Eating is one of life’s most important events. Our daily social patterns are shaped around mealtime. Community and relationships are developed over food. Culture is expressed by the flavor and variety of cuisine. Health and well-being are nurtured, or harmed, by the kinds of foods we eat. For all of these reasons and more, a project related to encouraging healthy mealtime habits among the residents at the Oasis Center was the focus of our team’s efforts this year. Continuing on the work of previous fellows who developed a produce garden, this year we sought to delve more deeply into issues related to food and mental, physical, and spiritual health. During this process, I learned much about teamwork and service.

As a medical student I have learned much about the health crisis in our country related to obesity. Overeating of nutrient-deficient diets combined with sedentary lifestyles have contributed to an epidemic of serious health problems—diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, etc—that have resulted in death, disability, and billions of dollars in healthcare costs. While the obesity epidemic is more prominent among adults, one-third of children are now obese and the number is rising steadily. These problems are particularly pronounced among low-income populations where cost is a priority over substance and health literacy is more limited.

The core mission of the Oasis Center is to support teenagers at the greatest risk in Nashville for homelessness and poverty. As a place where these youth are sheltered and given personal attention, our team decided that instruction in healthy eating habits could be highly effective here. Because these teens come from unstable home situations we also believed that recipients of Oasis Center services would also be at risk for having little or no instruction in how to choose and prepare healthy meals. In cooperation with the Oasis staff, we settled on a two-pronged approach to promoting healthy eating habits among residents at the Oasis shelter. The first component was to watch and discuss informational documentaries on the ulterior motives of the food industry, and the second was to entrain practical skills in food selection and preparation. Through this series of
events, we hoped to teach not only that healthy eating choices promote physical health but also to show that meal preparation and mealtime can be positive experiences and promote mental and spiritual health, as well.

During the course of the year we held two documentary screenings and two cooking events consisting of a trip to the Nashville farmer’s market and preparation of a meal at the Oasis shelter. The success of these events can largely be attributed to the enthusiasm of the residents we were working with. I was very pleased that at each event I attended there were teenagers who were excited about contributing to the meal and talking about their experiences with healthful eating. It was evident that these children were not immune to the allure of fast and processed foods. Sadly, several were already obese. However, nearly all of the children that I interacted with were aware of the importance of healthy food choices and enjoyed the healthful meal that we helped prepare. Their openness to participate in these events and discuss the topic was refreshing and was the highlight of the experience for me.

Although we accomplished many of the goals we set out for ourselves at the beginning of the year, I believe we came across several challenges that limited our success. The Oasis shelter setting has certain advantages—a kitchen, an active staff, residents who stay full-time and prepare meals for themselves. However, it also has high turnover in its residents and a series of events was not well suited to reinforce our program over time. In the future, the Oasis Youth Opportunity Center should be considered for at least a portion of these activities because they have residents who live there for months at a time. We also faced a problem of scheduling. Arranging four busy schedules together was challenging, and our attempt to recruit a local chef to participate in an event failed because we could not find a suitable date. In retrospect, our enthusiasm and organization was high at the beginning of the year but tended to wane as academic and other responsibilities built up over the course of each semester. This is certainly a lesson in leadership as clear planning and accountability are vital to ensuring execution of a project.

I feel very privileged to have been able to work on this project. As I have mentioned, the highlight for me was to serve the courageous youth of the Oasis Center. Interacting with students from other disciplines was also very rewarding, and this
experience has certainly positively influenced my ability and desire to participate in these kinds of collaborations in the future.