



LEARNING THROUGH SERVICE:

How a Five Mile Trip Off Campus Proved to be
the Greatest Experience of my College Career

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As I sit down to complete this reflection piece, it comes to mind that this is one of the last academic papers I will be required to write. As a senior who is nearly basking in the light at the end of the tunnel, I find it slightly bittersweet to realize just how far I've come, and the finality that comes with a cap and gown. This class was the product of tacking on a minor during my senior campaign, and choosing English. I fully admit that, upon hearing that only two courses were necessary in order to fulfill these requirements, I chose what I believed would be the easiest available, English 200: Making Literary Connections. Amidst four jobs and an internship, I cared more about the credits than the content.

Initially, I expected to sit through four months of freshman level basics and get an easy grade. However, that was all challenged on the first day when the professor for the course, Rachel Smydra, welcomed the group of just over a dozen students with slightly startling bit of information. According to her, we would be leaving the classroom on multiple occasions in order to take what we learned from various readings and teach to members of the Pontiac community. In my head, I wondered why we would leave the comfortable setting of Pawley Hall for the uncharted territory of communities outside

Oakland University. Furthermore, Smydra explained that this would incorporate ‘service learning’ into our curriculum, something that I had honestly never heard of until that point. Despite being a Golden Grizzly for four years, the farthest field trip of any kind that I had been on either incorporated Kresge Library or the O’rena. After I spoke with fellow classmates and friends around campus, it became evident that this idea of service learning was foreign to them as well. Overall, while I did have my initial doubts of both the class itself and the aspect of leaving the comforts of campus, I learned not only what service learning is, but I subsequently discovered why I believe the OU Community should utilize experiential learning more frequently.

During the next sixteen weeks, the peers in my class discussed, outlined, planned, conceived and ultimately carried out a plan of action. We partnered with Grace Centers of Hope, a shelter located in Pontiac that houses people who have fallen on harsh times. Student groups selected various short stories, each highlighting different themes found in literature and ultimately spurring discussion amongst the Grace Centers residents and my fellow Oakland classmates. As Smydra explained, “Reading literature in a classroom always generates good discussion; however, moving students off campus facilitates a different kind of experience that allows them to re-think how they themselves connect to course material.” By ‘teaching’ a college level lesson plan to the group at Grace Centers, students like me were taught a great deal as well. Topics such as enchantment, recognition, character development, unreliable narrator, and more were highlighted and utilized in our meetings.

I expected that residents would simply learn from us the aspects of literature that we brought to the table. While we did accomplish this objective, a great deal more was brought to that same proverbial table as the residents were able to bring an entirely different perspective to the stories. “Red Seven” by C. B. Christiansen, a short story that explores the loss of loved ones, was one of the passages used. In my small group alone,

Grace residents poured out incredible tales of injuries and death to loved ones. Participants, both from Oakland and the shelter, openly talked about deep losses and how they tried to overcome them. This particular discussion happened on the first of three meetings for the class, and it instantly made me want to return for each additional session. As Smydra explained, “In this case, having students lead large and small group discussions exposes them to different interpretations, life experiences, the importance of listening, and methods of fostering connections to discuss universal themes.” She was absolutely right, as I experienced something that no OU classroom setting could offer: a chance simply to read, react, and reflect with members of a community that, despite being only minutes down the road, are truly worlds away from Oakland’s campus.

Established in 1942, Grace Centers of Hope is the largest and oldest homeless shelter in Oakland County. The non-profit Christian organization offers a rehabilitation campus for men, women and children who have abused drugs, alcohol, or a combination of both. Fifteen residents from the shelter, aged 20 to 57, participated in the meetings with my class. In order to get to the facility, students carpooled from OU, embarking on a journey that, although it takes less than ten minutes, treks into a vastly different realm.

As Pontiac has slipped far away from its status as a once mighty city, signs of neglect and poverty are unfortunately extremely evident. Many of the residents of Grace Centers bear some of the same scars as their surroundings. I selfishly had an expectation that these participants would struggle to read the materials provided, much less participate in open discussions. I could not have been more wrong, as I was blown away by many of the ‘takes’ that the shelter residents had after reading a story.

Overall, some of the most significant insights I gained from this experience were the reflections of the participants, as they brought an entirely different perspective to the readings that I could never have imagined. Seeing a pure thirst for

knowledge from the residents was extremely refreshing. In many of my classes, students have almost become immune to the joy of learning, as they simply go through the motions to receive a grade, one step closer to that diploma. In the case of the residents, all 15 of them individually signed up for our class, and they genuinely wanted to be there. Seeing the way some of them actually cherished a new journal that was provided to them sharply contrasts with many of the students who I see mistreat school property, books, their laptops, desks, and more.

I believe one the most crucial aspects of this undertaking was the lack of an 'us vs. them' mentality. While I did just observe that many of the residents do not have as much as I do, whether that be in material possessions or college learning, they still taught me a great deal from their perspectives. Ultimately, it became apparent that we were not even there to 'teach,' rather we were all experiencing the text together. This allowed for great discussion by everyone, and overall a very positive experience for both the residents and students.

After we completed the three sessions, Grace Center participants completed evaluations regarding the material and course set-up. Flipping through the various responses was fascinating, again as my initial expectations as to not only what the residents were capable of doing, but also what our service learning project could accomplish, were shattered. Residents both young and old praised our sessions, saying that they now had the necessary tools to break down stories and relate to them. Furthermore, a new confidence level was seen by many of the participants as they also exceeded their own expectations. Most of these people, truly down on their luck, had never participated in a college level discussion. However, now they believed and knew that they could, even encouraging multiple participants to enroll in local college courses! It is an absolutely tremendous feeling to see that something I did in class could make an impact of that magnitude in someone's life. One particular participant was amazed that he was treated as an equal during the discussions, and that his opinions mat-

tered to all of those sitting in the room. When he learned that our sessions were very similar to what would be done on campus, he asked how exactly a student receives a grade. I told him that everyone reads the material but brings his or her own opinion and reaction to it. The man was amazed by this, and said that this inspired him to read more and try to go back to college.

Another participant named Duane also was changed by our class sessions. Duane, 29, is a recovering heroin addict and had been homeless for much of last year. After being clean for over a year, he relapsed and overdosed. The day of our first meeting marked just over two straight months of being sober again for Duane, a step in the right direction. Being at Grace for over a year, the college proceedings were something new for Duane, and more importantly, something that encouraged him to do more. “I always loved grammar and literature, but I lost interest in school and was kind of rebel,” Duane said. After he dropped out of school at age 16, his life on the streets caused him to think about everything but higher learning. However, our class helped to open up a new path in his life. “I liked the interaction, and the story wasn’t too complicated. I have an open mind, and I’d really like to go to college to become an addiction therapist,” he said. I made sure to catch up with Duane after the following two sessions, and by the end of our third class, a real change was evident in his demeanor. He was actively involved in the group discussions, citing ‘extra’ readings he had done, outside of the material handed out for the classes. Seeing Duane really thirst for knowledge was an absolutely incredible experience, and by far one of the greatest things I have ever been involved with while at OU.

When thinking of how to rebuild a community like Pontiac, many ideas come to mind. As part of Smydra’s class, we took a historical field trip through the once mighty city, walking through the streets of its downtown. Incredible statistics on infrastructure and investments were thrown about, citing just how far Pontiac has fallen and what is being done to try and reverse that. During the tour, our guides brought up again and

again the metaphor of the Phoenix, as many want to see the town rise from the ashes.

Pontiac once housed over twenty separate car companies at one time and had over \$25 million poured into the city from the local and state governments on a yearly basis. Now, not one automobile manufacturer remains, and the total of public money invested in the city for this calendar year amounted to exactly zero. However, one of the most startling stats was on the frightening levels of illiteracy. According to a tour guide, nearly half of the residents of the town, less than five miles away from Oakland, are functionally illiterate. Words like “baffling,” “startling,” and “saddening” do not begin to describe that statistic, something that is truly unbelievable in 2014.

The fact that a city, which at one time was a hub for technology and industry and once hosted a World Cup in soccer and a Super Bowl in football, now finds itself in utter uneducated shambles is extremely disappointing. Therefore, before money can be infused, before buildings can be rebuilt, and before businesses can return, it is clear that the very life of the city will depend on the ability of its populace to read and write. That is ultimately what struck me about this whole experience. Sure, Pontiac needs canned food drives, volunteer painters, better city leadership and more, but a city cannot function unless the residents can as well.

This brings me back to my main point, realizing what a fantastic opportunity my service learning experience turned out to be. While I thought it initially might just be a waste of time, it was the complete opposite. My peers truly made an impact on the lives of Duane and others by simply taking the time to teach them basic literary skills. More importantly, they taught us a great deal as well, creating a symbiotic experience that was truly one of the greatest things I have ever done as a Golden Grizzly.

Sadly it took me four years and over twenty different classes to do so, finally learning what a hidden gem service learning can be. Oakland should not just promote service learning more, but implement it across the different schools

on campus, encouraging all majors to get out and help the community. While Detroit certainly draws headlines and subsequent much-needed aid, Pontiac, our close neighbor, is in the shadow of the new Elliot Tower begging for help. I would love to see service learning become a requirement for graduation. Students could really get a chance to impact and change lives in the same manner that I was luckily able to do in my English class.