

Service Learning at the Iroquois Library

I still vividly remember the day my family and I arrived in America. A mixture of feelings of anxiety and joy occupied all of us and made us feel disoriented because it was so surreal. There, the adventure began, a social worker helped us at the Los Angeles airport, but we had to rely on ourselves to make it from L.A. to Houston and then to our final stop in Louisville, KY. None of us could speak English. The social worker had given my father a poster that said, “I speak limited English. Help me.” We had no clue what it was for although we could read and understand the meaning of it. The social worker had said nothing but put that poster around the neck of my father. Later, when we got lost trying to find the next flight to go to Louisville, KY, all of us realized the purpose of that poster. To be frank, it was embarrassing. It was so difficult navigating through the enormous Houston airport. We were five minutes away from missing the flight, but we made it with the help of genuinely good staff members. I realized then that I needed to know English, so I would not have that difficulty again. That little moment and all of my family’s struggles here in our new home have inspired me to choose the Iroquois Library because I know it is time for me to contribute to the community, I live in.

Service Learning Site

People in Beechmont community knew the importance of having access to knowledge and demanded public library service. Generous and wise donors, fund raisings, the support of the City Officials, and the resources of the Federal Works Progress Administration led to the construction of the library March 1, 1939. Over the years, Iroquois Library has adapted and served the needs of the Beechmont community where immigrants and refugees decided to make it their home. Various programs offered at the Louisville Free Public Library branches, and at the Iroquois branch are basic computer classes, citizenship class, resume building and cover letter

help, homework help for both adults and kids, cultural show case, and the most significant program, ECC that stands for English Conversation Club, for English learners. Most of my service learning experiences came from ECC run by Sophie Maire, Immigrant Services Librarian.

A long running weekly program, ECC, at the Iroquois branch is slightly different because Sophie personalizes it and pairs learners and volunteers by “some element of shared experiences.” I think her strategy is not just interesting but also successful because teaching English to non-English speakers is not as easy as it sounds. I know it as a former ESL student and English speaker. It is not about how much a volunteer is fluent in the language to teach the learner, but it is finding connections with the learner to teach the language, culture, and most importantly making them feel welcomed to this new home. For most learners, ECC allows them to explore their curiosity of this new home as well as this new culture, to make new friends, and to find a way to achieve their American dreams.

Responsibilities

My responsibilities were simple yet crucial to the service learning site, especially for ECC. ECC is a weekly program starts from 3 pm to 4:30 pm on every Saturday in the basement of the Iroquois Library led by Sophie and operates with the help of volunteers and interns like me. Sometimes, it was challenging to set up tables and chairs in a timely manner before learners and volunteers arrived due to conflicted schedules with other events and programs held at the library. The basement would be crowded with people even before ECC started and could be overwhelming for new volunteers and learners. Since we only had one and a half hours, we wanted to make sure everyone’s (both learners and volunteers) time was well spent at ECC. So, my responsibility was to set up tables, chairs, carts, and put out snacks and water before ECC

started so that Sophie did not have to worry about it and could focus on greeting new people and getting to know them which is very essential to pairing people.

Another responsibility I had was homework help, and I did it on Tuesdays and some Wednesdays in the evening. I worked with kids from kindergarten to college students, and most of them did not speak English as their first language. It was quite an experience for me because I was once in their situation, and now I am helping them. I could not believe the responsibility I had at my learning site. My other responsibility was to sort and put flash cards back into their appropriate carts. When volunteers and learners came, the carts needed to be ready to be used. For ECC, there are long term volunteers but most of them come one or two times and usually do not come back. So, my responsibility was important so that ECC could run without having any inconveniences because I was a long-term volunteer and knew the drill.

My other responsibility was to greet volunteers and learners who came to ECC for the first time while Sophie was busy pairing people and managing the program. Some were overwhelmed, especially if the people were learners because of the language barrier and the setting. I would ask people if they came here to practice English or to volunteer, then according to what they told me I would ask them to sign in and tell them to wait for Sophie in the “lobby” because we could not keep everyone in the room at once. Some people, specifically the learners would ask “Where’s Sophie?” as soon as they arrived. So, it was my job to inform them of where Sophie was and tell them to wait for her. I did all my responsibilities with another intern at my learning site, so it was not as overwhelming as it looked, although it could be at times. Doing all my responsibilities helped me grow in confidence in working under pressure with many people and most importantly become competent in communicating with people with different ethnic heritage.

Challenges and Opportunities

The most challenging part of doing my service learning was having a lack of sleep and third shift work schedule. I knew it would be difficult even before I decided to take this course, but I did not have another way to resolve this issue; I just had to deal with the situation I was in. As much as I was concerned about what I would be doing at my learning site, it was not that challenging; my life situation made it challenging. Especially on Saturdays, I only had 4 hours of sleep or 5 hours at the most, and when I arrived my learning site, I was half asleep and half awake. I could do my responsibilities without any conflicts because I knew the drill. However, when I wanted to present my opinion or communicate with the people, I was struggling because I could not think clearly. Most of the time, I tried so hard not to say embarrassing things.

Nevertheless, the opportunities given to me were much more than the challenges I had at my learning site, the Iroquois Library. I had the opportunities to make new friends, converse and share knowledge with them, and I was inspired by their stories as well. I met new people from across the world who decided to make America their new home. Listening to their stories reminded me of my arrival to America and the struggles I confronted as a newcomer. In this new land, I have fought to reach my American dreams, and battling against the barriers, culture dissonance, and internal conflict has exhausted me periodically. However, just conversing with them helped me to realize how far I have come to reach my American dreams and motivated me not to give up on them.

I gained those inspirations from people in the homework help program at the Iroquois Library. I helped more adult students than young students like elementary, middle, and high school kids. I had helped an older Somalian lady currently attending ESL class at JCTC and a few young ladies who were preparing to work in the medical fields as a medical assistant. They

all work hard to achieve their American dreams, and among those there was an older Somalian lady who was in her forties. She really inspired me to work hard and not to lose sight on my dreams. She experienced a civil war right before she started going to college, so she couldn't get college education there. Now that she is in America, she has started pursuing her dream that was struck down by the civil war. I also met a young lady who was in her early twenties studying to become a medical assistant. That young lady had to take a test on the day she gave birth to her child, and I met her twenty days after she gave birth to her child. She did not take a break and studied hard to pursue her dream. It was very refreshing to have conversations with those strong women because our conversations helped me navigate to find myself again.

My service learning site not only provided me an opportunity to teach and help others but also gave me a chance to learn from experienced volunteers. I had a conversation about teaching kids with a retired elementary teacher who was down to earth. She explained to me how she taught kids with different learning styles and how she introduced new concepts to kids. Since I want to teach at some point in my life, conversing with her was like finding an oasis in the desert. There was also another volunteer, she is an editor at a Business magazine. Conversing with her opened my career options and was a new window and a sneak peek to a different lifestyle. It gave me a new perspective on life. As listening to an immigrant or refugee's life is interesting to Americans, listening to Americans talking about their lives is interesting to me as well. In my opinion, textbook and university courses can teach me academic aspects and knowledge but cannot teach me how to handle what life will throw at me. I must experience it to truly understand. So, hearing life experiences of Americans who were born, raised, and lived here is unique because it's a chance for me to learn about what they do for a living and the experiences they have gone through.

Many people came to the library to get information regarding their class projects, and sometimes they asked Sophie if they could get people to interview; usually they are college students. Sophie arranged two interviews conducted by two high school students from different schools for me at the ECC program. One was from J. Graham Brown School and the other was from Manual high school. Doing interviews, especially with high school students gave me hope because I knew it from my experiences that they would have a better understanding about the lives of immigrants/refugees.

Sometimes, it was hard to do interviews and talk about my past life because I had to recall my memories of unpleasant moments in my life. Unfortunately, it was hard when the Manual high school student interviewed me although it was my opportunity to contribute back to the community, I live in. I almost cried when I did the interview, but I controlled myself. I don't think the girl noticed that. As I was answering her questions, I recalled memories of how people have been discriminated against based on their gender, religion, race, and culture in Myanmar during the military regime and now. I also realized that it's everywhere. I was so frustrated and disappointed as I was telling my life experience. Even though I was very upset, I was determined not to stop the interview. I did not want to let this opportunity go because people needed to hear stories like mine, especially young people like the interviewer.

Another opportunity given to me was an interview I had with nursing students from Bellarmine University. They asked me questions about lifestyle in Myanmar, how women are treated, health care, and again my experience living in both countries, Myanmar and America. Later, the nursing student sent me an email with a list of questions we could not cover during the interview at ECC. Honestly, I am so proud to be the one who was interviewed because I believe that it is more powerful to hear a first-hand story in person than from a news network. I told them

what to expect if they have immigrant/refugee patients by sharing my mother's experience at the hospital. We were new to this country and all of us went through a lot of changes emotionally and physically.

All refugees are required to have a medical exam when they arrive, and my mother had an additional medical exam because of her health situation. The doctor asked her questions regarding her emotions and mental state. My mother was ill for many years and coming to America with three teenagers who were 18, 17, and 15 years old respectively was not easy for her. Having to adjust to a new land, new culture, and new lifestyle was even more challenging for her. So, my mother was honest and expressed what she felt, expecting that she would get the help she needed. At the end of the session, the doctor concluded that my mother was crazy. My mother was very upset and sad. So, I told the nursing students to be aware of their patients' life circumstances and not to assume someone is crazy just because they feel different about life than other people. I saw the empathy in their eyes. It was one of the many opportunities I had at my learning site that I appreciate.

Expectation and Reality

I did not expect both the volunteers and learners to come to the library every week, but to my surprise, they did. Despite cold or hot weather, people showed up to ECC or homework help. I expected to help more kids with their homework, but in the reality, I had helped more college students with their homework than kids. I was a little nervous and anxious about how I would fulfil my service learning, the 75 hours, because I worked third shift, supported myself, and went to school. It was much easier to fulfill the hours than I thought.

For the Homework Help Program, I knew what I would be doing because the name itself is self-explanatory. However, it is impossible to imagine what kind of services ECC will offer to

the clients besides practicing English. I thought I would just be conversing with the learners every Saturday from 3 to 4:30 pm. Beside practicing English, one of the many services ECC offers to its clients is providing a safe space for kids and teenagers. I saw high school kids volunteer to help adults with their English and sometimes play chess and other games with other high school kids. Little kids who came to ECC with their parents also had a chance to color, learn their ABC's, and listen to stories. Sometimes, parents would bring their children who needed help with their homework, math, and others to ECC because they knew there were always people who were willing to help them.

I think it's beautiful because when I was in high school, I did not fit into any groups at school and in the Burmese youth group. I was at home doing my house chores or with my mom and her friends. High school was the loneliest time of my life. Since we only had one car, the whole family shared it to go to work, school, church, buy groceries, and I did not have that much of a chance to go do activities. I asked kids of all ages who came to ECC, if they enjoyed coming there, and all of them said yes. I was amazed! I never thought that they would say yes. I think it's because they knew they were loved and in a safe community.

The same high school kids would come every week and I could tell they felt at home in the Iroquois Library. Some little kids did not even want to go home at 4:30. I am sure it's also because of Sophie's hospitality, kindness, and care for other people. I am happy for those kids because coming to ECC was safe, fun, and adventurous. They got to see many people from around the world and were exposed to other cultures at this young age. ECC provided kids and teenagers a safe place to explore the world without having to leave their home town which will be very beneficial to the families of those kids, their school, their community, and to our country.

Course Preparation and Reality Encountered

I chose SOC 323, Diversity and Inequality, as a supporting course in fall 2016 without knowing that it would be a perfect fit for my PEAC certificate. It was interesting and I thought it would be beneficial to me, a sophomore at the University of Louisville at that time and eager to learn the socioeconomic, social classes, and diversity of America. This concept of Diversity and Inequality was not new to me; however, how American or western scholars approach it was so interesting to me. My home land, Myanmar where Theravada Buddhism is widely practiced, people approach to the concept of inequality more from a religious perspective. Most people in Myanmar accept that poor people are poor because they have bad karma, and rich people are rich because they have good karma. Being rich and poor, and even being born as a male or female are the consequences of what a person did in the past life. So, people would work hard to get out of poverty, pray to the Buddha, and do charity to gain good merit to be born in a rich family or in a country with better government but rarely blame the government system although they know how corrupted the government is.

On the contrary, in my SOC 323 class, we analyzed why inner-city poverty exists, we discussed solutions to create a better juvenile justice system, we presented our opinions of the existence of the glass ceiling, and we talked about racism and how to end it. As a class, we talked about how essential diversity is to America and encouraged each other to appreciate the diversity we have here in this country. The whole class shared their personal experiences about racism, class struggle, gender inequality, and our day to day struggles we confront as a human being. In the West, the way the scholars approach diversity and inequality are very secular and more from an academic perspective. In this course, theory and experiments were involved in the discussion, and the professor respected the view of religions but disagreed with the idea. My classmates also presented their views, opinions, and thoughts about diversity and inequality, and it was very

informative. So, taking SOC 323 prepared me to handle various ideas that people brought to Iroquois Library and especially to ECC.

In PEAC 325 (Peace, Conflict, and Justice Transformation Fundamentals) class, I learned about civil disobedience, how non-violence protests have brought successful revolutions across the world, the history of countries who fought against dictatorships and became a democracy, and how to analyze a conflict. The PEAC 325 course covered many international affairs in depth with analysis of those affairs and conflicts, which helped me to have a better understanding of clients and their backgrounds at my learning site. What I learned from PEAC 325 had prepared me for my service learning because I dealt with immigrants and refugees of all ages who had experienced structure violence and cultural violence in their life time. So, even though I did not confront and resolve any complicated issue at my learning site, having the knowledge helped me to stay ahead of the game.

Skills that I learned in PEAC 350, Mediation and Conflict Transformation, fit perfectly with my choice of service learning site. Active listening, understanding self, conflict management style, how to ask clarifying questions, and emotions management also helped me understand myself better. This was very crucial to the service learning where I interacted with people who had different interests and goals. I asked clarifying questions when I helped college students with their essays, and it worked. I also used clarifying questions at ECC with the learners so that they could be able to express or articulate their emotions as well as their thoughts. Since I took PEAC 325 and 350, I have applied the skills I learned from these classes in my daily life to express my thoughts and articulate my emotions. I know from my personal experiences that being able to articulate thoughts and emotions can liberate one from stress and confusion because thinking out loud can clear some of the confusion.

One evening, I was helping an elementary kid with his homework, and as we finished the mother started asking me questions regarding my personal life. When she heard my answers like, I am not married and not interested in having kids, she was persuading me to have kids and kept telling me how wonderful it was to be a mother. Then, I explained to her my reasons and logic of not being interested in having kids, and I realized that the mother was a little upset with my answer. I was also annoyed because of her facial expression and some of her comments.

It was quite difficult for an outspoken young lady like me, but my role as an intern of Sophie, a U of L representative, a student of the PEAC course reminded me of the reason why I am doing service learning. Despite being annoyed, I managed my emotions and ended the conversation politely and walked away from her. I knew I would be interacting and dealing with different people, but facing the reality of it was quite challenging, especially when another woman did not respect my view points. However, any further argument did not occur because I was able to manage the situation with the skill, I learned from PEAC 325 and 350 which enabled me to control my emotions.

The Call of Service

I am glad that I read *The Call of Service* because it helped me go through my service learning experience smoothly. Every time I was in doubt and not sure what I was doing and why, the book cleared my cloudy thoughts and helped put me on the right track. Living a busy life, it is so easy to lose motivation to help others. I was a little overwhelmed when I first read the book, but as I was doing my service learning, reading the book made more sense. I started to analyze my own thoughts and how I felt about doing this service learning. In the book, some college students or volunteers felt guilty about gaining benefits out of volunteerism. However, I do not feel that way because our life is about sharing and giving what we have, whether it be materials,

knowledge, or life experiences with others, and it is also about taking or absorbing it from elsewhere.

Our thoughts are limited because we live our own life, our experiences are limited because we only experience our own. So, sharing, exchanging, giving what we have to others and taking what we need to expand our horizons is healthy and necessary. Acknowledging our privilege and then contributing back to the ones who aren't is a must. It is human nature to be satisfied and be happy with the work we do. I get satisfaction, friendship, and rewards out of this service learning, and I think I needed it to be driven to do more good merits or boost my moral purpose.

I loved how the author included and tied the historic events under its title. I enjoyed reading stories and testimonies of intellectuals, devotees, college students like myself, blue collars, non-religious, politics, social activists, and even the people who received the help. One of the stories stuck in my memory was about a guest at the Saint Joseph House founded by Dorothy Day and her friend Peter Maurin. An alcoholic man who grew up with an abusive father was exposed to Dorothy's love, empathy, and kindness. Later, that gentleman donated the money he inherited to Saint Joseph House after he passed away to show how much Dorothy and the Catholic volunteers meant to him. Reading that story gave me hope and helped me retain my belief in humanity although the story happened a long time ago.

One thing I appreciated the most from the book is when the author talked about Hazards, Cynicism, Despair, and Depression. Sometimes, we tend to focus on the good outcome of volunteerism then forget to mention the hard part of it. If I had not read this book and did my service learning, I do not think I would be able to finish my 75 hours with passion and enthusiasm. *The Call of Service* prepared me mentally to do my service learning because I was at

one-point in despair and did not believe in volunteerism and activism because I felt like everything I did did not matter.

I was invited to have an interview with Mark Hebert from U of L today. A Louisville based magazine named INSIDER also interviewed me and that's how Mark Hebert found me. Sophie also took me with her to give a presentation to a graduate communication class. When I worked at the Church, I shared my personal struggles and emotions with the administration in order to help the refugee and immigrant members of the church. So, I have done a lot of talks regarding refugees and their struggles in America. Still, I had to explain to a co-worker who is in her early fifties, was born and raised in Kentucky, what a refugee even is. If I had not read those sections in the book, I would be in despair and depressed.

What Service Learning Has Contributed to My Goals and Career

I could never consider myself as an American because I always felt that I did not fit-in anywhere in this country. I could not make a connection with my neighbors, classmates, and co-workers. A piece of me had been always missing in my life as if my life was a puzzle. The only time I felt comfortable as an American was when I travelled to Thailand in 2016. On my way home, I stopped at Tokyo international airport as a transit, and I did not feel comfortable around people who looked like me until I saw American pilots and flight attendants and heard them speaking American English. I was relieved because I knew I was going home. I was astonished at my own reaction. Unfortunately, that sense of belonging disappeared, and I have not felt like I was an American since then.

However, at a world fest where Louisville was celebrating the diversity with food, parade of culture, selling traditional clothes, and accessories I found a lost puzzle piece. My job was to reach out to people who want to help others with their English language or who want to learn or

improve their English. I have realized the diversity we have here in Louisville and how much Sophie, the Library, the community, and the government have put their effort into this service. This time I got involved in this kind of festival very different than how I usually did in the past. I was always a foreigner or a new resident who was trying to explain or display my culture and my story. Now, I was an American who wanted to promote the awareness of the diversity and ways to help newcomers.

I saw who I was that day and my role as an American, not just a refugee who was trying to mingle in this new world. To be honest, I rarely felt that I was an American and I belonged to this land as if living in this country for eight years was merely a dream that I did not remember when I woke up. All the luxury I have here and warm hearts that welcome me, support me, and cherish me cannot break the tie I have with my home land. However, standing in the hot weather as I explained what the Public Library offers had woken me up. After that day I knew I belonged to this land and I was an American for the second time, and I was certain that my sense of belonging would not disappear this time.

I realized that I have teaching abilities while I was volunteering in the Burmese Community, but I did not have the confidence to teach in English. I enjoyed teaching and interacting with students especially with the little ones. I helped kids with their homework, and I had my own doubts that I would not be able to help those kids with what they needed. My insecurity kicked in and I almost gave up, but I reminded myself how far I had gone in this life journey. I dragged myself to the Iroquois branch. Sure enough, I could not pronounce some of the words and did not have any idea how to break it down for the girl I was helping. I am grateful that I was born in the era of Internet. Instead of acting like I knew everything, I told the girl that I didn't know how to pronounce the word and had a hard time explaining it to her.

I am sure the girl realized that I was struggling with English just like she was. My survival instinct had kicked in again! I put my Chromebook on the table, and we used Google to look for the meaning of the word and to learn the pronunciation together. She didn't speak or read out loud because of her insecurity and shyness. I encouraged her that it was fine not to know something, and if she made mistakes or some errors on her homework, we would work on it together. I saw the relief on her face. Half way through, she spoke loudly and read the sentences out loud. I felt some sort of accomplishment and satisfaction after I saw her face. Confidence is something we need to learn through errors and trials, and I had the opportunity to gain confidence through my service learning site with the homework help program.

I remember telling my math teacher at Newcomer Academy on a field trip that I would like to work at the embassy once I graduated from a university. I had stumbled and fallen at times, and said different answers to the question, "What do you want to do in the future?" because there are so many things, I would like to do. I did not know where to begin as I started my post-secondary education, then I decided to choose Asian Studies as my major. I was not sure if I was intelligent enough to pursue my dream job or could speak English fluent enough to articulate my thoughts. I have thought about dropping out of school many times, but with the support of loved ones and close friends, I continued my study and take PEAC courses. Through this service learning project, I have found myself again, and hope that I lost during my journey.

I was so excited when I began college and thought that I would make new friends who would hang out and share experiences with each other. I went to JCTC first where I was classmates with working parents, working students, and sometimes older people. Somehow, I felt a little connection with my classmates and also the real world. That little connection was gone when I transferred to U of L where my classmates were talking about club activities they do and

sororities. I work all the time and have lost in touch with my peers and my life situation has forced me to stay in a sheltered life. So, completing this Service Learning has pushed me out of my own little bubble and reconnected me with the real world.

I had the chance to listen to a retired professor from Bellarmine University. She has been an activist since the civil rights movement. She encouraged me to speak up for what I believe in because a movement can take a lifetime to bring about change. I also met Vicky who has volunteered there since the beginning of the ECC. She speaks up for herself, and for women, and encourages me to be myself, find my gifts and talents, and told me not to give up on my goals. These are the kind of people we know from textbooks and documentary films but are not famous or recognized for their effort in bringing an equal society. I have had an opportunity to have actual conversations with them at my Service Learning site. Meeting these wonderful women inspired me to be more determined to share my story and struggles to Americans who do not understand the life of immigrants and refugees although it can be exhausting sometimes. I believe I am destined to carry this task until I breathe my last breath.

Conclusion

I had to the opportunity to learn about the American history that is not taught in school and listen to life stories of immigrants and refugees at the Cultural Show case. I learned about the Young Lords organization founded by Puerto Rican-Americans who wanted to make a change in the society they live in. I always wondered about the Latino and Hispanic population in the United States, how they came here and why there are many of them because I knew very little about them. At my learning site, I got to watch the documentary film about them and heard their struggles and stories in person as well. I knew Cuba was under dictatorship and people fled to

chase their freedom and to get their human rights, but after I watched the documentary, I knew the very reason of why Cubans stayed in America.

As an American, I think it is very important to know that part of history because it changed my whole perspective on Latino and Hispanic people although I had never had bad impression about them. Watching those documentary films is the main reason I accepted myself as an American without a doubt. I have come to a realization that being an American, is not about having a certain race, or belonging to a certain ethnic group, but it is about maintaining my identity as a Burmese-American. Keeping this identity means carrying my own culture, keeping my beliefs, and having my own political opinions, all while respecting others.

My service learning experience was remarkable, emotional, and a milestone achievement for me. I realized that a girl from Myanmar with an inconspicuous future, who could not even dare to dream big has come this far in chasing her dream. Four years ago, I wrote an essay when I was in my senior year of high school about my life and what I wanted to do in the future.

“Although there have been many struggles in my life, my experiences in America have inspired me to pursue a pathway leading to higher education. I never again want to carry a sign that says, “I speak limited English. Help me.” Mostly, my education has inspired me to share my dream. I am determined to show that a girl from a country ruled by a military-regime has the bravery to accomplish such grand dreams.” Although I have not yet fully reached my dream, I believe I am not that far away.

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