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My Internship At Ronald McDonald House Charities of Kentuckiana

Service Site and Responsibilities

My service site, the Ronald McDonald House, is a non-profit organization I didn't know much about before I began work there. I recognized the name, I think many people do, but do not know the incredible work that happens there and the essential service that is provided. The Ronald McDonald House is found not only in cities across America but also internationally, in 64 countries and regions around the world. The organization is built around the belief that families should be able to stay together during times of crisis without worrying about finances. They offer housing, food, and basic needs to families who travel away from their homes to seek medical care for their children and who can't afford a hotel for the duration of their stay. At the Ronald McDonald House of Kentuckiana the average stay is 8.5 nights, which would add up to \$700 or \$800 for a hotel room in downtown Louisville. Many families are already struggling with medical cost for their sick child and can't imagine taking on this kind of expense. The goal of Ronald McDonald House is to alleviate some of the stress of a medical crisis by removing the cost of housing.

There are a few different ways they reach out to communities and families in need. A Ronald McDonald Family Room can be found in many children's hospitals. This is a space that offers families solace from the hustle and bustle of a hospital and provides them with a cozy atmosphere and some comforts of home. Many family rooms are equipped with kitchens, laundry facilities, sleeping rooms, bathrooms with showers, and a television and couches for relaxing. These Family Rooms allow parents to stay only steps away from their sick child in the hospital but still have access to a home-like setting.

I did my service work at the Ronald McDonald House, which is a similar concept but is a residential house, separate from a hospital. The Ronald McDonald House in Louisville is located right around the corner from Kosair Children's hospital. Families are able to walk back and forth in just a few moments. The house has 36 rooms, with plans in the works for an expansion. There is a \$20 per night requested payment, but families who cannot pay are never turned away. Some insurance companies will even cover this fee. If the house is full, families are given rooms based on the distance of travel. I encountered families who had come as far as Palestine and some from just a few counties away. Ronald McDonald House provides families with basic needs and the comforts of home, things like toiletries, laundry facilities, and fully stocked kitchens so families can focus solely on the needs of their sick or injured child. Volunteer groups come in every day to cook a hot meal, dinner on week nights and brunch on the weekends. The families are responsible for doing certain chores while they stay in the house and there are house rules that must be followed. The house has a zero tolerance policy for drugs and alcohol as

well as for physical punishment of children. Residents are expected to be respectful, polite, and responsible for their own rooms while they are there.

My role at the Ronald McDonald was diverse and changed on a weekly or even a daily basis. Like many other volunteers, I did things like check rooms that had recently been vacated to make sure they were cleaned properly, the beds were well made, and the toiletries were fully stocked. I also did laundry, washing the linens from rooms that were being turned over and making linen bags of towels and blankets for families. I also was often tasked with cleaning out or stocking fridges in the kitchens. There is a full kitchen on of the four floors so families can prepare their own meals and keep snacks nearby. There are also refrigerators with specifically designated space for each family and a “help yourself” fridge with communal food provided by the Ronald McDonald House. There are even fridges that are designated for storing breast milk for nursing mothers. Often I would go floor to floor and make sure nothing was expired or molding in the fridges and restock any items that were low or missing. If we had food come in, milk deliveries or a donation of pantry items like pasta, I would distribute that to each kitchen. Because I was a long-term volunteer who could commit to a regular schedule, I was also tasked with things that other volunteers were not. I often worked in the administrative offices, especially on fundraising. These tasks gave me an opportunity to see a different side of non-profit work, the world away from hands-on volunteering. While this was interesting and gave me some experience I can take in to a future job, in some ways it was this work that challenged me the most.

Challenges and Opportunities

During the course of my office work at Ronald McDonald House, I got an inside peek into one of the biggest fundraisers they hold, the Red Tie Gala. This event is a huge fancy auction and dinner held at the Marriott every year. One of my tasks during the first few months of my internship was to sort through and organize the auction items. These comprised of different themed packages like “Spa Day” and “Date Night,” which were made up of different gift cards for restaurants, museums, salons, and even a hot air balloon ride. There were also several big-ticket items in the auction like green room tickets to Jimmy Kimmel or a New Years Eve getaway in Aruba. The work that went into the organization of this gala really began to challenge me. I was seeing such a massive amount of wealth in the donated items—the owner of six bedroom ski-in chalet in Aspen donated a two-week stay there, someone donated an incredibly rare and valuable bottle of bourbon that eventually auctioned for \$24,000 dollars. All the prizes exemplified wealth and excess. I was sitting in the office conference room at Ronald McDonald House sorting through the information, putting different prize packages in folders and just feeling blown away by the money I was surrounded by. By this point, I had spent enough time in the house to see and understand some of the family situations and the great need that exists for organizations that support these families. I started to think, “Gee, the Ronald McDonald House would really benefit more from just having this money donated to them instead of going through the expense and stress to holding a fancy gala.” I was watching the staff members, including my own supervisor, working until 3 or 4 in the morning to ensure the Red Tie Gala went off without a hitch. I became really frustrated and even angered.

I attended the gala as a volunteer and saw all the expensive designer dresses, the steak and scallops in the catered meal, and the open bar of nice wines and whiskeys. Even now, writing this paper, I have difficulty reconciling the level of need of the struggling families I saw in the house with the display of wealth at the gala. It reminded me of a course I took last year, Diversity and Inequality. We watched a video that used graphics to illustrate the massive gap in wealth between the upper socioeconomic class or the the “1%” and those living below or near the poverty line. While this video was a great illustrative tool, it did not prepare me to see this discrepancy first hand. I was working among families who were struggling not only with medical bills, but daily expenses and the added burden of being away from work for the duration of time their child was being treated. At the gala, I saw people spending money like it didn’t matter, a few thousand here, a couple hundred there. While I’m glad that the proceeds from this event all went to Ronald McDonald House, it feels so discouraging to know that the families at the house will likely to continue to face financial challenge to support their child’s recovery while a portion of our society lives in a kind of wealth that is beyond what most of us can imagine.

One thing that was a source of comfort for me during the course of my internship was returning to my own role and impact within the organization. I wrote some about this in my journal through the semester and looking back on those entries I can recognize a shift from when I first started up until now. During my first few weeks and even months at the Ronald McDonald House I had difficulty seeing how my work could possibly make an impact, especially the work I did alone in an empty conference room. Even when I was out in the house I often felt like I was an intruder, stepping into other peoples

personal space. It took a lot for me to overcome the feeling that I was more in the way than I was helpful. A major shift occurred for me just within the last few weeks. I was looking at the schedule of service groups coming in to make dinner and brunch. I began to think about when a friend or family member gets sick, often we bring food over, or call and see what they need—I remember after my mom had a major surgery, friends came over to do chores and tasks that she could not complete during her recovery. People brought food so she always had something to heat up when I was in class or at work. I had a light bulb-over-the-head moment—this is what I and other volunteers attempt to offer residents at Ronald McDonald House who are far away from their own friends and family. Doing things like cooking and cleaning for those in crisis is an expression of love and care. Doing this kind of volunteer work is reaching a hand out, a gesture of support to a family in crisis. I began to look at my role and the roles of other volunteers in a whole new way. We are trying to be those family members that bring over lasagna or hearty soup when someone is sick, those who make sure that a friend recovering from surgeries has everything they need at home. I came to look at the volunteers and families not as separate groups but as one community that understands their common humanity.

This recognition totally changed how I viewed my tasks in the house. What originally felt like a challenge became an opportunity. I started the semester feeling like the repetitive paper-pushing I did in the office was pointless. When I realized the work I felt was boring was actually vital to keep the whole organization running smoothly, I felt honored that I was being asked to do it. Instead of feeling nervous and intrusive when I worked throughout the house, in kitchens and bathrooms, I started to look forward to taking milk and pantry items up to each floor. I encountered some families and children

often enough that I began to get familiar and friendly with them. Often on the fourth floor I was greeted by a young girl named Sophie who is probably four or five. When I got off the elevator on her floor, she would run over and ask what I was doing, or tell me about a toy she was playing with or a snack she was having. One day I was tasked with taking digital photos of everything that had been donated on the floors, from furniture to paintings. When I told Sophie what I was up to, she started down the hall pointing at things she thought I should photograph. I took the pictures she requested and eventually deleted ones we didn't need (photos of all her stuffed animals, etc.) These interactions became little nuggets of gold that I picked up during the course of my internship, the things that helped me realize I was a part of something bigger than myself. Sweet moments like this and the realization of the value of this service work also inspired me to put a little more care into everything I did. When I checked rooms, I wanted the beds to be as neatly made as possible, for the room to smell nice, for the curtains and shades to be open to let some light in. I started trying to get a matching set of soap, shampoo, and conditioner for each room and make sure there was toothpaste and floss, not just a toothbrush. I tried to imagine that these things, no matter how small they seemed, would be comforts to a family who had spent a long day in the hospital with their child.

Expectations, Realities, and Realizations

It's hard for me to say that I went into this internship with a lot of expectations or goals because I didn't have any idea what it was going to be like or what kind of work I would end up doing. Honestly, my hope was that I would complete the required hours and gain some work experience. I never anticipated feeling the way I do now about my service site. I've actually decided to continue work at Ronald McDonald House through

the end of May because it has become a place I'm passionate about. My expectation of getting work experience has been beyond what I could have imagined. I was touched by the relationships I built with residents, employees, and other volunteers. I learned not only about myself and those I worked with but about the world of service and non-profits. I was privileged to be entrusted with office work and ongoing projects that I got to see the implementation of, like my work on the fundraising gala. It was a real gift to see the fruits of my labor and stick with a project from beginning to end. In many ways, the realities of my experience at Ronald McDonald House far exceeded my expectations.

On another hand, I was discouraged and disappointed in what I saw and learned during my internship. I previously discussed the wealth inequality I witnessed at the Red Tie Gala. Seeing our society's wealth gap in the real world led to me ponder on some larger truths about wealth, poverty, and medical care in American society. I started to do some research on the different measurements of poverty and medical inequality. One thing I found that really intrigued me was the idea of measuring poverty in terms other than simple dollars and cents. One researcher suggests we should measure socioeconomic status by considering health, nutrition, education, and other aspects of human well being (Buvinić 1997.) Not all families who stay at the Ronald McDonald house live below the poverty line, but all are there because of some lack of resource in their lives, which I believe falls under this more holistic definition of poverty. By using this definition, we can examine the Ronald McDonald House and the families who use this resource in a more comprehensive overarching way.

Families who stay at the Ronald McDonald House, whether for a week or a year, have travelled from their communities because they do not have access to the health care

their child needs in their own community. Many residents at the Ronald McDonald House are staying there because the mother has recently given birth to a child with a critical health issue. Often the baby was premature and they were referred to Kosair Children's Hospital so the infant can be cared for in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, or the NICU. There is a whiteboard in the Ronald McDonald House lobby where families check in and out and write where they are going when they leave. At any given moment, most of the "checked out" families are in the NICU.

How does this relate to the issues of poverty and medical care? Women who live in medically underserved, impoverished and/or rural communities are less likely to have access to good prenatal care, which increases the likelihood that a baby will be born with a variety of different health challenges. I believe that this lack of adequate care and medical facilities to serve mother, fetus, and child fits within a holistic definition of poverty.

So let's take the next step, keeping in mind the fact that a huge percentage of families who stay at the house have children being treated in the NICU. What I have come to realize and believe is that the fact that the Ronald McDonald House exists represents a failure on behalf of the American health care system. This claim may seem outrageous, but let's examine a hypothetical situation of a family who uses the service of Ronald McDonald House. A woman living in an impoverished community in a rural area of Kentucky is pregnant and spends the duration of her pregnancy without affordable, accessible, good quality prenatal care or information on how to care for the growing fetus. When the time comes for her to give birth she travels to the nearest hospital, which is small and only equipped to do basic medical procedures. The baby is born at a low

birth weight, a condition that has been positively correlated with poverty. This results in a respiratory tract infection, causing abnormal lung function (Wymelenberg 1990.) The woman is told her newborn child needs to be transferred to a hospital more capable of handling her child's medical needs. She travels to Louisville, the child is admitted to the Kosair NICU and she and her family check in to the Ronald McDonald House. This family has now been displaced from their home and support system because of a lack of healthcare in their community, which I argue is a way of experiencing poverty. I don't expect us as a country to be able to build high-tech hospitals in every single town across America but the fact that families have to be uprooted and travel hundreds of miles to get adequate care for their child seems crazy. It seems like good care should be at least somewhat more accessible, especially when we know that some of the most common factors that contribute to a low birth weight baby are low socioeconomic status, a low level of education, childbearing very early in the reproductive years, and poor nutrition (Wymelenberg 1990.) All of these conditions are more likely to manifest in a rural or impoverished community that is medically underserved. .

Doing this research and reaching some of my own conclusions again took me back to some of what we studied in Diversity and Inequality. The intersection of gender and poverty creates a situation in which women are not receiving the proper care during pregnancy because it's not accessible to them by pure proximity or because they can't shoulder all the costs, from regular doctor's visits to prenatal vitamins. This opens up another issue of inequality, how medical expenses and poverty feed in to each other and become a cycle. In one study I came across, one researcher found that among families she interviewed, one-half cited healthcare expenses as the reason for their family's decline

into poverty (Anirudh 2004.) In this regard, poverty and healthcare are cyclical issues, one feeding into the other. Families who live in poverty, income poverty or otherwise, are less likely to have access to good healthcare which increases the likelihood that women will experience a difficult delivery or serious health issue will present in the infant. When the child is born, there will be an immediate need for treatment of any health issue that resulted from a lack of care during pregnancy. This treatment will increase expenses for a family who may already be struggling financially with the cost of a hospital birth and could push them into debt or deeper into poverty. Being this far in the financial hole may prevent families from doing things like making regular trips to the doctor due to co-pays or avoiding treatment of medical issues because of concerns about the expense. The cycle repeats itself as people struggle with their finances and their health, even having to chose one over the other.

This is a reality that was only revealed to me during my work at the Ronald McDonald house. It's an issue I had thought about in relation to the current national debate over healthcare and health insurance but I had never understood the reality and gravity of the issue for people who struggle with finances on a day to day basis. My eyes were opened to how lucky many of us are without realizing it. We're lucky to have been born with our health, without having to overcome a major medical issue from infancy. We're lucky to not have to make the choice between a check-up with the doctor and blowing our budget for groceries or bills. We're lucky to live in an area that has amazing medical facilities so that we don't have to leave the comfort of our community and families in the case of an emergency. Many families across America don't have these things. My experience at Ronald McDonald House sparked my interested in these issues

and brought up questions of how we can work to correct them and offer more help to families who do not have access to essential services. As I see it, healthcare is not something that should only be accessible to those who can afford it. Good healthcare should be available to all who need it, especially children and newborns.

Service Learning and Careers in Service

I was so happy to have the opportunity to sit down and talk with my supervisor, Becca Washer, about her job, the challenges and rewards of her work and how she sees her role in the Ronald McDonald House. I started by talking to her about the big picture issue that Ronald McDonald House is trying to address, the problems of healthcare and poverty that I discussed above. She said it was this exposure to the world of wealth and healthcare inequality that kept her wanting to work for this organization. Becca started working at the Ronald McDonald House during the night shift, checking families in at the front desk. She said that being “on the front lines” made her realize how critical this organization is for families. She said of the organization, “It’s not just nice to have—people need it and rely on this service.” The Ronald McDonald house is filling a hole, providing something the government can’t or won’t offer. She talked about how the Ronald McDonald House is not just a financial necessity for families but an emotional one as well. The support they receive from staff, volunteers, and other families in the house helps them through a challenging experience.

We also talked about what challenges Becca about her work and she spoke of something Robert Coles addresses in *The Call of Service*, burn out. She talked about experiencing compassion fatigue and spending so much time watching and worrying about the suffering of others that it starts to affect your life and well-being. She said she

thought she would be less affected by this feeling once she left the “front lines” and started working in development but in some ways it’s become harder for her. She no longer has as much one-on-one contact with families and only hears things secondhand, mostly when there are problems in the house. This is something I hadn’t considered as I became more interested in looking for a job in a non-profit after graduation. Service work comes with a lot of rewards—the staff at the house sees the impact of their work when they receive letters from families with pictures of healthy babies and words of gratitude for the time they spent there—but it also comes with many challenges and struggles. In development, Becca spends a lot of time alone in her office and when she meets with people they are corporate partners or donors, not the families. She said that it’s easy to forget what you’re really up to when you don’t have the one-on-one contact with families and sometimes she begins to lose sight of the bigger picture of service work.

My experience with burn out and compassion fatigue was not on as big of a scale because I have only spent a few months in the organization, not years and years. I wrote a recent journal entry about the recognition of burn out and how it snuck up on me. I set my schedule at the Ronald McDonald House to be two days a week for four hours each day. Eight hours a week may not sound like much but combined with other course work and commitments outside of school I began to feel tired all the time. I was missing out on doing things for myself that I used to have time for, like exercise and cooking healthy meals. It was only when I took a week off during finals that I realized what was going on. I missed going to the house but I suddenly had more time to devote to my school work, time to go walk in the park and visit with my mom. I will go back to work at Ronald McDonald House after all my finals are turned in but this break gave me an opportunity

to reflect on my commitments. Everything we say “yes” to means we say “no” to something else. Saying “yes” to service work might mean saying “no” to some leisure activities or time with family or friends. In Becca’s case saying “yes” to Ronald McDonald House means saying “no” to a potentially larger salary, or a job with less emotional work involved. But when we say “yes” to service work, we are also embracing a “yes” to many good and rewarding things. For me, it was a “yes” to connection, a “yes” to being part of something bigger than myself, a “yes” to overcoming so fear and anxiety I had about working out in the house where people were living their daily lives. All these “yes” choices and rewards were positive and made up the incredible experience I had this semester but it’s important to keep the balance of “yes” and “no” in mind. The choice of service is a powerful one and it comes with other considerations.

Robert Coles wrote in *The Call of Service* that he was told, “Enjoy yourself, or it will be hard for you to give of yourself to others!” What I saw in my interview with Becca and in watching the other employees at Ronald McDonald House is that they found something that truly brings them joy and this is what enables them to continue to show up each day with passion and compassion for those they serve. When staff encounter challenge or conflict within the house they approach the situation with firm care, never making concessions that would compromise the integrity of the organization but keeping in mind that they are dealing with real imperfect people. Only once during the semester did I hear of a family being asked to vacate their room and leave the house. The staff members I encountered had the ability to transform conflict between family members or volunteers in a way that made the relationships stronger and the house environment healthier. The employees often work long hours, late into to evening, and

come in on weekends. They have meals with the families and check in with them about their children's medical situation. None of the staff at Ronald McDonald house are social workers or therapists but they often offer families referrals and assistance if they need these kind of resources. I was continually impressed with the way the staff gave of themselves to the people they are serving and seeing this inspired me to examine ways I can be more compassionate and giving in all areas of my life.

I was able to find the kind of enjoyment Robert Coles is speaking about at the Ronald McDonald House. My shifts there became a part of my weekly routine that I look forward to and have become totally integrated into my life. I love the ritual of arriving at the house, putting my on apron and checking the volunteer log for any work that needs to be done. I love the meditative task of laundry and the smell of clean sheets, the satisfaction of checking of everything on the list when cleaning a room, the peace of the house when I arrive at 9am to the smell of brewing coffee in each kitchen. I love when my shift is exactly as expected, comprising of cleaning and organizing, or when I get a task that's totally off the wall. For example, a couple weeks ago my supervisor asked me to walk around the neighborhood, go into tall buildings and take "birds-eye-view" photos of the house. This has come to be the joy of service work for me—I never know what my day will hold and it's often something that takes me out of my comfort zone.

Final Reflection and Career Plans

My internship was not at all what I expected it to be, starting with the location. My original intention was to work at the Center for Women and Families. I'm a Women and Gender Studies Minor and I was hoping to round out my college experience by doing service work that would relate to all of my areas of study. In hindsight, this was so

narrow-minded of me. Just because on the surface Ronald McDonald House doesn't seem to address a gendered issue doesn't mean that one doesn't exist. I discovered in my research about prenatal care and poverty that this organization addresses a very serious issue that primarily affects women and falls under the umbrella of reproductive rights. We don't often think of the right to have children as a part of this conversation but it absolutely is. The right to prenatal care and accurate information about pregnancy health is a part of this issue. The Ronald McDonald House serves people of all races, genders, and cultures and many of them have experience inequality in totally unique ways. After spending some time at the organization, I came to realize how relevant this work was to not only Women's and Gender Studies and Peace Studies but also Sociology, my major. I was able to examine my internship from the lens of social justice and inequality, social problems, and focus on a women's issue within the spectrum of social issues this organization addresses.

This internship gave me so much that I didn't expect. It wasn't a perfect experience by any means. I experienced things that saddened, frustrated or angered me, from the struggle of a young child with a debilitating disability to the wealth inequality I witnessed at the gala. Everything I saw taught me something. I was touched by the strength and resiliency of the children I encountered, the care of their parents and the kindness of the strangers who saw me come and go in their living space. I was challenged emotionally and found myself on the verge of tears when I saw a child in the house whose head was wrapped in bandages dotted with blood. I was challenged to overcome my anxiety about entering in to other people's living space and being an "intruder." I learned about the families and what they are going through and also about non-profit

work in general and all the paperwork, fundraising, and organizing that it takes to keep a place like the Ronald McDonald House running smoothly. I learned the value and importance of volunteer work and how important it is to organizations like this, even when the tasks for a volunteer seem simple or unimportant.

This work has absolutely affected my career plans. I had already been toying with the idea of a master's degree in social work and this semester at Ronald McDonald House helped me solidify that plan. I learned how effective this kind of work can be, how many unseen problems exist around the issues on the surface and how much there is still to be done to help people who are stratified by inequality of all kinds in our society. Another thing I realized through the course of my internship is that I want to work in a non-profit like this, one that fills a need for people that isn't being met by other social welfare programs. There are so many gaps, so many holes in the different systems of government where people can fall through the cracks. My work at Ronald McDonald House opened my eyes to this and made me want to work to try to help those who are most likely to suffer the injustice of these systems.

More than anything else, my work has opened my eyes to a new way of seeing community. When I say the word "community" the first thing that comes to mind may be friends, family, neighbors, fellow students or coworkers. What this semester and this internship taught me is that we are a global community. The sayings that once seemed so cliché to me now rings true—we have more that unites us than divides us, more in common than we have different. The residents at the Ronald McDonald to house seemed like strangers at first, people I was afraid to try and connect with because I couldn't even begin to imagine what they were going through. But they didn't need me to identify with

their struggle or understand it. What I and other volunteers bring to the house is a sense of community, of human supporting fellow human. Community doesn't mean people who have something in common, who share a neighborhood or school or workplace or hobby. Community means we have a the human experiences, have basic needs, and experience common humanity. My internship has taught me that there are no barriers between you and another person unless you build them, there are no differences so big that they can't be bridged. People from all walks of life have the amazing to ability share what they have, give themselves, their time, and give love and care to anyone they may meet.

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