authored a publication on silicosis (occupational lung disease afflicting mine-workers in nearby stone quarries) and helped design a water quality project. Within a week, my experience exceeded my expectations!

In contrast to several other NGOs in my experience, GRAVIS is refreshingly transparent – it's governing structure, it's finances, it's project hierarchy, and the types of projects they do – they are all readily known. Just pick up one of their annual reports. This should give you a good idea of what kind of work they do and how you may be able to assist them.

GRAVIS's experience with a steady stream of foreign volunteers over the past few years has made them very unique in the grassroots level organizations in India. They are ideally suited to maximize the utility of volunteerism from abroad, and ensure that it is a mutually beneficial experience.

Most often, you will find yourself writing. GRAVIS prints a lot of publications to disseminate knowledge to the general public, to it's funders and other supporters, and most of those publications are written by volunteers. As a volunteer, you spend extensive time on field visits to research your subject, talk to people, and bring a unique perspective to a project and write about it.

GRAVIS is also familiar with the needs of the volunteers. They organize frequent field visits that give volunteers exposure to the local people, the challenges they face, to the harshness that is western Rajasthan, and in general, to a very unique region of the world. GRAVIS realizes that the strength of the experience, for a foreign volunteer, lies in meshing with the local culture and they arrange for that to the best of their ability.

They do all this while making you feel like you are part of an extended family. I felt like a valuable, contributing member of a team that was trying to achieve something worthwhile. The people at the office have a great sense of humor and take a light-hearted approach to life, which is wonderfully refreshing on those days when you feel overwhelmed by India's bureaucracy or plight of the poor.

As a volunteer you need to make an effort to reach out to the people on your field visits since there is frequently a great barrier between the lower caste/class and the upper caste/class people. Even if you are a student, a foreigner falls into the category of the upper class, and needs to make that first gesture to break through the cultural barrier. However, once you do break through the barrier, be prepared for the flood (see #2 below).

I was a atypical volunteer in the sense that I grew up in India, and have visited family and friends frequently in the years since moving to the US. Therefore, I am familiar with the culture and can speak Hindi. Here are some difficulties I've particularly noted:

1. This may be a no-brainer but is important enough to require re-iteration: gestures do not always translate the way you meant them through the screen of a foreign culture. For example, a friendly gesture may be interpreted as romantic interest, or needing alone time may be interpreted as arrogance. Remember that you are essentially an ambassador of your country and should always be aware of what you say and do. If ever in doubt, ask for advice from the GRAVIS staff. They are very good at breaking down that cultural barrier.
2. Personal space is not as much of a concept in India as it is in the western world. Hence, don't be surprised to have random strangers on trains and buses be deeply interested in you and wanting to be your friends. If you really want to be part of the culture and the country, be prepared to give up "me-time", but at the same time know where to draw boundaries.
3. As a woman, you will encounter cat calls and comments in the city. Even people reaching out to touch you if you're particularly fair-skinned. Jodhpur is a relatively conservative city, and while jeans and pants are fairly common, I still would recommend wearing long shirts with them. A fair-skinned woman wearing salwaar-kameez still stands out, but less so than a woman in shorts and a tank top.

All that said, remember to enjoy the experience! Revel in getting to know a region of India that even most Indians are unfamiliar with, and take pride in the fact that you are part of an amazing organization that is truly helping make a difference in the world. Good luck, and remember to try the lychee ice cream in Shastri Circle =>

Ruchi Kapoor
USA

Noopur Midha, Shipra Suneja
India
May-June, 2009

We heard about gravis from a relative in Jodhpur and one thing that most excited us about is that it works with Thar communities in villages. Working at the grass root level, enthused us the most. Gravis undoubtedly does excellent work while taking care of several aspects, hence contemplating a holistic livelihood perspective. The journey was really exhilarating and learning experience for us. We stayed at the Gagadi field centre which is 60 kms from Jodhpur. It is the greenest of places after you have travelled a whole lot of barren soil. We lived there for three weeks and gained a lot of knowledge there. The people at Gagadi field centre were wonderful. Rajasthan's delightful hospitality and GRAVIS' caring attitude is clearly visible here. Everyone was very helpful and cooperative. Be it food (amazing Marwari khana) or the provision for stay or the invaluable information that the team there provided us is cherishable. The field visits were filled with enthusiasm, exploration and lot of hard work.

We visited several villages, travelled a good part of the desert, whether bus, motorcycle were amazing experiences in their own right. The nature provides you interesting sight seeing, but it is most heart warming to see how people acclimatize to their difficult circumstances so amazingly. Though certain aspects reflected a disheartening situation, but overall lives were as

The beautiful colors of clothes, polite Marwari language (we learned quite a bit from them) a never dying hospitable attitude anybody and everybody strengthen their capacity to fight their difficult circumstances. It only strengthened our belief that when we met people in different contexts and circumstances, we should always have an open mind, sans prejudices, to be able to learn a lot more, more than the eyes can see.

You also carry back a feeling that Gravis is doing excellent work in these places. The taankas that women proudly stood against, the SHG group that gave a new life to many homes clearly reflected the changes that GRAVIS is bringing their lives with ideals of Gandhiji being followed all along that is worth mentioning.

One thing that we as volunteers in our scope observed and would wish to recommend to GRAVIS is that the meetings that are held with women on information on social issues and otherwise should take more frequently and follow up can be further strengthened where it can be found out whether a change in their thinking is really taking place or not.

Back at the GRAVIS office, all members have been friendly and helpful.

We thank Mr. Prakash ji for making us a proud member of the GRAVIS team, providing us with the freedom to do what we wished to, supporting us at every step and till the end.

Well, this end is just is the beginning and we wish to continue this relationship with GRAVIS to as far as possible.

And for us, it was an enriching experience. We learnt a lot about people's lives in different contexts acquainting us with other parts of our country, the delightful culture and wonderful lives. It gives us encouragement to work for and with our community to whatever extent we can. And believe us it was this encouragement that kept us cool and going in the hot weather that we worked in.

We take back a heart full of warmth, gratitude and respect towards everyone we met in this unforgettable journey.

Thanking you all.
Yours sincerely,

Noopur Midha
Shipra

Soham Bhatt
US
May-July, 2009

As I reflect on my time here at GRAVIS, many thoughts and images cross my mind. I have spent approximately 10 weeks here, from the end of May 2009 to the end of July 2009.

In terms of work, I spend a majority of my time in the head office at Jodhpur primarily doing research about the organization and completing various documentation tasks. These included the annual report, editing and revising preexisting reports, preparing presentations, working on applications, and various other pet projects. This time was interspersed with field visits, some being only a few hours and others lasting over three days.

In the field, I assisted with water quality testing, whilst also taking pictures and talking with locals for my office work. In my own capacity I even made a few suggestions for medicine use and inspected what they were taking, in personal interest (I have a degree in pharmaceutical science).

Logistically and personally speaking, this has been a highly educational and rewarding experience. The transition was easy as everyone here is extremely welcoming, and the workplace is professional, organized and well-run. The operational structure is efficient, and after establishing familiarity it was not difficult to maximize my output and ability to collaborate with others. They also accommodated my technical needs, beyond my expectations. In the field, I experienced the real life of the people and saw the direct impact of my and GRAVIS' work (sometimes on the day itself).

The truth is that it is a two-way street. Work hard. Be open and sincere. Adapt. In the US we say, "Don't sweat the small stuff". And while keeping this in mind and in practice one can truly be energized and learn a lot. Be proactive and you will be given more responsibility. Be curious, don't be afraid to be yourself and people will reciprocate. Some communications are done without speaking; and in many cases a sincere smile in a village, an opinion (even if disagreed with), or constructive logical criticism is appreciated. In the same way, be receptive to all of these things from the opposite end—these are the ways to work best, happiest, with the most fulfillment, and constructively.

I could write pages about the insane beauty of the desert and its people, the compassion I felt for the villagers, and the inspiration I gained from the people at the office and their philosophical drive. The breadth and accomplishments of the organization can be found on the website, and they are impressive and comprehensive. But the work, as they say, is always there and will be. And my impression is that it is not paternalistic, but rather compassionate and humanistic. Ultimately it is fortified by the mission and the relationships they have established in the field. This is a real place, doing real work, and benefitting many many people.

If you are a prospective volunteer, I ask that you take these words seriously and do work here to see it firsthand. I've gained a family here and I am changed. I hope that you too may be inspired.

Best,
Soham Bhatt
14 Josiah Drive
Upton, MA 01568 USA

P.S.: contact me anytime sohamxbhatt@gmail.com for any words or questions.

P.P.S.: brush up on a bit of Hindi, or learn some before you come, it will be an asset.

Eva Schmitt

Germany, August 2009

Namaskar again!

If you are reading through all the journals carefully, you may have come across my previous journal already. Don't worry - I am not going to tell you the same things again. Rather, I would like to explain why I came back to volunteer with GRAVIS a second time.

In 2008 I had spent 2 months living and working with GRAVIS and I really enjoyed it very very much. I was sad when I left and the longer that I had returned here, the more I realised that I would like to go back and join in the good work as soon as time would allow it.

On the one hand side, I believe that GRAVIS staff is very committed to their work and that the work itself is the best approach to poverty alleviation in the area that I have come across, so I wanted to contribute to it again. The second reason is a, yes, a selfish one. The work with GRAVIS and living and being with the people there is doing me good. It may sound strange, but on most days, I find work there so fulfilling and enjoyable that it is rather relaxing. That may change of course when your stay is nearing its end or a deadline is coming up, but all in all I can underline Gandhi ji's wise words when he said that "the best way of finding yourself is losing yourself in the service of others".

GRAVIS is like a family and although you become a family member on the first visit, you definitely feel the kindness and welcoming atmosphere brought towards a relative who had been abroad on your return.

From a more practical point of view, I think that volunteering a second time enables you to be more independent, self-reliant and familiar with the environment, colleagues, contents of the work, the climate, etc. which all makes it easier for you, and I would like to believe also for the organisation.

Despite the fact that I worked on a grant proposal this year as well as last year, it was an entirely new experience: a different format, different focus, etc. It simply helped me to gain a more holistic understanding of grant applications and GRAVIS work.

Finally, I also was keen on seeing the changes that had happened during my 11 months of absence, and I was happy to see that there were quite a few. Constant improvement is another thing I deeply appreciate in GRAVIS work as well as openness for criticism and new ideas.

I now have been back just about a week and I already hope to come back to Jodhpur soon.

Eva

Vinita Vyas, India

3rd January 2010

GRAVIS a non government organisation is itself a big achievement to work with. I Vinita Vyas, a management student(ITM business School, Mumbai)worked with GRAVIS for duration of one month form 4th January 2010 to 3rd February 2010. It was a life time experience for me. The work that GRAVIS do for empowering desert communities is really worth appreciating. I did many field visits at village GAGADI and Meenu ki Dhani where GRAVIS has motivated women to join Self Help Groups and earn their livelihood on their own. Today women empowerment is the basic need of the hour, and GRAVIS by its tremendous efforts is doing this work very well.

Being a management student I observed all the aspects of GRAVIS i.e. Human resource, Marketing, Resource management etc. With my observations I found that it is very well organised and all areas are very well taken care off. During my project the staff at GRAVIS supported me a lot and the valuable guidance of all of them helped me to make my project a success.

Working with GRAVIS I developed the feeling of helping others and to do something great for human society. This one month for me was a duration of great success and learning.

VINITA VYAS

ITM BUSINESS SCHOOL

MUMBAI

Reena Chauhan, UK

March-April, 2010

Namaste,

My name is Reena and I am a non-resident Indian, living in the UK. During March and April 2010 I joined the Gravis organisation and, together with the Gravis Team, worked with many women living in the Thar desert who are part of Self Help Groups (SHGs) to understand how the SHGs are currently performing, what type of initiatives they are undertaking to become independent and any issues they are facing. My objective was to write a strategy document which included an analysis of the current situation of SHGs and future recommendations for enhancing self-reliance amongst the women of the desert communities.

Many of the village women I met demonstrated the passion to become economically and socially independent, which was wonderful to see. I experienced first hand the challenges with which the desert communities are faced, which really made me appreciate the hardships they have to go through. Despite this everyone I encountered has a strong spirit and want to help make change happen. This included the Gravis Team which firmly believes in promoting self-reliance at all levels of village society. Part of my research included interviewing several Gravis staff and the collective experience and insights they shared with me gave me a practical perspective of how life is slowly improving for the communities and how much more can be done.

The Gravis Team made me feel very much at home and my stay in Jodhpur was very comfortable due to the hospitality I received. The villagers also made me feel very welcome and I would have gladly taken them up on their offer to stay with them if I was able to! My experience at Gravis was very rewarding and it has helped to give me a different perspective on life which will always stay with me.

Reena Chauhan