In the summer of 2022, I was given the opportunity through the London School of Economics to work in the remote area of Caquetá, Colombia. This agrarian terrain on the edge of the Amazon has been home to some of the most continuous conflict Latin America has seen in the last decades. The Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC), a communist militia, fought for change from 1964 until 2016. A peace accord was signed between FARC and the government, but there is still lingering distress throughout the country. Tens of thousands have been displaced, drug cartels threaten to move in on the illicit coca market the FARC once controlled, and families are going hungry. Last summer I was tasked with interviewing ex-combatants, government officials, displaced victims, and NGO workers. I collected robust data and have begun processing it all in the interim. I care deeply about these people, and I see a way to help.

Another part of my work in that area was to initiate a community garden for victims of the conflict. My goal for summer 2023 is to bring formerly disparate Colombian identities together in the pursuit of sustainability and peace through scaling that community-garden model to the rural context of a remote village. The community-centered approach and process will be documented in a book to be both published and distributed across Colombia for Colombians, bringing light to the hope and promise of continued peace that the project represents. This work will bring together victims of the conflict, both displaced peoples and abused villagers, and former combatants of the conflict, both former FARC and former military. I will place a rising local NGO and a vetted ex-combatant/ex-military team at the stern of driving lasting change in the long-troubled countryside. I will be there to support Colombians helping Colombians. I will foster new relationships across once-strained social circles, man a shovel and hoe in the physical process of cultivating land, and assist my local friends towards the desired goals.

The primary partner will be the fundación de mujeres campesinas sin tierra víctimas (FUMUCASTIVIC), a new foundation I assisted last summer. Their name may be complicated, but the vision of the founder, Maria, is simple: a new beginning. They are women that once farmed land but became displaced victims of the conflict. They are centered in a low-income neighborhood called La Gloria in the municipal capital of Caquetá. This neighborhood was constructed specifically for displaced victims. They once all had livelihoods from the land, but now have nothing. FUMUCASTIVIC was founded last May and immediately went to work on a community garden as a way to create sustainable income for these women without work. The garden is up and running, and these women have learned a great deal about teamwork and community in the process. They are excited for an opportunity to take these skills to the countryside and assist in implementing a larger-scale garden in a village much like the ones they were forced to abandon during the conflict.
**Project:** Gardening Community After Conflict  
**Country where the project will take place:** Colombia  
**Nominating University:** International House at the University of Chicago  
**Designated project leaders:** Connor Christensen (U.S.) and Daren Colby (U.S.)

Along with Maria’s team, I will bring on two rising leaders from Trust After Betrayal (TAB). Uverney was once a FARC combatant. Now he’s the first recipient of TAB’s *Find Your Why* scholarship. Dr. Erin McFee founded the project as a way to bridge the divide between a life in the ranks of a militia and a life of purpose in post-conflict society. Uverney is invested in using his upbringing in an agrarian context, his leadership skills acquired in the FARC, and his vision for a thriving Colombia to grow into a community leader for change. Through the scholarship, Uverney has been working with former Colombian military commander, Ignacio, in preparing for university study and building various managerial skills. These once sworn enemies, Uverney and Ignacio, are now bound together in their mutual pursuit of peace. Their life experiences will bring unparalleled support to FUMUCASTIVIC and the Project for Peace throughout the implementation of the community garden in the rural context. Together, this team, along with Daren, myself, and the people of the village, will work on two fronts: we’ll assist land-owning village farmers in implementing sustainable farming and selling practices of non-coca products as set forth by the Colombian peace accord’s *Integrated National Program for the Substitution of Illicitly Used Crops*, and we’ll guide the rest of the community (i.e., youth, non-land owners, leadership) in scaling the urban community garden to suit the needs of the village, reestablishing former locally indigenous foodstuffs that ceased to be cultivated following the illicit drug boom, and create a balance of home-grown sustenance and sustainable income streams through the fruits of the garden. By bringing in partners from outside the community, we’ll establish a network of trade between the village and the municipal capital, and, most importantly, we’ll foster community between every subgroup both involved in and affected by the conflict.

Trust After Betrayal successfully published a book for a fishing village in Mexico, capturing a similar image of hope and peace after conflict. We will follow this successful model and document the intercommunal work of the gardens growing both in the urban and rural environments, highlighting the dissolution of identities such as *soldier*, *combatant*, and *victim*, and share beautiful images and stories of Colombians helping Colombians regain and maintain normalcy and life after so many years of hardship. The message of the book will be twofold: it will guide other Colombian communities in creating their own community agrarian projects, and it will share with the rest of Colombia that the conflict’s past has no power over the people’s present and future. Citizens from every background will see their country healing. Throughout the publication process we will take on a local village photographer along with a Caquetá publishing company to help produce the final product. Books will initially be distributed free of cost to communities all around Colombia, and any future earnings will go directly to the village. I have personal experience in working with every element of this project, and I have the fullest trust that these friends and colleagues of mine in Colombia can successfully execute.

Daren and I come to this project as former members of the United States military. We’ve seen the aftermath of conflict in the eyes of our fellow veterans, in the streets of the Middle East, and most recently in the
Project: Gardening Community After Conflict  
Country where the project will take place: Colombia  
Nominating University: International House at the University of Chicago  
Designated project leaders: Connor Christensen (U.S.) and Daren Colby (U.S.)

stories on the ground in Latin America. Our personal experiences coupled with our study of Public Policy drives a passion for formulating structures of lasting change at the grassroots level. We plan to invest the Project’s funds into a sustainable community garden for a struggling village and into the publication of the book. There is already a village that has expressed interest in taking part in this project: I had the opportunity to speak with their leadership, answer community questions, and tour their farms in August 2022.

Sustained peace in Colombia is the dissolution of former identities, a new sense of community, and a confidence in a future of providing basic necessities for loved ones. I’m confident that this project will do just that. As already demonstrated in my previous project with FUMUCASTIVIC in the urban garden, people are ready to work as a community. As proven through Trust After Betrayal, former enemies are ready to work together. As I learned in the villages last summer, the families there need new means of providing for themselves. They are hungry, their profits from coffee and plantains have not been sufficient in recent years to provide for themselves, and they are at risk of falling prey to future cartels that want them to grow coca. The Colombian government has officially announced that peace has been achieved, but the people on the ground disagree. This project will heal old wounds, establish a new sense of community and purpose, and share that story of peace with the rest of the country and the world.