This month, the Service-Learning Program sat down with course instructor Julie Miller to ask her about her transition from serving as a Service-Learning Teaching Assistant (S-LTA) during her time as a Northeastern undergraduate student to currently serving as the instructor for Global Experience.

How did your experience as a student and being a service-learning teaching assistant (S-LTA) as an undergrad at Northeastern and graduate student at the University of California – Berkeley inform your career path?

“My experiences as a student and facilitator of Service-Learning (S-L) internationally and domestically played critical roles in shaping my path in experiential social justice education.

As an undergraduate student in Human Services and American Sign Language, S-L was an integral part of my education and without it, I probably would not have pursued a career in social work. My relationship with the Center of Community Service at NU allowed me to learn from, and with, incredible professors, including Professors Bob Hall and John Wolfe, as well as students and community partners, all of whom were dedicated to the advancement of S-L in social justice capacities. I was also privileged to serve as a Community Partner for several S-L classes because of my intense involvement with Social Change through Peace Games, now called Peace through Play. And, after graduating from Northeastern, my year of travels serving as an international S-LTA for Professor Lori Gardinier to India, Benin, and Costa Rica were personally and professionally transformative for me.

I brought my interest and experience in S-L to UC Berkeley with me, where I studied Social Work on the graduate level. The Cal Corps Public Service Center became a second home for me at Berkeley. As Program Director of Oakland Community Builders, a community organizing internship program, I facilitated a two-semester Service-Learning course for undergraduates and worked alongside radical and inspiring thought leaders in the field of Critical S-L, which is the exact intersection of experiential education and social justice theory and practice.

My S-L experiences, both as a student and as a facilitator, have led me to where I am today. My identity as a social worker will sustain no matter what "job" I am doing at the time, and that is because I have been reminded time and time again of my role as an agent of social change. I see my teaching and program design work now at Northeastern as well as my research at MIT as natural extensions of my education and training. Just five years after embarking on my S-L journey, I can truly applaud and deeply appreciate the work of site supervisors, S-LTAs, faculty, students, and community members because I have been in the position of all of these people. Coming full circle from student to S-LTA, to community partner, and now to Instructor and S-L Program Director of NU Global has, and continues to be, a humbling, inspiring, and generally wild ride.”

Please share an overview of your course and why you chose to include S-Las part of your curriculum.

“The Global Experience course is in a pilot semester as a survey course of social justice issues, weaving together cross-cultural collaboration, civic engagement, and social justice by using S-L as a pedagogical tool. The course was created from the idea that students coming to Boston for the first time should not miss out on the real Boston. This entails meeting those who actually live around Northeastern, namely the residents of communities that you read about in the newspaper. It’s one thing for students to sit in a classroom and read textbooks about issues in the community, but it’s totally different to be on site with youth, elders and community members. Service-Learning serves as the textbook for Global Experience, providing students with the opportunity to open the book and have Boston come to life.”

What feedback have you received from your community partners since the start of the semester (including at the Service-Learning Partnership Orientation)?

“I was overwhelmed since the beginning of the semester with positive feedback about our Global Experience program. It can be easy to underestimate the teachings and insights that international students can bring to organizations and the Northeastern campus, but we are fortunate enough to be partnering with organizations who share our vision. Education-based partners often comment on how excited they are to have Global Experience students because they want their students to be exposed to different cultures. I do hear concerns about language barriers and cultural gaps, as Global Experience is a program for international students, but I find that those concerns are often balanced with excitement.”