

Service Learning at Restorative Justice Louisville
And Iroquois Branch Library

Introduction

“Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You can vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote everyday about the kind of community you want to live in.”

–Unknown

As I am nearing the end of my service learning experience, I can see the un-denying importance of this quote. Never has it been so apparent to me that the actions we take in within our communities effect the lives of the individuals that surround us. Through the Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation program, I have been afforded the opportunity to work with both Restorative Justice Louisville and the Iroquois Branch of Louisville Free Public Library. These programs are located on two different end of Louisville, and interact with two different demographics of people throughout the community. But, what makes these two programs similar is their ongoing and positive impacts within Louisville’s community.

Service Learning Site: Restorative Justice Louisville

The began my service learning hours with Restorative Justice Louisville, or RJL, located less than half a mile from my own home. I had first heard of restorative justice practices in one of the classes offered in the Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation program, PEAC 350, or Basic Mediation and Conflict Transformation. I had not heard of the restorative justice process before, and it seemed to be like an ideal alternative to the current judicial system in the United States. The mediation process has many of the same traits that the restorative justice process

has, and learning first-hand the transformative power of mediation has on a conflict, I knew that restorative justice had to be equally as powerful, especially in a setting where a crime has been committed.

Restorative Justice Louisville began in 2011 and was “the first nonprofit in Kentucky to provide an alternative to our criminal justice system” (*Learn More about RJL*). As soon as I read this from their website, I knew that I wanted to work with RJL for my service learning. The restorative justice process first and foremost is a voluntary process, for both the victim and the offender. Restorative justice takes place after a crime has been committed, and is an alternative to going through the typical court process. At the beginning of the restorative justice process, the offender and the victim will have separate meetings, called pre-conferences. At these pre-conferences, the victim and offender will meet with a facilitator as their first step. When meeting the offender, the goal is to try and understand what the offender was thinking when committing the crime, how they plan to fix what they have done, and how they have learned from their crime. This is an extremely valuable step for restorative justice, especially RJL, because they only have juvenile offender, or no offender over the age of eighteen. I learned that through the restorative justice process, often times the children have never truly been held accountable for their crimes, and especially are never told to think about the consequences they have caused to the other parties involved from their actions. When speaking to the victim, the facilitator will ask them to express how they were affected by the crime committed against them, and what actions they wish for the offender to take to fix what has been done. A lot of times, this includes the offender doing community service hours, repairing the item/ items they damaged, or paying for the cost of repairs.

In the final conference, the victim, offender, and a facilitator will meet together. For the first time, the offender and the victim will meet each other face-to-face. This meeting gives the victim the opportunity to tell the offender directly how their crime has effected them. The offender gets the chance to tell their side of what happened, such as what led up to the incident, and that they are remorseful for what they have done. Both parties then talk about the final agreement, which is basically like a contract, so that the offender is help accountable for the actions that follow. Most of the time, the victims has already made a plan for the final agreement before the final conference. The final agreement must be signed by all present parties at the final conference, and if the offender does not finish the agreement, their case goes back to court.

Throughout the restoration process, RJL checks on the offender, to make sure that they are upholding their end of the agreement. On the local level, Restorative Justice Louisville has seen “significant cost savings for every case resolved outside the court system, restoration for victims, closure and healing for victims and their community, promotion and support of positive behavioral change of offenders, successful re-integration of the young offenders back into the community, and prevention of future crime” (*Our Impact*). RJL works with the Louisville Metro Police Department’s 1st, 2nd, and 4th divisions, as well as many different community programs throughout Louisville.

It was a very personal decision for me to do my service learning at Restorative Justice Louisville. I have had immediate family members go through the “cycle” of the judicial system, starting with small crimes at a young age and progressing to larger crimes as they grew older, never able to break away from the life of crime that followed them. I have seen first-hand the

many failings of this system, and have always wanted to be involved with a program that made a conscious decision to break away from the traditional model, because they knew too well that the high levels of recidivism in the United States needed to be addressed in a different manner. I knew that choosing a service learning site that was so personal to me was very important, and knew it would allow me to grow from the process, instead of just looking at it as another volunteering activity.

Initially, I had wanted to become a facilitator with RJL when I began my service learning. As previously stated, I had some mediation training through the Peace Studies program, and thought that I could jump in to the process. However, I later came to learn that RJL has a relatively intensive program for their facilitators. It is a four day program, from 8 A.M to 4 P.M, where facilitators learn how to interact with the victim and offender, how to accentuate the most important aspects of the process, and how to truly be present in a situation that could be very emotional for both parties. With my school schedule, I was never able to attend this training, and it is only offered about three times per year. Instead, the main duty I had while working with RJL was speaking to facilitators directly about their experiences with RJL, and gather their facilitation stories. This project was very valuable to RJL, because case stories can be used when they are creating newsletters, applying for grants, and they are an important part of community outreach. My supervisor said she had always needed to gather the personal stories of facilitators, but as one of the only two paid employees at RJL, it was very difficult to find the time and resources to do so. When she suggested this project for me, I thought it would be a great way to learn more about the restorative justice process, and see how it is carried out.

I was given the contacts of all the facilitators RJL had, and reached out to each of them to set up a meeting. I had meeting all across coffee shops in Louisville, and truly met so many wonderful people from many different walks of life. When I had meetings with the facilitators, I would first ask them some personal questions about their RJL experience, like what had originally drawn them to volunteer with RJL, how long they had been volunteering, what were some highlights they had, ext. Next, I would ask them to describe one to three facilitations that they had, usually suggesting to tell me about cases they felt had the largest impact on the victim and offender, and the community as a whole. I heard some remarkable stories about all of these young people who had committed crimes, and the true joy it brought the facilitators to be a part of the process. Quite often, I heard that it was moving to them how much the victim wanted to help the offender, and wanted them to make a positive impact on their community. Usually, the victim would want the offender to do community service to fix what they had done, and told the offender that they wanted what was best for them. On one occasion, a facilitator had told me the victim offered the offender a job at his company, on another occasion the victim created an internship at their business place for the offender. In every case I heard, there was always an outcome that helped, rather than hindered, the offender in some way. After recording these meetings, I would then listen to them again, and transcribe their responses. The meetings lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to one hour, and the transcriptions varied in times, taking longer for the more lengthy meetings. At the end of this process, I had compiled a seventeen page case story booklet with all of the interviews with the facilitators.

I was able to sit-in on a final conference with RJJ, and this specific one was between ~~two~~ two ~~men and a young boy~~ adults and a youngster. Since it was the final conference, this had been the first time the victim and the offender had met one another. What had brought them to this facilitation happened almost a year ago, when the offender was ~~just twelve years old~~ a pre-teen. ~~He~~ The offender was riding ~~his~~ a bike late at night with ~~his older brother~~ an older sibling and some of ~~his brother's~~ the sibling's friends, and started throwing rocks at an apartment building. They ~~boys~~ had thrown a rock through ~~this man's~~ a sliding glass doors and ~~through one of his~~ windows. One thing in particular that I observed at before the conference began was before the offender arrived, the victim had a very crass manner ~~about him~~. Understandably, ~~he was~~ still angry about what had happened ~~to him~~, and which had affected him most monetarily, costing around \$900 in home damage ~~to his home~~. However, ~~when he~~ the victim was taken aback upon found finding out how young the offender ~~boy~~ was. The victim, ~~he was very taken aback~~. He had no idea ~~he was so~~ of such a young offender, ~~and he even said~~ he was and was expecting an older teenager, ~~who was~~ a "thug". ~~He~~ The victim had even brought ~~his~~ an uncle to the conference ~~with him~~, who used to be a police officer, just in case things went awry because of these pre-conceived notions.

When the offender arrived to the conference location, the facilitator and I stepped outside so that we could talk to the offender before ~~he met~~ introducing the victim. At this point, it was the facilitator who was taken aback. She said she barely recognized ~~him~~ the offender because ~~he~~ the offender had matured and grown, both physically and emotionally. The facilitator stated that when they first met, the offender would take no accountability for what ~~he had~~ was done, and took pride in d himself on the fact that he was being a "bad ~~boy~~ person" at

school. The offender's aunt accompanied ~~him~~ the offender to the conference, and she stated that ~~he~~ the offender was now living with her, attending a new school, had joined ~~the~~ basketball sports team, and had goals to make ~~it onto~~ the high school team. The offender ~~He stated that he~~ was ready to take accountability for what ~~he~~ the offender had done, and we proceeded to have the final conference with all parties involved.

The victim and the offender introduced themselves, and sat across from one another at the table. The victim went on to explain to the boy-offender the damage ~~he had~~ done, and the victim had brought pictures of the broken door and window to show ~~him~~. The offender was truly shocked at the damage ~~he had caused,~~ and was very apologetic. The victim ~~stated that he~~ was saving up for a new truck-vehicle at the time, and ~~this~~ the repair had really taken a toll on these savings. The offender was then asked to tell the victim what ~~he~~ the offender likely felt like ~~he~~ needed to know about the event. This ~~twelve-year-old boy~~ pre-teen looked at this ~~man~~ victim and went on to ~~tell~~ discuss ~~him about his~~ life at the time at the event.

~~He told him that he~~ The offender was out late with his ~~brothers~~ siblings, and ~~that he~~ had no idea where their parents were that night. ~~He said that~~ they were often on drugs and were never home. The offender said, ~~saying~~ that the parents were “out doing what adults not in their right mind do.” ~~He~~ The offender and others ~~stated that they~~ were riding their bikes close to the train tracks, and then they crossed over them ~~they and~~ saw ~~these~~ new apartments. ~~He said that when he and the boys that accompanied him~~ When they saw nice apartments, they simply decided to throw rocks at them. As soon as they broke his-a window, they rode their bikes back home, which was on the other side of the train tracks in another neighborhood. The

police arrived to their home soon because "the police knew everyone in ~~his~~ the offender's house by a first name basis" according to the ~~boy~~ offender and ~~his~~ the offender's aunt.

After this explanation, ~~the offender~~ he lookeds at this man the victim right in his eyes and apologizedds for ~~his~~ the actions. ~~His~~ The aunt was then asked to add to the conversation, and she told the victim that her ~~nephew~~ relative was truly a new kid since ~~he had begun~~ living with her. ~~He~~ The offender said he ~~goes~~ went to school every day now and actually lookeds forward to it, ~~again stated that he was on the basketball~~ including the sports team. The offender ~~,and~~ had short-term as well as long-term goals for life. At this point, the victim had let down all of the guards ~~he had up just~~ from just half an hour before. The victim He expressed pride in the offender ~~told the kid he was proud of him,~~ and wanted ~~him~~ the offender to continue doing so well. ~~He said that he hopes~~ The offender should see ~~he sees~~ how much better life can be ~~when~~ ~~he does not~~ without falling into the trap of letting bad influences dictate the decisions ~~he makes~~ in life. The final agreement that the parties decided on was that the offender and ~~his~~ family would pay for damage done to his windows.

The opportunity to sit in on a final conference was definitely the highlight of my experience with RJL. I was able to experience first-hand the power of this transformative process, instead of hearing accounts from facilitators. First, I saw who this kid was becoming, and it would not have been possible if he were sent to a juvenile detention center for his crime. It was easy to see him breaking of the "cycle" that he was immersed in from such a young age, again which would not be possible if he had to follow the traditional model of the United States justice system. These young kids can see that people in the community care for them, and want them to be able to succeed in life. I was also able to see how this process benefits the victim

just as much. It was very visible to see the change in the victims tone, body language, and overall comfort with the process once the offender opened up about the experience. His perception of the whole situation changed completely, and by the end he was able to tell the offender he was proud of him. The restorative justice process was able to bring peace to both the offender and the victim, and made it so that both parties could learn, grow, and move on from the whole experience.

In the spring of 2017, I took a class called Peace, Justice and Conflict Transformation Fundamentals, or PEAC 325 as part of my certification. In this class, we explored the many concepts and terms that align with peace studies. One of these terms that really connected with restorative justice practices is “conflict resolution.” Conflict resolution can be defined as “efforts to address the underlying causes of a conflict by finding common interest and overarching goals. It includes fostering positive attitudes and generating trust through reconciliation initiatives, and building or strengthening the institutions and process through which the parties interact peacefully.” In being able to experience the restorative justice practice first hand, it was clear to me that it is the true definition of conflict resolution. The underlying cause of this crime was expressed from the offender’s standpoint, without him even realizing it. This young offender was able to express his new goals in life to the victim he caused harm to, and the victim was able to encourage these goals. They were able to connect with one another over basketball, and they genuinely all left the room with smiles on their faces. Not only were both parties able to avoid court with the restorative justice process, but they were able to benefit both short term and long term. This account was an exemplary example of what peace building in the Louisville community looks like.

Service Learning Site: Iroquois Branch of the Louisville Free Public Libraries

I was afforded the opportunity to continue my service learning hours at the Iroquois Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library. This library is located on Woodlawn Avenue in South Louisville. The location of the library contributes greatly to the different demographics and ethnicities of people that enter through the doors. In Jefferson County alone, there are approximately 136 languages spoken, and many of these languages are spoken throughout the neighborhoods that surround the Iroquois Library. For this reason, the Library makes sure to address the particular needs of the international communities that surround them with their Immigrant Services division. There is a computer learning center, programs to help with resume building, cultural exhibitions, various clubs and workshops, as well as family movie nights. Every weekday night, the library offers homework help for both children and adults, who are often times working on their English comprehension.

An important foundation of the Immigrant Services the libraries offers is a program called English Conversation Club, or ECC. This program offers one-on-one English conversation practice, citizenship test preparation, and homework assistance to the international community. At the Iroquois branch specifically, this program is on Saturday's from 3:00-5:00 P.M. This program relies heavily on volunteers throughout the community to assist, because there is such a large number of immigrants and refugees that make use of this valuable resource.

My duties at the library were very specific to the Immigrant Services portion of the Iroquois library, because I worked directly with the Immigrant Services Librarian. Before I

arrived on my first day of service learning, I was not aware of the numerous services the library had to offer the immigrant and refugee community in Louisville. Part of my duties was assisting at the “homework help” table. Here, I would assist both adults and children with their homework assignments. For adults, their assignments were always English comprehension homework and the children’s assignments varied with typical math, science, and social studies school work. When it came to assisting adults with their homework assignments, it was a different experience entirely because everyone’s English comprehension varied. I helped people on multiple fronts, from filling in correct verbs in a sentence, trying to help them understand the difference between a complete predicate and a complete subject, helped them read through children’s books aloud, assisted with writing papers, and learn what everyday objects were in English translated from their native language. When helping at the homework table, I was typically there from five in the afternoon to nine at night, and it was always incredible to me how much drive these students had to learn more. Some of them would be at the library, leave to go to English class, and come straight back to the library so they could continue working until they closed.

When providing help at the homework table, I became hyperaware of the way that I was explaining concepts. I did not want to be confusing or misleading in any way, and especially on the first couple of times I was helping, I unconsciously mimicking my own mother. She has been a special education and ELL teacher for about thirteen years. Throughout the years, I have seen her interact with her students on many different occasions, observing the way she speaks to them, the way she sometimes uses different mannerisms to explain difficult concepts, saw the immense patience and kindness she had with her students. I began mimicking her tone

when I was trying to explain concepts in English that I had long ago forgotten. After my first night at the library, I called and thanked my mother for providing me with such a great starting point there, when neither of us even realized I would be doing service learning so similar to her field. Much like Restorative Justice Louisville, the library made an immediate connection to my life, making the experience much more valuable than I could have anticipated.

Another part of my responsibilities at the library included my involvement with ECC on Saturdays. ECC was easily the most hectic day of the week at the library. Before ECC began at three, my supervisor would usually host a film showing in the computer lab. These films were usually about women's liberation throughout the world, and specific oppression that women face in different cultures. As soon as the film ended, it was my job to leave the post-film discussion and begin setting up for ECC. This included simple tasks such as setting up chairs and tables in the hallways and main room, going to the back room to bring in the carts of games, flashcards, citizen preparation quizzes and conversation cards. Once we were set up, I would make sure volunteers knew where they needed to go, because most of the volunteers were there for their first time. Once people began to flood into the basement room, I would wait by and be at the ready for my supervisor to tell me my next task.

When waiting for my next task, I was always able to observe the room pretty well. It was interesting to watch these interactions between two very different groups of people. Most of the volunteers were there for school, and like me when I first arrived at the library, they did not really have any idea what I was getting into. For many people, as I later learned, this was the first time they had ever encountered and refugees on such a personal level. For people who were talking to adult immigrants or refugees, it often seemed as if they were uncomfortable,

not really knowing where to begin. It is a hard task, to try to have a conversation with someone you just met and who speaks English at a very basic level. I understood exactly what they were going through, because I too felt like this when I first began. I did not want to mess up, and I also was not really sure what to say. It is after a few times attending events at the library that I realized the people you are talking to feel the same way, and I would imagine the feeling is much stronger for them. They are making themselves vulnerable by coming to a place specifically to have a conversation in English with a native speaker, just so they can improve their own speech, which ultimately effects their quality of life in the United States. This process is certainly one of the more humbling experiences someone can have from a volunteer standpoint. I think that this experience is also extremely valuable for anyone, including myself. As Americans, we hear a plethora of information and feelings about refugees and immigrants. I think that to truly be on the peacemaking front of the argument, it is important for an individual to connect with these populations, and really have a "face to the name" experience. It was through both the homework help table and ECC that I came to know multiple young refugee girls and their families. I know what high schools they want to go to, I know about their families that are still living in their home country, and I have come to know the struggles they face when in the United States. They consider me their friend, and I cannot think of a better and more respectful title coming from them. I think that an important aspect of my service learning experience was realizing the need to be more than just a volunteer. Becoming an integrated part of the community that surrounds you makes a profound difference on how you view community as a whole.

Attending and working outreach programs for the library was another part of my duties for the Iroquois Branch. Outreach programs occur at many different locations throughout Louisville, where the goal is to promote the library and the programs it offers to the different communities in the Louisville area. Often times, the Iroquois Branch focused on lower income areas in Louisville. Near Thanksgiving, I was able to attend the Catholic Charities Thanksgiving lunch, which was located in West Louisville. At this event, Catholic Charities Migration and Refugee Services hosted a lunch for refugees from over thirty different countries. There were multiple speakers at this event from different cultures to speak to the community and offer different blessings the food and the mayor of Louisville spoke as well. I was there to hand out flyers about ECC to everyone, and explain what we offered with this program to both participants and volunteers. I can think of no other word for this thanksgiving lunch than beautiful. To see so many refugee and immigrant families being supported by so many members of the community was nothing short peacebuilding actions.

The location of the Catholic Charities event was striking to me. Before I had taken an elective course for my certificate, Environmental Sociology (SOC 315), I never knew of the vast inequalities that the residents of West Louisville face. New terms such as food deserts, environmental racism, and food justice were brought to life for me, and to know that such things were happening just a couple of miles down the road was astonishing to me. What was also interesting to me was how many residents of Louisville viewed the West end at a completely different entity from the rest of Louisville. As someone who is not from the Louisville area, it was unusual to hear people talking about West Louisville as some stigmatized place that residents try to avoid. Still yet, I had never been to West Louisville, so I had never

really seen for myself what this community entailed. As soon as my supervisor communicated to me that where I would be doing outreach was in West Louisville, I made sure to be observant of the community from an environmental sociology standpoint. I was finally able to witness first hand the lack of grocery and retail stores that contributed to food deserts, and the abundance of empty lots and smoke stacks. I was able to see the stark contrast between the parts of the city that Louisville prides itself on, such as Bardstown Rd, Old Louisville, and the pristine museums and night life we are known for. This small experience was a very important one for me as a resident of Louisville. Many times throughout my academic career, I have heard of initiatives to help bring equality to the residents of West Louisville, but I have never been a part of them myself. It is as though I thought that knowing the statistics, the crime rates, and all of the definitions were enough, as if it was the same as acting. Seeing this valuable part of our community in such a light has made me finally act on all this knowledge I have accumulated. Along with this, being able to apply the concepts I learn throughout my Sociological degree to our own community greatly benefits my education experience. I have already begun looking at service projects specific to West Louisville, so that once my service learning for this semester is over, I can jump into another, and bring the valuable assets I have gained throughout the duration of my service learning and vast knowledge I have accumulated through the Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation program.

One of the last outreach programs I was involved in for the library was at the Derby Park Flea Market. This flea market is located in a large building, and filled with individual vendors selling a variety of items. This was a little different from the other flea markets and farmers markets I have attended in the past. Here, there were a people from many different

backgrounds and cultures selling hijab's and providing henna, selling a variety of ethnic cuisines, and some simply selling colognes and perfumes. We were stationed at this little table in the corner, asking people as they passed whether or not they had a library card, giving them information about upcoming events, and telling them about all the resources the library has to offer. Many times, my supervisor would speak to people in Spanish about the library if they did not speak English, which really helped us engage with people from Spanish-speaking countries. After we had set up, I looked at the vendor that were to our left and right. One of the vendors was selling different kinds of knives, swords, and accessories for these items. To our other side, there was a vendor that had a shooting range with realistic-looking BB guns that imitated semi-automatic weapons, but they used BB pellets instead of bullets. Down the hall from us, there was a gun show going on, that was teaching anyone who walked by gun safety, and the ways to own a gun and, as I heard multiple times through their intercom, "ways to avoid getting arrested." My first thought was "we do not belong here", and I suddenly became very uncomfortable in this setting, and it was clear that my supervisor felt the same way.

However, it was not a second later that I realized, I am exactly where I need to be. Here I am, representing the Iroquois Library as well as the Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation program at the University of Louisville. What a wonderful juxtaposition our presence brought to this place! We were surrounded by symbols of violence in our culture, objects that have created uncountable tragedies, wars, and displacement throughout the world. There we were, two women from the local library, trying to spread a message of peace, acceptance, and prosperity for the community in the midst of this. It was through this experience that I realized, though not to this very literal degree, I was doing this all throughout my service learning with

the library. There are often so many negative opinions about the low-income, refugee, and immigrant population in the United States, and these opinions can have such a negative impact of these populations. The library makes a visible effort to make all of these populations feel welcome, and more than that, try to benefit their lives in any way that they can.

How Service Learning Has Contributed to My Goals

One of people's favorite questions to ask students in college is, "what do you want to do when you graduate?" This truly is one of the most daunting questions you could ask me as an individual. Throughout my studies, I have changed my major and my career plans many times. I have never truly felt led to do any specific job or go into any specific field. Still yet, as a senior, I am still unsure what I want to do with my sociology major. However, one thing has become very clear to me throughout my service learning. My answer to the question "what do you want to do when you graduate?" does not frighten me as much as it used to. I have encountered so many wonderful people over the course of the semester, heard so many stories, and felt the movement that my two service learning sites have created. I have witnessed the impact two women, my supervisors, can make in a community, and it truly inspirational. I want to always be a part of this movement, and eventually, take charge of these peace movements wherever life may take me. "I want to help people." That is my answer.

Conclusion

I would like to go back to the quote I began with, "Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You can vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote everyday about the kind of community you want to live in." Through my experiences with

service learning, I was able to dive deeper into the community that surrounds me. Often times, I feel like I have no voice when it comes to changing the often negative feelings towards refugees, or helping people break free of the cycle of crime, or even simply applying the knowledge I have gained throughout my four years of college. I have come to realize however, that a young college student can make a difference quite easily in their own community. I am voting for a better community through serving it, and encouraging other to do the same. Through my service learning, I have a gained far more insight than I ever have sitting in a classroom, because I have experienced first-hand the programs and the people in Louisville that are truly making a change, a peace-oriented change, to our community. I have often felt overwhelmed with the amount of change I have wanted to see in our city, state, and country which made it difficult to know where to start. Service learning was the best starting point I could have asked for, and it is because of this program that I will continue to serve my community, and change it from the ground-up.

Citations

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