Student Spotlight: Miriam El-Rif

Who She Is:
Miriam El-Rif is a Biological Sciences Scholar and fourth-year senior with a Dual Degree in Microbiology and Political Science with Research Distinction. She really enjoys being outdoors and is passionate about helping others.

What She Does:
Here at OSU, El-Rif is an HIV Test Counselor at the Student Wellness Center, a Biological Sciences Scholar, and a Morrill Scholar. During the summer, she volunteers at One Heartland, where she once led a BUCK-I-SERV trip. One Heartland is a camp in Minnesota for people (ages 6-21) who suffer from negative stigma. The campers come from a variety of backgrounds; some suffer from illnesses such as HIV/AIDS or diabetes, some have dealt with homelessness, some are part of the GBLTQ community, etc. “I mentor a few of my campers throughout the school year,” she explains, “and each of them is a light in my life.”

How She Got Involved with Clinton Global Initiative University:
Like many pre-med students, El-Rif felt that she was under a lot of pressure after her freshman year, and wondered if perhaps she would have to give up on becoming a physician and instead pursue a career as a human rights lawyer. After reading the book Mountains Beyond Mountains, she learned of the poverty in Haiti and how it was partly controlled by the government. At this point, she was “thoroughly disturbed” by the issue and felt a responsibility to understand it, a responsibility that becoming a human rights lawyer would not fulfill. “I buried myself in knowledge through my political science and microbiology classes about the inner workings of the UN, the politics within Latin America, and how people get foreign aid and the mechanisms of pathogenicity,” she says. Knowing she would have to wait years before actually getting to treat the Haitian patients whose government was failing them, she sought other ways to help and decided to apply for the CGI U program.

Her Commitment to Action:
In her further reading about Haiti, El-Rif learned of an incident in which a Nepalese peacekeeping troop was sent to Haiti and improperly disposed of waste there, causing an outbreak of cholera that has infected over 700,000 people and killed over 9,000. The disease is treatable by rehydration therapy and preventable by proper sanitation, yet it has still spread quickly and has affected so many people. The United Nations refuses to take responsibility for the situation despite being sued by human rights lawyers on behalf of Haiti. El-Rif explains, “Using my paired degrees, I am blessed with the support through working with Dr. Jiyoung Lee from the College of Public Health and Dr. Alexander Thompson from the Political Science department to write an interdisciplinary thesis on a solution for Haiti to contain cholera from a microbiological perspective through a combination of Community Led Total Sanitation and self-sustainable hand-washing, and a solution on the governance challenge Haiti is facing with the United Nations.” Her commitment to action is not only to make sure the people of Haiti get the reparations they need, but to prevent further outbreak. El-Rif is committed to ensuring that Haiti regains stability, is no longer reliant on foreign aid, and becomes a bigger actor in the global arena.