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## Teaching in some of the most difficult schools in the country: Global Teaching Project



What began as a routine tutoring assignment with the [Global Teaching Project](#) (GTP) in January 2025, turned out to be anything but for Harvard's Varshini Odayar ('24). That semester, the classroom teacher, Mrs. Cynthia Chambers, at South Pontotoc High School in rural Pontotoc, Mississippi, fell ill and soon passed away, leaving her students and school dazed and grieving.

Varshini, who has tutored with GTP since 2023, was assigned to South Pontotoc's AP Biology class last semester and partnered with Mrs. Chambers to assist the class twice per week over Zoom for hourly sessions in which she would review challenging homework problems, provide in-depth explanations for complex topics, and generally serve as a mentor for students. In the days and weeks after Mrs. Chambers' passing, Varshini, alongside South Pontotoc and GTP staff, quickly mobilized to ensure that the students had a support system and a steady teaching structure in which to continue learning. It would be a steep climb to get the students ready for the AP Exams in May, but everyone was up to the task.

This is just one example of the many challenges that students in the Global Teaching Project's Advanced STEM Access Program face. The Program, launched in Mississippi in 2017, works with high-poverty, rural Mississippi public high schools to ensure that promising students have access to Advanced Placement science courses those students need to achieve their full potential. The Advanced STEM Access Program provides classes in four AP courses—AP Physics 1, AP Computer Science Principles, AP Biology, and AP Statistics—by providing a range of resources, teachers, professional development, Teaching Assistants, and university-based residential instructional programs.

**One of the most critical elements of the Global Teaching Project's blended learning model is the extensive tutoring provided by college STEM majors from leading universities around the country**, such as Harvard, Yale, the University of Virginia, Columbia, and Vanderbilt, among many others. These Teaching Assistants work with Mississippi high school students multiple times per week by synchronous video conference, as well as in person at the Global Teaching Project's residential programs held throughout the year at Mississippi's flagship universities. Teaching Assistants also have the opportunity to travel to Mississippi and meet with the students at their schools at the start of the academic year.

Varshini is one of many Harvard students who have become part of the Global Teaching Project family over the years. Ian Espy ('23), a Mississippi native, stated:

“Being a Teaching Assistant with the Global Teaching Project was one of the most meaningful things I've ever done, especially as a Mississippi native. When I look back at my time with the Global Teaching Project, I don't think there's any better way I could've given back to my community.”

For Varshini, she was drawn to GTP because of its mission and because of her love of teaching. On a personal level, GTP's focus on access to education and opportunity resonated with her as her family is from India originally; issues of access, particularly in rural areas, were deeply meaningful to her. It is her love of teaching and building connections through teaching, however, that has kept her coming back year after year, even as she is now heading into her second year of medical school. To Varshini, the Global Teaching Project offers students the unique opportunity to connect, in-person, with students and teachers from rural Mississippi as well as college students from around the country—an opportunity that few, if any, other education programs provide.

Moreover, even as she pursues a career in medicine, Varshini sees the long-term value of teaching—something she is quick to add would benefit any college student, whether they are interested in teaching or not. As she noted, “any career you pursue will have some educational component – in medicine for example, we'll be learning and teaching for the rest of our lives; it

is important to have these skills no matter what career you choose. Teaching helps you to know your own information better and shows you your own gaps.”

As for her students at South Pontotoc High School, Varshini says that they demonstrated remarkable resilience in the wake of a tragic situation. They stepped up to support each other, and worked hard to learn the material and prepare for the AP exam. Regardless of how they ultimately performed on the AP Exam, Varshini and everyone at the Global Teaching Project recognizes the powerful lessons that her students learned this semester, from persevering through difficult situations to working under pressure. We are grateful Varshini could be a part of their journey.

