After a year and a half of gutting an old house, rewiring the electricity, installing plumbing, clearing the overgrown land, building up poor soil, painting, hammering, and the like, Pay It Forward Farm opened its doors in May of 2014. The farm was started by a 21-year-old woman with a mission: stewardship, community, and sustainability. Sophie Viandier, the owner and founder, is a native of Andover, New Hampshire, where Pay it Forward Farm (PIFF) is located. After attending Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Vermont, she began Gaia University International’s Integrative EcoSocial Design program. The farm is the materialization of her knowledge of and experience with natural building and permaculture that she gained and is currently gaining from her eco-centric education.

The farm is situated on just under one acre of land on a rural highway in Andover, sandwiched between the towns of Franklin and New London. The main house, gardens, chicken and rabbit enclosures, 3 grey water ponds, greenhouse, hoop house, outdoor compost toilet, wood stacks, and outdoor sitting area are current features of the farm, many of which were added during my internship period, with more being added every week since. Sophie began the farm as a design project for school using permaculture zoning and natural building techniques, but it has evolved into much more. The farm is Andover’s first community education center for regenerative and sustainable agriculture, and design/build techniques.

Sophie moved into the farmhouse in May, and I arrived as her first long-term intern in June. My experience was entirely holistic, which spoke to my being an anthropology major, but also physically and materially practical, speaking to my geology minor. My time at PIFF can be characterized as an intensive crash-course learning of permaculture and natural design, with lessons in local environmental policy and natural resource management, sustainability, farm culture, and alternative lifestyles.
Over the 6 week period, I worked 5 to 8 hours per day during the week. My responsibilities included caring for the garden beds (watering, weeding, planting, etc.), feeding the chickens, transporting compost, contacting individuals and farms about animal sales and plant donations, and co-managing PIFF’s social media interfaces (Facebook and Instagram). In addition to my duties at PIFF, I worked in the Penacook Community Garden (PCG), a community garden project that Sophie manages supported by the Penacook Community Center (501c3). The garden is located in the town of Penacook, New Hampshire and consists of two 110’ by 32’ feet plots, which are designed with permaculture techniques to grow food for the local elementary schools, elderly homes, day cares, and food bank. Over the six week period, I planted, weeded, composted, mulched, and harvested vegetables and fruits, including kale, blueberries, spinach, and peas, as well as aided in the Jump and Sprout program which brought children from the daycare center to the garden once a week to learn about food production.

The manual labor of farm life, as noted above, was only a portion of my experience. In addition to being the owner and founder of the farm, Sophie also serves as a selectwoman for the town of Andover’s mayoral board. I accompanied her to several meetings for a local development project run under her title of selectwoman. Chaffee Beach, located on Highland Lake in Andover, is adjacent to a prime wetland area, and was in need of a beach clean up, as well as a refurbishing of recreational spaces and pathway accessibility. I accompanied Sophie to several meetings with the local townspeople in a collaborative effort to gear the beach’s development in a way that incorporates the desire and vision of those in the community. The finished project included palette picnic tables and chairs, a covered walkway that did not interfere with the zoning of the prime wetland area, and a new raft for diving and laying out in the lake.
Though PIFF did not yet produce enough for market, I attended about 5 different farmers markets on a semi-weekly basis to support Sophie's peers. One farmer, Andal S., is currently managing a farm by herself through the NOFA-NH’s Journeyperson Program, providing farmers in their first few years in production with the kind of hands-on support, training, and community connection. I spoke to her about her experience, which includes waking up at 5AM on market days to begin harvesting, cutting and packaging for market, and sometimes the market is cancelled due to weather, closing sales for the day, rendering her days work unpaid. We traveled to various farms, including Andal’s for a work-party, where Sophie's group of farmer friends would come together and work on one farm for a day, and at the end there would be a community potluck. The farms would rotate to increase productivity of labor, which would not only benefit the farm being worked but also create a system of community support so that all farmers involved benefit.

We visited Garlic Hill Farm in Cornish, New Hampshire for a pig slaughtering, during which time I viewed my first animal slaughter and also learned about the technicalities and regulations of animal slaughtering and butchering set by the FDA. Another highly valuable experience was sitting in on Sophie’s meeting with Tom Workman, CEO and Executive Director of the Franklin Falls Downtown Development Authority. The town of Franklin, an old mill town next to Andover, has been neglected for years by the city employees and many prospective developers. With a heavy drug culture and mainly Section 8 housing, the beautiful downtown area with its abandoned mills and storefronts, and underused river walk, the potential of the city is left unharvested. Tom Workman is in the process of converting downtown Franklin into a public-private partnership that will use permaculture and natural design techniques to redesign
the entire downtown, while preserving many of its historic aspects. This experience of learning about the plans underway for Franklin inspired me to utilize my newly gained knowledge of permaculture and personal yearning for a greener and more sustainable society to produce a plan for a social enterprise with three aims: elimination of waste, sustainability, and building of community.

My internship experience was amazingly unique - I found myself on a newly started farm, led by an incredibly driven and environmentally and socially progressive woman, worked in ways that I had never physically or mentally challenged myself before, and engaged with some of the most interesting people I have ever had the chance to meet in my life. Going into this internship, I had only a slight idea of what “permaculture” was, which is technically defined as “permanent agriculture/permanent culture,” but my experience has shown me it is much more. The principles of earth care, people care, and fair share are both paramount and applicable in many areas of life, and I have continued to incorporate the lessons of sustainability I gained from the farm in my daily life. Before my internship I had planned to attend graduate school for Environmental Law, but now I plan to pursue a Masters in Food Systems, and hopefully from there will enter into the realm of social entrepreneurship.