

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Devin Wardell, India, Interdisciplinary Studies

For nine months of the year, I lived a traditional American childhood and adolescence in suburban New Jersey. But as every school year drew to an end, I eagerly anticipated my family's annual ten-hour journey north that launched our summer in Maine. Residing for fifteen summers in the rural, coastal town of Brooksville, my family and I became members of this community far removed from highways and television. I spent the summers getting to know my neighbors -- farmers, carpenters, and lobstermen, as well as artisans and artists -- many of whom had left cities and suburbs to live lives imbued with nature and creativity.

Among these neighbors Suzanne Grosjean, a professional weaver, had the greatest impact on my life, for she sparked my enduring passion for textiles. I apprenticed to Suzanne for seven summers, and she taught me her trade. Together we spun yarn from sheep fleece on our spinning wheels, dyed threads with indigo leaves and goldenrod flowers that we picked from her garden, and hand-wove rugs to sell in her shop. Working with Suzanne I fell in love with the meditative process of transforming natural materials into beautiful woven goods. I knew from that first summer apprenticeship that textiles and hand-weaving would play a central role in my life.

It was clear to me that I had interests in common with our Maine neighbors, and I wanted to incorporate similar artisanal pursuits into my life. At the same time, I felt drawn to my father's work, leading inner-city hospitals serving low-income patients. I greatly respected the fact that he accomplished a social good -- improving the quality of people's lives and their communities -- by using skills in business and coalition-building. I aspired to emulate my father and engage in a career that drives positive social change through business. My challenge was to find a profession that combined business for social good with my passion for textiles.

Thus I have worked to develop skills and knowledge of both textiles and business. At Middlebury College, I wrote my International Studies senior honors thesis on William Morris, a 19th century entrepreneur who sought to address social ills through his textile business. I am a Fellow and Regional Chair of the StartingBloc Institute on Social Innovation, which explores how for-profit businesses can drive social good. Concurrently, I am completing graduate level courses in Sustainable and Socially Responsible Apparel Business at the University of Delaware, while working full-time as an international business consultant. In this role, I lead international workshops, teaching financial analysis and business strategy to Fortune 500 senior managers, so that they can better cope with the complexities of their competitive business environments while leading change in their companies. Building on this international business experience, I have traveled to developing countries including Ghana and Thailand where I explored hand-weaving communities and talked to weavers about the market challenges they face.

My goal is to increase economic development opportunities for artisans by employing my passion for textiles and my business skills. My experiences as an apprentice, graduate student, and international consultant have prepared me for the next critical step toward achieving this. I will live and work among the textile artisans with whom I plan to partner, so that I may understand the market pressures they experience. Subsequently, I will supplement this field research and practical knowledge with graduate study in international development and business. This will allow me to meaningfully contribute to scholarly literature concerning socially responsible business and to practically apply these concepts to drive social good. Suzanne in Maine and my father in New Jersey inspired my passion for textiles and socially responsible business. As I engage these passions through study, travel, and work in the coming years, I look forward to positively impacting other people's lives and the world.