

Service Learning at The Backside Learning Center

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Introduction

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others” - Mahatma Gandhi. The first time I ever heard of this quote was in eighth grade during a life orientation class where we had been studying the topic of service. At the time, we had been talking about the idea of extending help to others, and how doing good for others could manifest into personal well-being and success in our own lives. I remember my teacher quoting the words of Mahatma Gandhi and then explaining to us that, by offering our time and energy to help those around us, we could learn more about ourselves and benefit significantly from it. I remember not grasping how assisting others to could support learning, let alone benefit you when it was intended to help the receiver. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by this idea and began gravitating towards acts of service in hopes of reaping the benefits. Thinking back, I realize that as an eighth grader, my perception of service and helping others was more about reciprocity than it was about altruism.

However, over the years, as I went through life experiences that put me on the receiving end of service, my perspective began to shift. It started in 2014 when my family and I received authorization to resettle to the United States and rebuild our lives there with the prospect of becoming citizens. Before our resettlement, we had spent sixteen years living South Africa as refugees, bearing no rights to claim privileges (such as permanent residence, employment or property), or access same the freedoms afforded to citizens. So when family and I moved to the United States in 2014, it was a clean break for us. With nothing except for the luggage, we had brought with us, my family and I were welcomed at the airport by a group of Catholic charities volunteers who took us in and helped us rebuild our lives from scratch. It was surprising to me to see so many people embrace us and pour into us without expectation. We came in with nothing

and had nothing give, yet people kept pouring into us. It was that outpour of kindness shown towards my family during our most vulnerable phase that altered my perspective on service.

When I reflect back to the quote by Mahatma Gandhi and my teacher's interpretation of it, it resonates with me very strongly, especially now that I have participated in a service learning experience. My experience volunteering at the Backside Learning Center this past semester redefined my understanding of what it means to serve, and the importance of service in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. I had the opportunity to incorporate my personal experiences, the lessons learned in my previous classes as a well as prior volunteer experience into my service learning project. I was able to build connections with members of the Back Learning community and cultivate friendships with them through shared similarities and lived experiences.

With the basis of this course being peacebuilding, my main focus throughout my service experience was to bridge the gap between the "Us vs. Them" mentality and be more integrating to the people that I was working with. As someone coming from a background where I was once on the giving end and the receiving end of service, I went into my service learning project aware of the importance of fostering inclusivity and openness. This service learning experience offered me an opportunity to expand on my awareness by challenging me to delve more deeply into the experiences of community I served and broaden my perspective.

During this service learning project, I was also challenged to think more critically about the principle of service as it related to the social conditions in society. I was pushed to think about questions such as why organizations such as the Backside Learning center existed, why volunteers served, what motivated them and how they influenced the organizations' successes. Through these questions, I was able to reflect more deeply on why I served, what it meant to serve, and why I

continued to served. This paper takes a deeper look into my service learning project by examining the experiences I encountered while serving at the Backside Learning Center, and then connecting them with the lessons learned in my previous course electives and prerequisites to obtain the Peace Justice Conflict Transformation Certificate.

Service Learning Site

The service learning site that I selected to complete my course requirements was the Backside Learning Center. The Backside Learning Center is a non-profit organization that provides access to resources and support for equine workers and their families. The Backside Learning Center is located across from the grandstands of Churchill Downs, and right next to the barn area where the equine workers work. Due to proximity, the Backside Learning Center affords easy accessibility for workers and their families to access the resources provided by the Backside Learning Center. According to the Backside Learning Center's mission statement, the Backside Learning Center is centered toward providing educational services that help equine workers and their families develop and strengthen language skills, basic technology skills, and social skills. The Backside Learning Center also offers social services such as citizenship test preparation, student enrollment assistance as well as immigration and interpretation support.

The population served by the Backside Learning Center consist primarily of Latin American Immigrants, many of whom lack English proficiency and familiarity with the American culture. As part of its mission statement, the Backside Learning Center aims to overcome these challenges through its comprehensive programs that target education, connection, and community. There are six different programs offered by the Backside Learning Center that clients can enroll in. Among the provided programs there are: English Language Classes, Conversation Partners,

Individual Tutoring, Art & Music Workshops, Bike Workshops, and the Front Runners after school program. The Backside Learning Center offers English Language Classes to help workers strengthen their speaking, reading and writing skills. Trained volunteer instructors teach the classes at beginner, intermediate, and advanced level English over a six-week cycle. Conversation Partners is another language proficiency program that offered by the BLC. It is designed to allow non-native English speaking students from the BLC to engage with native English speaking volunteers for one-on-one, conversation in both Spanish and English. The program helps BLC students understand and adapt to U.S. culture, and obtain cultural awareness. The BLC also provides equine workers the opportunity to work one-on-one with volunteers for a more personalized experience. Individual tutoring may include working on Citizenship test preparation, GED preparation or technology. On the more community enrichment side of the programs, the BLC offers Arts and Music workshops that include guitar drumming, painting, drawing, and photography. A bike workshop is also held every six weeks to teach workers and their families the basics of bike maintenance and repair. Lastly, there is also the Front Runners Program. The Front Runners Program is a two-part program divided into an after-school and summer program. These programs are designed to help the children of equine workers receive the educational support they need for academic and social enrichment.

Responsibilities

During my time at the Backside Learning Center, my responsibilities varied throughout my service learning experience. As with most non-profit organizations, the Backside Learning Center relied heavily on volunteers for day-day operation. As a result, many of my responsibilities shifted

on a daily basis according to demand. I did, however, have a few roles that remained consistent throughout my service learning project.

When I first started at the Backside Learning Center, my primary responsibility was to assist with lesson plan preparation and design lesson plans for the Front Runner's program held every Tuesdays and Thursdays. The Front Runners program was a two-part program that served as an after-school program during the academic year, and as a summer youth program over the Summer. During the school year, the after-school program ran according to a bi-weekly schedule with a curriculum. Each week, the afterschool program would operate around a "theme of the week" would be explored under the social and emotional development domain, and then incorporated into an activity for the day. As a planning assistant, my responsibility was to brainstorm educational ideas for the activities and make sure that they aligned with the content focus. Having worked with multiple educational programs in the past, I had many insightful ideas for the events, and I was excited for the opportunity to employ them in my service learning.

When I began my first official week of service learning at the Backside Learning Center, my first task was to create a classroom activity centered around promoting awareness on the importance of establishing group norms (rules) and following them. In the activity, I needed to include a social and emotional outcome as well as a knowledge and a skill outcome. I was able to come up with an introductory activity whereby the students would learn the difference between rules and agreements and establish their own community Agreements for the program. The idea was to introduce the concept of rules and agreements by describing what each of the two terms meant and differentiating them. Students would then be given an opportunity to discuss their experiences with rules/ agreements by identifying the different types of rules they had to follow at

school, at home or when visiting others. Following that discussion, the students would be encouraged to report back to the class about their answers and reflect on why they thought those rules existed and the purpose those rules intended to serve. In creating this dialogue, students would be able to establish other skills such as applying previously learned information about rules to different environments. Moreover, the students would be encouraged to get to know each other by working in groups to brainstorm ideas.

Thinking back to this activity, I remember being taken by surprise when I was assigned this task because I was initially under the impression that my role would be geared towards providing support rather than being hands on. Nevertheless, I enjoyed creating the activity and later seeing it come together during the after-school program. Later on, when I wrote in my journal entry, I described how it was eye-opening to see how incorporating one activity could change a learning outcome and create a space for other learning opportunities. As a student, I had never put much thought into the course objectives described in the syllabi. However, after planning and then implementing the lesson plan that I had created, it, it occurred to me how teaching approaches could affect the learning outcomes, and how learning outcomes impacted the learning experience. It finally made sense as for why syllabi had course objectives.

In addition to assisting with lesson plans, I was also assigned a second responsibility of facilitating activities during the Thursday session of the Front Runner's program. My role in this position was to help the leading instructor step-up and prepare the classroom for the prepared lesson, assist with carrying out the lesson procedures, and help with student reflection. Additionally, I also got to work one-on-one with the students during the after-school homework period. During the homework period, I would sit with one or sometimes two students, depending

on volunteer attendance for that day, and work on some homework problems. Most of the students came in with either English and Math homework, but occasionally, some student brought in homework from a different discipline. I would sit with the students and go through the homework with them, explaining along the way what certain words mean or how to solve certain equations. During our homework sessions, we would also talk about topics not related to homework such as school, friends, family and sometimes we would talk about our ethnic backgrounds. The after-school homework period was arguably my favorite part of the Front Runners program. I enjoyed after-school homework period the most because it was a time where I genuinely got to know the students and learn about them. The after-homework period was important to me because when I started my service learning, one of my main goals was to gain a deeper understanding of diverse backgrounds and the life experiences of the communities I served through personal interaction. The after-school homework was, therefore, an opportunity for me to learn. It was through this experience that I discovered that people are much more than their circumstances and their experiences. It fostered a sense of critical awareness in me.

Challenges and Opportunities

My overall experience completing my service learning at the Backside Learning Center was highly fulfilling. It provided me with an excellent opportunity to engage with a community that was outside of my scope and learn how to communicate and adjust to experiences different from my own. Although not many, I did encounter some challenges while completing my service learning project.

The first challenge that I faced started before I had even begun my service learning. Before my first official day, I had to complete a set of requirements that involved multiple trips to the Backside Learning Center during class periods. The conditions entailed attending a volunteer

orientation, meeting with the Executive director, and then finally, meeting with the Director of Programs. The challenge that I encountered during this process was coordinating times that worked with the running times of the Backside Learning Center as well as my class schedule. Unfortunately, none of the times suggested for either of us to meet without having to again the next week. Seeing that I was already two weeks behind my classmates and was already falling behind on my journals, I had no choice but to skip some classes. The reason that I found this experience to be a challenge was because I was confronted by a situation that had no favorable outcomes. Unlike the rest of my classmates, I had not been able to begin my service learning right at the start of the semester because I was behind on my pre-requisites. I was growing anxious about falling behind because this was an independent class, and the further behind I was, the more time I would need to make up for it. However, once I went through my orientation and met with the Directors, my anxieties began to lessen.

The second challenge I faced, involved my responsibilities. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, when I initially started my service learning, my primary responsibility was to assist with lesson plan preparation and design lesson plans for the Front Runner's program. However, four weeks into my service learning, the intern that had been working as the Youth Activities Leader for the Front Runner's Program resigned from her position unexpectedly, leaving the Front Runners Program without an after-school homework facilitator or an instructor to lead the social and emotional activities. Due to the abruptness of the intern's resignation, the Backside Learning Center couldn't get a stand-in intern immediately. Subsequently, I became assigned to some of the critical roles. I assigned the task of facilitating the after-school homework session as well as leading the social and emotional activities. In addition to those roles, I continued with my original duties as well. The challenge that I faced in this situation was fulfilling all of my tasks. After I took

on my new responsibilities, I started staying past my set hours to get complete extra work and would sometimes do work outside of my service learning. After some time, I began to feel frustrated and slightly resentful towards my responsibilities. I didn't express these feelings to my supervisor, which I should have done. In hindsight, if I had expressed my concerns the outcome would've been much different

Amid the challenges, there were many opportunities presented during my service learning experience. The first opportunity I had, was creative freedom. The environment at the Backside Learning Center was very supportive of independent work, in that employees worked on tasks individually and if there was a group project, the duties weren't micro-managed. Even with my responsibilities, my supervisor rarely directed me on how to perform my roles unless it was something specific. Having the freedom to work according to my methods and be accountable for my productivity was motivating. I felt more encouraged to deliver high work because of the level of trust placed in me.

The second opportunity that my service learning experience afforded me was gaining cultural competence. Before working at the Backside learning center, much of my community service geared toward serving refugee, immigrant, and underserved populations. Many of the individuals that I had previously worked with were either from the African regions or the Middle East, so my exposure to the Latin American population was limited. Completing my service learning at the Backside Learning Center, offered an opportunity to expand my cross-cultural awareness and gain cultural competence. Through my daily interactions with the equine workers and their families, I was able to learn about their experiences, their culture and develop a new frame of reference based on their perspective. The biggest take away from my service learning

experience was realizing how much I could learn from is about experiencing and learning through the realities of others and seeing life through their lens.

Expectations and Realities

Going into my service learning project, I didn't have many expectations about my actual service learning experience. My expectations were more focused on the learning outcomes that I hoped to obtain from working at the Backside Learning Center. The first expectation that I had was learning Spanish during the course of my service learning project. I entered my service learning thinking that I would be exposed to only Spanish speaking clients, and would have to learn the basic conversation terms. However, I quickly learned that that would not be the case. Despite, the population of backside being primarily Latin American immigrants, many of the clients that I encountered could speak English very well and only spoke Spanish to convey ideas that they didn't know in English.

The second expectation that I had was that Backside Learning Center would be structured (physically and administratively) like the previous organizations that I had volunteered for in the past. Going into my service learning, I had expected the Backside Learning Center to be a large organization that had many staff members and a lot of working space because of all the services that they offered. I was surprised to learn upon arrival that, the Backside Learning center operated on a smaller scale. Physically, the Center resembled the structure of a traditional house. It had an open space which consisted of work desks for the staff members, a room that functioned as a computer lab for clients to utilize, another room that served as the music/art room and finally a third room that served as a conference room. It was in the conference room that English Language Classes and One-on-one tutoring occurred. Due to space constraints, the Front Runners program operated in a church nearby called Kenwood Baptist Church. During my service learning, I learned

that the Backside Learning Center worked on very small budget that made it difficult to accomplish the same operation as the non-profit organizations that I had previously worked volunteered for. The Backside Learning Center functioned primarily through donations, grants, and its yearly fundraiser.

The realization of how the Backside Learning Center functioned was eye-opening. It put into perspective why the organization relied so heavily on volunteers for day-to-day operation. The realization of how the Backside Learning Center functioned was eye-opening. It put into perspective why the organization relied so heavily on volunteers for day-to-day operation. With most of the budget going toward paying for the running of the organization, it made sense why the Backside Learning center needed volunteers to help fill in the gaps for services that sometimes required funds. I remember during my service learning, having to help make thank you cards for a fundraiser because it would cost a lot more to have them bought. Overall, I was very impressed by how the Backside Learning Center was able to provide so many resources to the workers considering the organization's limitations.

Course Preparation

During my service-learning experience, I encountered many situations where the principles that I had learned in my previous courses permitted me to engage with the issues concerning the Backside Learning Center community.

While completing my service learning project, I got the opportunity to learn about the experiences and stories of some of the workers. Every time I came to the Backside learning center, I met someone new. There were a few regulars who came into the office every day for the sole purpose of interacting, which allowed me to get to know them better. One of the workers that I got

to know very well was named Tony. Tony was one of the few African American equine workers that worked in the barn area. He would come into the learning center every Mondays and Fridays (which were the days I came in) and make everyone coffee, and then tell us about his work experience that day. Tony often told us about how sometimes he worked extremely long hours and how sometimes the horse trainer wasn't very understanding towards him. Tony told us that during the racing season his day would begin at 4 am and go on until at least 11 pm. During the working hours, Tony would have to at the barn by 4:45 a.m. where he would check each horse for changes in health conditions. Tony would then have to bathe and groom the horses, check the stalls, clean the stalls and then feed the horses. According to Tony during racing season, he would have to do this all day for however long the races ran. Tony's story was difficult to hear because it was evident that the conditions of his job were strenuous and were affecting him.

His situation made me think of one of the core concepts that I learned in my Peace 350 course. In the PEAC 350 course, we studied the significance of effective communication and active listening in conflict prevention. In the course, we learned that conflict often arose from the failure to communicate issues as they arose openly. We learned that a lack of communication could lead to a build-up of negative emotion that could provoke the person to react in a harmful manner (lash out). In Tony's case, he was getting more and more frustrated by the long hours of work, and the trainer's insensitivity. Understanding the fundamental causes of conflict and how to respond to them, I listened to Tony's grievances and then asked him to follow up questions with the intent of prompting him to consider addressing his conflict head-on rather than harboring all of his emotions.

Another Key concept that I learned from Peace 350 was active listening. In the course, we studied how active listening was one of the most critical tools for conflict resolution and conflict prevention. We learned that, unlike everyday listening, active listening required listening with full attention and an open mind. We learned that active listening involved listening to what was being said by the speaker, internalizing their position and validating their emotions. By paying attention to what the other person is saying and considering how it makes them feel, active listening can allow you to understand what is really concerning an individual. Before I addressed Tony's concerns, I had to first listen to what was being said. In actively listening, I was able to figure what was really troubling Tony. Although Tony had said that his problem was how the trainer reacted to him, after listening to his story, it seemed as though the problem was the lack of communication. Tony never verbally expressed his concerns directly. He instead, revealed them to us and internalized them around the trainer.

When I took PEAC 350, I never thought that I would be able to apply the principles of conflict resolution theory in everyday life. I only thought that the principles would be applicable in the event where conflict situations.

It was very neat to see how the course materials I learned in the classroom were being integrated into real-life situations.

Peace 325 was another course where I the materials I learned in the course came to reflect in my service learning. One of the key concepts that I learned in PEAC 325 was partnership in the context of violence prevention and peacebuilding. In this course, I learned that peacebuilding extended beyond the absence of war and the absence of conflict. I learned that peacebuilding was "a way of dealing with conflict that results in justice and satisfaction without resorting to violence" (Shifferd,2011). I also learned that Peacebuilding could be fostered through partnership

relationships whereby individuals and their communities promoted mutually respectful and caring relations. Through partnership, individuals can form relationships that encourage progressive understanding of each other, tolerance and solidarity. It is through those relationships that environments promoting peacebuilding can exist.

During my service learning, I was able to witness elements of partnership behavior play out at the Backside Learning Center. The atmosphere of the Backside Learning Center was very supportive towards building community. Many of the clients who came to the Backside Learning Center often spoke to the staff and me as though we were their friends. There were days where the workers would come in and eat their lunch at the center or have coffee with us while we worked. The Director of the Backside learning center was by far the most invested person at the Center. Many of the workers would come wanting to see her, and she would stop whatever she was doing to attend to the workers. I noticed during my time at the Center that everyone was treated equally. Even though there a hierarchy of roles existed, there was never a time where distinctions were visible. I think this play into the relationship dynamic at the backside learning center too. It was fascinating to see elements such community building reflect in everyday behaviors such as eating lunch together. The Backside Learning center cultivated an atmosphere whereby anyone could come in and feel supported and included.

Final Reflection and Career plans

From a young age, I have always been passionate about people and making sure that those around me feel noticed and included. Growing up, I struggled a lot with my identity because of my refugee status and the treatment immigrants faced in South Africa. As a child, I always got made fun of whenever I spoke KinyaRwanda and when I grew older, I experienced bullying because I was an immigrant. In South Africa, immigrants were associated with taking

opportunities away from South Africans which created a hostile environment for non-South Africans. Noticing how negatively people were being treated on the basis of their nationality caused me to be more empathetic towards marginalized individuals and vocal against discrimination.

Over the years, volunteering has given me a chance to bridge the gap between advocacy, service, and learning. It has allowed me to find my voice through the experiences of others and has empowered to step outside my comfort zone and use my position of privilege to empower the communities I serve. I have been fortunate to have experienced life in a way that allowed me to cultivate diversity and inclusion from a young age. It taught me how to handle situations stemming from biases, stereotypes, and hatred. It also taught me how to chase after the hard conversations regarding the social conditions in society. My service learning experience offered me a chance to extend my perspective and acquire an all-encompassing learning opportunity to understand those social conditions better

Before this course, I thought that I knew all that there was to know about service and peacebuilding. However, I have learned that service is more than about offering resources or giving up a few hours of your time and that peacebuilding is more than about abolishing violence and war. Instead, I have learned that service is an extension of peacebuilding through experiencing and learning through the realities of others, bearing their challenges and seeing life through their lens to advocate for change.

I have come to recognize the importance of truly understanding the communities you serve and their experiences. Although we may never be able to understand the issues facing the communities we serve fully, we can get a glimpse through service. My service learning experience has challenged me to take in the experiences shared with me by the members of the Backside

community and reflect on them from their perspective. In doing this, it has allowed me to move away from the attitude of knowing to an attitude of seeking. Before my service learning, I considered myself as one of those volunteers who 'knew' the challenges faced by the communities I was serving. I wanted to change their conditions and transform their experiences. However, as I wrote in my journal, sometimes that can be harmful. I learned through my service learning that not all communities are broken, and that not all communities need transformation.

Moving forward, I intend to take what I have learned in my service learning and my PEAC courses and incorporate them into my career path. Thinking of my future, I have decided that I want to pursue a career in public service, focusing on humanitarian aid. We are currently living in a time where conflict and warfare have become an epidemic. We hear on the news about countries in need of humanitarian relief, but because of the nature of those environments, not many people are willing to risk their lives. Fortunately, that is not the case for me. I am committed to advocating for peace and truly being of service, and for me, it is through humanitarian work.

Currently, my plan after I graduate is complete an internship abroad, doing Humanitarian work. I have been scouting organizations such as the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) as well as the International Organization for Migration (IOM). UNHCR works to provide support to people who have been forced to flee their home, while IOM provides humanitarians assistance to migrants in need. Both of these organizations would be ideal places begin my career in humanitarian aid, and I look forward to going through the application process.

Works Cited

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