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Undergrad Research: Molly Mandell named UEPS scholar for 2015-2016 school year!

by American

Studies

Today we are thrilled to share a conversation with AMS undergraduate Molly Mandell, who is the recipient of an Unrestricted Endowed Presidential Scholarship (UEPS) for the 2015-16 school

AMS :: ATX is a blog dedicated to representing the many activities and interests of the department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Together with the department's Twitter feed, this blog exists to serve the AMS and Austin communities by acting as a hub for up-to-date information on events and opportunities at UT and beyond.



year. The UEPS award is one of the most notable scholarships offered to UT students from a wide range of departments. We are super excited that Molly will be representing AMS and doing great work in the year ahead. To find out more about her next project, which involves a trip to Cuba to visit and photograph organic farms, read on!



Tell me about what you are working on right now.

This summer, I'm working with the school of Undergraduate Studies and American Studies professor **Randolph Lewis** on an independent research project where I will be going to Cuba to photograph organic farms. I'm trying to understand sustainability there. Here at UT, I worked at the Micro Farm, which was an extension of my summer WWOOFing (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) in France and Italy. I've always been interested in organic, sustainable farming and



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agriculture, but that really inspired me to come back and to look into my own community and see what is going on locally.

How have your American Studies classes influenced the way you think about sustainability and organic agriculture?

My American Studies classes have taught me to think really critically in a lot of ways. I didn't start as an American Studies major. I found it by chance. I'm also interested in the arts. I like how in American Studies you can look at a lot of different topics and see common themes across them and understand how things reflect society. It makes you question society both locally and more broadly.

American Studies classes had a big influence on why I chose to go to Cuba, actually. At first, I didn't make the connection between agriculture and Cuba. I was just following all the news once the United States started relations again with Cuba. I feel like Cuba is either romanticized or demonized in the United States. Simultaneously, there are all these discussions happening about when the embargo is lifted and America is once again involved with Cuba, how all these things will get better. I think there is a lot of truth to that; many things will improve, but I also think that there are parts of their culture that we don't talk about that are really unique and special. As I was researching I

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started to read about agriculture, and it's fascinating: basically, they were forced to be entirely organic because they haven't had access to pesticides and machinery. They are now on their way to being one of the most sustainable countries in the world, but that is really subject to change as the United States gets more involved.

Tell us about one of your favorite experiences in an American Studies classroom.

The class that got me involved in American Studies was the Politics of Creativity course with **Randolph Lewis** in the Fall of 2013. That class was initially a writing flag for me, and I picked it at random. In that class, I did my research paper on Marfa, Texas, and the controversy between Prada Marfa and Playboy Marfa, which are two roadside art installations. I was talking about which one should stay there in relation to Donald Judd's ideas around art and what it should be. That was really influential for me because I hadn't really explored my more creative thinking side, and that class pushed me to do so. It caused me to rethink academics in general. There are all these notions about what it means to get a degree and do research—write a research paper. But I get to incorporate photography, as I will in my Cuba project, which is important. The end result for my Cuba project will be a book published as both a paper and eBook. I'm old school, I still like holding things. My photographs will have long captions as an alternate to a long research paper. My

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American Studies classes have taught me that you can use your creative side in academics, which is really exciting.

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**Undergrad Research: Molly
Mandell Awarded 2015-2016
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AMS :: ATX says:**

October 12, 2015 at 1:36 pm

[...] If you'd like to learn more about Molly and her research on organic farming in Cuba, check out this interview we did with her last spring. [...]

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