When I began volunteering at the House of Dignity, a public asylum for Syria’s socially marginalized, from the indigent elderly to the disabled, from addicts to victims of abuse, I struggled to see the dignity professed in its name. I found no hope in the locked bars around the beds, no compassion in the ragged, unwashed bedclothes. In the beginning, I choked on the sharp, fetid smells of bodies; I saw only the crowded rooms, beds jammed up against each other, lining the peeling, mildew-mottled walls, and I heard only the gurgling screams and moans echoing through the hallways. The problems of the institution seemed stark, unrelenting.

But as I came to spend more time at the institution, arriving before breakfast each day, leaving in the evening as the lights were dimmed, I discovered the shielded, quiet secret of the House of Dignity: people there were happy. Teenaged girls in wheelchairs, who had been hidden away in their homes, locked up in bedrooms for years, because of the stigma of disability, now gathered together at birthday parties. Employees applied their lipstick, curled their hair, lent them bright dresses to wear, and they danced with their arms and torsos, they laughed with each other, they flirted with the young residents from the men’s floor. The clothes were borrowed and the dance hall but a too-bright basement lined in plastic lawn chairs, but here they found new freedoms, friendships, and maybe even dignity. Over many months, the residents taught me to see the asylum anew, through their eyes. The beds were pushed together, but by friends who wanted to gossip. Children shrieked, but with joy at the sight of beloved caretakers. I learned the risks of trusting my naïve assumptions, and the importance of listening to people’s own understandings of their lives. It is this quest for people’s definitions of their worlds that now inspires me to pursue a career in anthropology.

It wasn’t until I was back at Brown University, months later, conducting research with sociologist Gregory Elliott, that I found the theoretical language to make sense of the asylum, in all its complexities and apparent contradictions. Our focus was the concept of mattering, the idea that people are driven by a need to feel they have social value – to feel that others are aware of them, rely on them, and that they can rely on others. Mattering was what I had witnessed at the House of Dignity, although I hadn’t known it. When Awaatif, disowned by her family because of addiction, helps employees prepare dinner, when she comforts younger residents, she once again feels that she is important to others. Badr, an elderly resident, disabled and without family, feels relieved upon when he leads his friend Abu Waleed, unsteady on his cane, through the hallways, when he lights his cigarettes for him, when he helps him peel his orange.

To understand the House of Dignity, I needed both the grounded firsthand field experience, and more rigorous, developed academic theories; in this realization, I came to appreciate social scientific research. It was the process of research that would allow me to unite my separate lives— one lived in lecture halls and libraries, the other in Middle Eastern asylums, prisons, and slums – and that would make each more meaningful, relevant, and useful. When I returned to the Middle East, I brought my new theoretical understandings with me, and I continued to find mattering in unlikely places. I saw the drive to matter in the Awakening fighters, former Al Qaeda members now allied with the American military, whom I photographed and interviewed in south central Iraq. As poor, rural, Sunni men, they had been denied social value for decades; by organizing themselves into a unified, independent political movement, by taking on the responsibility of protecting their communities, they now mattered. I see the need to
matter now in the young, disenfranchised Syrian demonstrators taking to the streets; although they are fighting for concrete political and civil rights, they are also fighting to be recognized, to have a voice in their future, to matter.

I have learned that we cannot understand how our world should be until we understand how it is and why it is. These are the questions I now pursue, through sociological research, through photography, through the collection of oral histories, and through the novel I’m writing for my MFA in fiction. I want to pursue a DPhil in anthropology because I believe that, as the study of the ways people create their truths, its methods and theories are best suited to exploring the manifold, contradictory, and evolving ways we define how, what, and why our world is.

My graduate research will seek to extend the theory of mattering, focusing on how Syria’s marginalized Bedouin locate meaning and maintain collective identities in the midst of radical social, economic, and environmental change. As I write this essay, in a rural suburb of Damascus, Bedouin tribes in the towns and villages around me are demonstrating in the streets, defying the violent oppression of the state. Although they participate in this national revolution alongside other Syrians, the Bedouin take to the streets as Bedouin, describing their movement using traditional tribal concepts like revenge and honor. They are Bedouin, despite great transformations in their occupations, migrations, material cultural, and political organization. My research will investigate the construction and deployment of Bedouin identity, examining the ways this largely disadvantaged minority group uses the label “Bedouin” to negotiate their place in society.

I will examine how identification as Bedouin may represent an effort to attribute positive valuations to an otherwise stigmatized label in order to find mattering.

I have corresponded with Oxford’s Dr. Dawn Chatty, who has done extensive field work with Syria’s Bedouin communities, about my proposed research. Also, Dr. Mette Louise Berg and Dr. Iain Walker, both at Oxford, are leading scholars in the field of identity construction, gender subjectivity, globalization, and notions of belonging.

I certify that this essay is my own work.
October 21, 2003 marked a historic moment for nearly 30,000 indigenous and campesino individuals living in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Known as Los Afectados (the affected ones), these communities had been waiting decades to present their claims in court. On this day, I was traveling with Cristobal Bonifaz, an MIT-trained chemist turned lawyer, to a courthouse in Lago Agrio, Ecuador, a small jungle town on the Colombian border and the location of this landmark trial. Coincidentally, this day was also my fifteenth birthday.

As we boarded our early morning flight from Quito, we headed east deep into the Amazon jungle. The small plane, which flew once daily to the northern Amazon region, was packed with journalists from the international press. I had been assisting Attorney Bonifaz for two years in anticipation of this day when the trial would officially begin and all the documents would be filed in the Lago Agrio courthouse.

I learned about Attorney Bonifaz and his legal work in Latin America while completing my final sixth-grade project, which focused on the cultural and environmental diversity of Ecuador. The opportunity for an introduction occurred the following year, after repeated requests to his daughter, my seventh-grade English teacher, Margarita.

I met Attorney Bonifaz in his Amherst, Massachusetts office. I recall walking over to his building after school before my cross-country practice. His office walls were covered in large antique maps of the Andes and plaques of chemical patents that he held from his 25-year career with DuPont Corporation. After asking many personal questions, the distinguished, white-haired gentleman said with conviction, “OK, if you think you can handle it, we have much work to do.”

Attorney Bonifaz first assigned me to review and sort 76,000 pages of court-released documents. Each document told a distinct story about the affected communities of the Amazon region of Ecuador. I read about individuals such as Diana Caballos, age three, born with leukemia. Her mother lived near an oil pit in the small town of San Carlos where one in six people had cancer.

I became fascinated by the long and complex history surrounding the extraction of oil in Latin America. Dictatorship and illegal contracts, corruption and underdevelopment, indigenous federations and FARC guerrillas were just a few recurring themes. The research provided a comprehensive view of modern Latin American history, demonstrating the importance of having a historically nuanced understanding in order to engage in effective advocacy.

On the day we landed in Lago Agrio, Attorney Bonifaz and I organized the documents and headed to the courthouse in front of which a massive demonstration was taking place. I saw easily 2,000 people chanting “Justicia Ya!” (Justice Now). I recall the headdresses with bright feathers and the wooden spears that most protesters were wielding. The small courthouse, which shared a building with the local butcher, was surrounded by heavily armed Ecuadorian military and policemen wearing riot gear. The journalists were
frantically taking photos as the situation unfolded. We were quickly escorted into the courthouse.

Being in Ecuador and observing the community response to our work after years of legal research inspired me, but it was the chance to explore the Amazon region that had the most profound impact on me. I saw children walking barefoot on oil-slicked roads, toxic waste pits and large burning flares. Upon my return I started Esperanza, the Ecuadorian Shoe Project, which delivered over 12,000 pairs of shoes to protect the children of the Amazon basin from the carcinogenic oil they walked on. We also facilitated the delivery of over 2,000 backpacks with school supplies as well as vital medical equipment for local hospitals.

Two years later we evolved into Esperanza International, Inc., a non-profit organization I founded to create scalable and fast-acting regulation of extractive industries. From both my legal work with Attorney Bonifaz and from the shoe project, I recognized that one of the root causes of the local poverty and contamination was poor regulation of industry. As Executive Director of Esperanza, I engaged attorneys and law schools in the creation of innovative legislation to improve these conditions. For example, Esperanza partnered with the Yale Law School Environmental Protection Clinic and played a key role in drafting Chapter 7, Article 72 of the new Ecuadorian Constitution, which gives nature "the right to restoration" in cases of negative environmental impact. This was the first such language ever incorporated into the constitution of any country. In addition, we drafted the first hybrid exemption tax in Latin America, which dramatically increased the importation and use of hybrid vehicles in Ecuador.

In 2009 I formed Equitable Origin, the first global, social, and environmental certification system for the oil and gas industry, a logical outgrowth of Esperanza. This addresses the need for a stakeholder-based rating system to further mitigate the environmental and social impact of the oil and gas industry. In our second year of operation, we continue to grow as our EO100 Standard begins to be implemented across Latin America with the support of diverse stakeholders ranging from governments, oil and gas operators, NGOs and indigenous and local communities.

I have continuously sought to expand my historical knowledge of Latin America. While at Brown I have gained a comprehensive understanding of its history, politics and culture. My multi-disciplinary academic study has served to enrich and add context to nearly ten years of work in the region. Whether evaluating the geopolitics of oil in the Amazon or completing an ethnographic study on the emergence of mobilized indigenous federations, my studies have always informed my advocacy. I hope to deepen my understanding of Latin America through a two-year Master of Philosophy degree in Latin American Studies at Oxford University, where I could not only expand my knowledge beyond Ecuador and Peru to Colombia and Brazil, but also see Latin America from the perspective of the United Kingdom. This new view as well as the chance to study with scholars such as Eduardo Posada-Carbo and Timothy Power will better prepare me for my intended life’s work in Latin America.
Rhodes Personal Statement

“Man, this is hard!” I knew that Tyler, an 8th grader at Bridgham Middle School, found math incredibly challenging. With a history of suspensions and a home in one of the country’s poorest neighborhoods, learning was not a top priority. Many of his teachers could no longer get through to him. But there had to be a way. Tyler loved computer games: why not tap into his natural curiosity and teach him how to make his own?

As we worked together to program a simple game of PONG, I challenged Tyler to derive the formula for bouncing the ball off of the paddle. He hesitated at first, but with some encouragement, he began to energetically draw unit circles on his paper to find the answer. I watched in amazement as he shouted out, “180 degrees minus where the ball was going before!” I responded with a high five. It was a simple formula but a big step for Tyler. Making PONG was able to reach him in ways that his textbook could not.

Tyler’s discovery incited one of my own: I can harness the power of software to address some of society’s toughest challenges. Developing consumer devices and helping others need not be mutually exclusive. Instead, everyday technologies have a capacity to enhance learning beyond what routine tests and quizzes can do.

Growing up, I was raised to believe that real learning happens when we experiment. During elementary school, I spent many Sunday afternoons at my parents’ clothing store, running around the clothing racks, reading sale signs and calling out questions like “what’s 20% off of $25?” My parents always answered. My favorite part of the store was the cash register. It was so mysterious – it made funny sounds, flashed green numbers on a small screen, and ejected obscure pieces of paper after each sale. If I had been good that day, my parents would let me ring up customers. As I learned to key in sales and return correct amounts of change, I started to connect with simple mathematics. Math was vital to running the store. Numbers were abstract, but the cash register made them real.

I went through middle and high school searching for a cash register. When I started college, I finally found one, albeit a modernized version with more processing power: a computer. From the start, I was hooked by what I could create with software. I spent my first two years learning about the software engineering behind innovations in digital entertainment and social networking, but I wanted to use what I was learning in the classroom for the direct benefit of people.

It was early in my junior year when I first heard about a professor’s use of computer science to aid in natural disaster relief. This was the type of application I had been looking for. I wasn’t familiar with the types of algorithms he used, but I sent him an email one night nonetheless to express my desire to start building a bridge between school and the world I had a responsibility to serve. Soon thereafter, I started to simulate disaster scenarios to determine how to restore electricity to affected peoples. I always heard that technology could be transformative, but I saw for the first time that I could help create software to promote social good.

My junior year was also when I deepened my exploration of how computer science could help my peers learn. As a teaching assistant, I helped novice programmers bring their creativity to fruition through code. It was inspiring to see the tenacity with which they struggled through challenging programming problems, motivated largely by the end products they would eventually see on screen. Through the late nights I spent helping students complete their programming projects, it became clear that the computer was an excellent teaching tool, but also that I had the capacity to shape the learning of those around me. With the right tools, I could help inspire students to eventually take their knowledge and use it to start the next big tech
company, discover new areas of research, and perhaps most importantly, share their newfound expertise with the next generation of learners.

My experiences as a TA sparked my encounter with Tyler after a friend and I started Learning Exchange, an initiative focused on using technology to help inner-city middle-schoolers become excited about learning. Tyler’s discovery proved to me that a world exists between computer science and education just begging to be explored; a world that uses technology to bring students and teachers together in pursuit of creativity. Tyler reminded me that learning is not only about sharing knowledge – it’s about sharing excitement and building confidence in one’s abilities. With the widespread appeal of rapidly evolving consumer technologies and the magic of software, we have an unprecedented opportunity to make learning more exciting and relevant for each student.

I have so much to learn in my quest to bring together education and technology and I hope to start by pursuing two one-year Master’s’ degrees at the University of Oxford. In the first year, I will pursue a taught M.Sc. in the Department of Education’s Learning and Technology group under Dr. Chris Davies. The program’s emphasis on letting educational needs – not the technology itself – drive the use of new media in the classroom will teach me to put learners and educators first when determining how software can help. During the second year, I will pursue a taught M.Sc. in Computer Science under Professor of Software Engineering Jim Davies. With a theoretical understanding of how to create assistive technologies and the support of a computer science department that encourages collaboration with the public and private sectors, I will work with publicly-funded grade schools to identify and implement new software solutions that enhance learning. The Rhodes Scholarship will enable me to use the innovation of today to help us better educate those who will be responsible for the innovation of tomorrow.

I certify that this essay is my own work.