I’m delighted to invite university students to apply for my 2018 win-a-trip contest. I’ve been holding these contests since 2006, and taking the winner along with me on a reporting trip to cover global poverty and social justice issues. My aim is to generate interest in neglected global issues and get more people writing about them.

The winner will write pieces for me on the New York Times website. HBO did a documentary called “Reporter” based on my 2007 win-a-trip journey to Congo; it’s on Amazon and iTunes if you want to see what you’re getting yourself in for. The contest begins immediately and you must apply by Sunday, Dec. 10th, 2017.

Read the full rules here. The contest is open to students enrolled in an American college or university, either as an undergraduate or graduate. To apply, submit an essay explaining why I should pick you. Please don’t gush about my reporting — just explain what you bring to the table. It might be that you’re a great writer or photographer, or it might be that you grew up poor and know something about poverty, or grew up rich and don’t know a thing about it. I’m not looking for expertise but for intelligence and great communication skills so that your posts, photos and social media will make other students interested in these issues and generate some conversations. If you blog or have other writing, photography or video experience, mention it and send links.

To enter, use this form at the Center for Global Development website. The center will help me winnow down the applicants to a much smaller pool of finalists, and then with the help of my assistant, Zoe Greenberg, I’ll choose the winner. My aim is to travel for a week or two, perhaps in the late spring or early summer. I’ll try to work around the winner’s schedule, but if you know for sure you won’t be able to take the time off, then please don’t apply. Your expenses will be covered, but there’s no cash award, and you
may have to pay taxes on the value of the trip. I’m not sure just where we’ll travel, but Central African Republic is one possibility, and Bangladesh is another. If you speak French, mention that, but it’s certainly not a requirement.

Also, remember that the traveling is sometimes tough. The joke within The New York Times is that first prize is a trip with me; second prize is two trips with me. We will be bouncing over awful roads, we’ll be eating wretched food, and you may get sick. “Hotel” rooms may come with bedbugs and rats. And we’ll be on the go from dawn to dusk. To get a sense of what the past winners have done, check out Aneri Pattani’s post from Liberia in 2017, Austin Meyer’s post on malnutrition in India, Saumya Dave’s first impressions of Morocco in 2011, Paul Bower’s reflections in 2009 on how religion in Liberia shares many similarities with the South, or my 2006 visit to the Dzanga-Sangha area in the Central African Republic to see gorillas and elephants with Casey Parks. You can also see what past win-a-trip winners are up to; the 2013 winner, Erin Luhmann, caught up with the previous winners, going back to the Casey in 2006. In 2016, I did something different: winner Cassidy McDonald and I reported on domestic poverty here in the United States.

If you want to get a sense of the issues I cover and care about, subscribe to my free email newsletter. But don’t feel you need to agree with me to apply or win! And I’d like to see a diverse pool of applicants, so if you don’t look like me, that’s welcome. Writers of color, women, LGBTQ+ students, conservatives, liberals, artists, athletes, veterans — send in your essays!

One other suggestion. Only one person will win this trip, but you can always try to make your own trip. Africa can be relatively expensive, but traveling around Nicaragua or India/Bangladesh, or Vietnam/Cambodia may be more affordable. You may also be able to get a job teaching English to defray expenses. And for that matter, there are many opportunities to leave your comfort zone without leaving this country — tutor in a prison, or in an inner city school. Over the years, I’ve heard from a number of win-a-trip applicants who, disgusted by my poor judgment in failing to pick them, went off on their own journeys and had life-shaping experiences. So if you don’t win my trip, win your own! You may also find ideas for places to volunteer abroad at omprakash.org or idealist.org.