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PEAC 350

Reflecting on Four Years, Culminated in Service Learning

I. Service Learning: Overview of the semester

When I started college four years ago, I could not have predicted the series of events that would transform me into the person I am today. I began my college career as a decided Communication major who was a member of the Honor's Service Living Learning Community. Today I am weeks away from walking across the stage and receiving my diploma for a Bachelors of Arts in Communication, a Social Change minor, and a Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation certificate. The immense experience I've gained through the challenges and situations I've faced have prepared me for a better future. And this expansion of self culminated with my service learning experience with Louisville Community Grocery and Louisville Association for Community Economics.

The Louisville Community Grocery began three years ago as a group of community members gathered around the shared belief that food is a human right. This belief turned into a mission to open a community-owned grocery store in one of Louisville's neighborhoods underserved by the traditional food system. In 2017, the group incorporated a nonprofit called Louisville Association for Community Economics. The purpose of this nonprofit was to lay the foundation for the cooperative grocery store, and for future cooperatives yet to be imagined. LACE consists of a board of directors and four committees: Governance and Membership, Finance and Fundraising, Market Research and Real Estate, and Community Outreach. When the cooperative becomes incorporated some members of the board will transition to the grocery's board. Central to both LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery is the idea that a community should be self-reliant and the organizations formed to serve the community should foster relationship building while maintaining transparency, equity, and inclusion.

Prior to the beginning of my service learning, LACE had taken preliminary steps to create a business plan and bylaws so that the Louisville Community Grocery could incorporate. They had also begun outreach to raise awareness of their mission and fundraise. They had been out in the neighborhoods meeting community members and collecting survey responses about households' demographics and grocery habits. Through a partnership with U of L's College of Business, a market research analysis took place. I entered my internship as the organization geared up for a new push - choosing a neighborhood.

After months of hosting community meetings and making efforts to keep the community engaged, the organization was feeling discouraged by the lack of consistent support. In efforts to address this problem the board decided that choosing a neighborhood for the cooperative may be the best move, so that members of that specific neighborhood would feel more invested in the future of the community grocery. The potential neighborhoods included Old Louisville, Parkland, Portland, Russell, Shawnee, and Smoketown/Shelby Park. A vote was held in February to decide which two neighborhoods would be included in a second market study, which would hopefully determine the future neighborhood location. The whole community was invited to participate in the vote, both those who had previously engaged with the organization and those who had not.

The results of the vote were unexpected to say the least, and not very helpful if we're being honest. The expectation was that there would be clear front runners. Instead, the numbers were all over the board, and no matter which way they were analyzed there were close ties. The characteristic differences between the neighborhoods made it even more difficult to narrow down the results. From their population density and buying power to the age of residents and their races, these neighborhoods each had something to offer as the future home of the grocery store.

Yet, it's difficult to prioritize and find the right neighborhood while also setting aside biases about neighborhoods as well as fears of not measuring up to the idea of being completely socially just. After hours of deliberation, the board decided to ask the U of L MBA cohort to do their study on Shawnee/Portland as a sector and Old Louisville/Smoketown/Shelby Park as a sector.

All the while, the organization had goals to meet in regards to the Healthy Hometown grant. The grant was awarded to LACE by the city in order to help meet three key goals. The first is to educate the community about cooperatives, the second is to grow the co-op's membership, and the third is to connect with other neighborhood organizations to foster community. The grant did have limitations though, it couldn't be used for direct fundraising activities such as hosting an event that would make money as its primary goal. Originally, my focus for the internship was to help the organization meet its three goals using digital media outreach.

Prior to the start of my service learning, the organization did not have someone on the team who specialized in digital marketing. There were individuals who were updating their Facebook page, but there was not consistency to the posting. Additionally, their website had been created a few years ago by a one-time volunteer. Besides having an outdated design, the website did not have a clear organizational structure and it had disjointed text throughout the site that did not help the reader understand the full breadth of their mission. Furthermore, there was a disconnect between their brand (or lack thereof), their outreach, and their culture. They had well established values but inconsistent messaging.

I joined LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery to fill this digital gap in their outreach. At the beginning of the semester the outline of my roles with the organization included

social media, blogging, website development, photography, and branding. I had two main objectives for my service learning. First, I wanted to provide them with a guideline for maintaining a digital presence even after I finished my service learning. It's important for any organization, but especially a nonprofit or startup organization that relies on volunteer work, to have a sustainable digital outreach plan.

Too often organizations venture to have a huge social media and online presence, publishing posts multiple times per day and staying up to date on the latest trends in an effort to raise awareness of their cause. Unfortunately, these efforts easily become overwhelming and get pushed to the back burner. For reference, at the marketing agency where I work the minimum that our clients pay us for maintaining their digital presence is \$2,000 a month for 5 hours of work per week, but to really capitalize on their social media and website presence these numbers double. The cost of social media and online upkeep for an organization getting its start is not feasible. Luckily, it is still possible to take advantage of the benefits of social media and digital outreach by maintaining a consistent presence, even if it is only a few times a week or month. So, for the Louisville Community Grocery, I wanted to give them a plan that empowered them to be consistent and share impactful content without draining their time.

My second objective was to revamp their website. Having a well developed website and content structure is important because an organization's website is often one of the first encounters people - volunteers, investors, community members - may have with the organization. The design and content of the a website can lend credibility to the organization. Additionally, at the agency I work for, we stress to our clients the importance of telling a compelling and transparent story with their website copy (the text on the website). The website acts as a guide (think treasure map) that should lead people through a journey from simply being

aware of the issue the organization is address, to exploring the work the organization is doing, and finally, to joining the organization on their mission. When I began my work with the co-op their website did not do this, so I knew it would be a big project of my service learning.

With these two objectives in mind, I began working with LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery in December of 2017. I realized quickly that there are few experiences that can prepare you for working for a nonprofit for the first time, even if you had volunteered for a one in the past. I knew going into the internship that the structure and workflow of the organization would be different from my experiences working for a business. Nevertheless, I still had expectations or assumptions that turned out to be very wrong. I had imagined that the organization would have a strong leadership structure, like the executive roles within businesses. Instead, the organization's team is composed of a board of directors who all volunteer their time in addition to work other jobs. Though they are all working towards the same mission, their different backgrounds and the organization's lack of hierarchical structure lends decision making to be a longer, more complicated process. I also assumed that there would be frequent and clear communication between the leadership team and volunteers in order to keep momentum going and everyone on the right track. Because LACE is in its infancy, it did not have the strong leadership structure and clear communication that I had expected.

One of the first challenges I faced was a distraction from my two main objectives. I mentioned previously the neighborhood vote that took place in February. Shortly after I began my internship the board decided to host the vote and the outreach committee asked that I turn my attention to raising awareness about the vote through social media and email. Therefore, I spent about the first month of my internship creating graphics, scheduling social media posts, and writing and sending emails to the community about the vote. At the time, I was happy to help the

organization in whatever ways they needed me, but looking back I wish the circumstances had been different. The research I had done up to that point revealed that social media posts that were about the community and not directly about the ongoing actions of the organization gained more engagement and reached a wider audience. If I could go back, I would really push for the board to agree upon a balance of community-centeredness and drive towards the vote. I think during the weeks leading up to the vote we really pushed community members away who did not know enough about the organization to feel comfortable taking part in the vote.

Following the vote, the board expressed that they felt that the neighborhood vote was actually premature, but they weren't sure how to progress. Based on the vote, they ended up choosing two areas for the U of L MBA cohort to evaluate, but they asked that we slow down on our other efforts while they figured out what direction the organization should take next. The month of March was very difficult because I was limited to maintaining a few social media posts throughout the week and continued research on best social media and website practices for the cooperative. Additionally, because of Spring Break and plans I had made prior to the start of the internship, I was unable to attend the March community meeting which made me feel even more disconnected. During that time, though, I realized how hard it can be to embed yourself in an organization that has a core body of leaders (who had three years of intimate experience working together) and is experiencing a hardship in their mission. I was working for the organization and having a hard time, so I imagined it was even more difficult for community members and volunteers who didn't get the same information that I did. These realizations became very important towards the end of March and really contributed to the turn around of my experience with the organization.

In late March I met with members of the outreach committee to discuss the most recent developments with the organization. In March, the new chair for the outreach committee, Arielle, attended the Up and Coming Food Co-op conference in Milwaukee. Her biggest take away from the conference was that as an organization we weren't being community-focused enough. Our focus had shifted from being in the community and facilitating relationships to trying to make all of the logistical aspects of the cooperative fall into place. In addition to discussing her takeaways, I was able to share with them what I was experiencing and my concerns for the experiences of the community members and volunteers who weren't as close to the inner circle as I was. Overall, the meeting was refreshing and Arielle promised that she would take these concerns to the board.

Ultimately, the board decided that as a whole the organization need to refocus on the community and those they wanted to serve with the community grocery. Though it was difficult, this experience with the organization taught me that it is really easy to become a group of people trying too hard to meet a goal without actively serving in/with the community you're trying to change. Our world considers success something this is measured by numbers and hitting big milestones, but service is often small acts and connections that build over time. With this new focus, I was able to being implementing what I had learned from my social media and digital outreach research on food cooperatives - orient yourself towards the community by sharing inspiring news stories, promoting what other community organizations are doing, and highlighting the needs the community has. It was this refocusing that allowed me to feel like I was addressing the goals of the Healthy Hometown grant again. Unfortunately, working towards my website objective was still difficult. I needed the organization to agree on a unified voice for

their messaging before I could begin creating the new website structure and writing the website copy.

One of the greatest opportunities I had with LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery presented itself when I asked the board for guidance on the voice they wanted to employ in their digital outreach. The opportunity came about because I was working on revamping their website copy and noticed that their mission statement wasn't on the site. After some questions to a few different people in the organization, they determined that they had a mission statement in their documents, but that it could be refined to better convey the organization's goals to the community. The board asked me to lead them and committee members through an exercise on the mission of the organization. This opportunity demonstrated how the board had come to trust me, not only to do diligent work but to also guide their voice as an organization. I was extremely proud to have built that trust, but I was also nervous to lead the exercise.

During our April community meeting I lead the organization through an activity of honing in on the key goals of their mission and developing language that conveyed how they intended to be successful in their mission. After the meeting I compiled the list of objectives and values and turned them into statements the board could give feedback on. Additionally, after the meeting I had gained enough information and insight to begin tackling the website copy. The board plans to make final decisions on the actual mission statement in the May community meeting. Prior to that meeting I will continue to work on the website and I will finalize the digital outreach plan that I have developed throughout the semester in order to fulfil my objects for my service learning.

II. Preparations for Service Learning and Reflections

When I began preparing for college four years ago, I could not have fathomed the journey I was about to embark on and who I would become over the course of my college career. When I entered my first semester at U of L I knew I wanted to be major in Communication, and in just a few short weeks I will graduate with my degree in Communication. But it is the Social Change minor and Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation certificate that I could not have predicted my freshman year. I've always had a passion for serving others, and when I applied to U of L, I also applied for the Honors Service Living Learning Community, but I never considered that service and social change would become huge aspects of my college career.

Throughout high school I had been involved in many volunteering and service organizations, as well as participated in service trips, and I knew I wanted to continue these activities into college. The Service LLC did more than encourage me to continue volunteering, it opened my eyes to inequalities and injustices in our country and across the world. The Service LLC required that I take a class called Windows on the World with the rest of the cohort, which included students from many different racial, socioeconomic, academic, and other demographic backgrounds. The class focused on developing our knowledge and understanding of racial inequality, poverty, minority experiences in the U.S., and other social justice issues, while also creating a safe space to converse about these issues and reflect on our own relationship to these issues. From this class I learned to acknowledge my privilege and the ways that I can use my privilege to empower those who are disadvantaged by the systems of our society.

When I finished my freshman year I felt transformed by what I had learned, but did not know what I would do with this new knowledge and experience. For a long time I have struggled to define what I was passionate about beyond simply serving others, which made choosing a

direction for my education difficult. My academic advisor suggested that I take a social change class to continue exploring my interests in community change. Food and Body Politics ended up being the one class that fit into my next semester schedule. So in Fall of 2015 I took Anthropology 352, not knowing that soon I would find a direction for my passions.

Jeneen Wiche, the professor for Anth. 352, transformed the way I viewed food. I have always enjoyed trying new foods and restaurants and cooking and baking, but I never considered my socio-political relationship to food. Through her experience as the daughter of a prominent agriculturalist, her studies of alternative food systems, and her operation of a farm raising sheep and chickens Jeneen informed our (the class's) understanding of the dominant food system and the businesses and governing that influence the system. From her class I learned the magnitude of food insecurity in our developed nation and the inequitable degree to which minority populations experience food injustice. I also learned about the corporate control of the food industry and the negative effects this control has on farmers, food workers, the environment, and consumers. In conjunction with learning about the harmful aspects of the dominant food system, my eyes were also opened to the alternative food systems that could address injustice and harm.

The knowledge I gained during this class proved to be extremely valuable for my service learning with LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery. Without this knowledge I think I would have had more difficulty communicating the mission of the organization in their digital outreach. When an organization like LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery takes the stance that they do, they are speaking out against injustice that is often caused by large corporations, local and national governments, and the social systems that are ingrained in our society. To share their mission they must explain why these dominant systems are harmful and highlight the benefits of alternative food systems, like a community-owned grocery store. To

maintain credibility their statements to the community, online or in-person, must be valid, consistent, and easy to understand. Food and Body Politics laid the foundation for me to be able to communicate on behalf of LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery.

After taking Food and Body Politics, I knew that I wanted to continue taking social change courses, but more importantly I was able to define one of my passions: addressing food injustice through positive social change. Over the course of the next few semesters I took a variety of classes related to social justice, inequality, and politics in our world. Then, in Spring of 2017 I took Peac. 350. I had learned about the Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation certificate a few semesters prior, but it was during the Basic Mediation Skills class that I got my first introduction to peace practices. This class taught me skills of immeasurable value that I use everyday in my personal life with my roommates, significant other, and family and in my professional life at work, in student organizations, and in my service learning.

One of the main ways that these skills stayed with me was simply through my openness with those I was working with in LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery. Peac. 350 taught me that conflicts are best resolved (and even avoided) when everyone involved feels comfortable to share their perspective and feelings. Additionally, the mediation skills were helpful when I led the organization through the activity about their mission. Throughout the exercise people were sharing their opinions and beliefs about the mission, and not everyone agreed on the best way to communicate these ideas to the public. Mediation taught me to remind everyone of their common goals and to help people determine the principles that are most important to them. When disagreements arose in the mission exercise I was able to help people determine if the concern was surface-level or core to the mission. Ultimately, everyone left feeling like their voices were heard and the initial feedback was very positive.

The final course I took before beginning my internship was Peac. 325. Personally, I think it was very valuable to take Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation right before beginning my service learning because it laid a foundation for understanding how my work was contributing to peace-building in our community. Prior to taking Peac. 325, I considered social change to be a disruptive process. Through the readings and discussion in the class I realized that social change can be a peaceful process that builds upon systems and resources rather than completely starting from scratch. The final project for Peac. 325 also prepared me for service learning by jump-starting my engagement in the community. Additionally, Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation informed my understanding of the process that was taking place when the organization realized that they had drifted from their mission. If I had not taken Peac. 325, I may not have understood why it was so important to refocus efforts on the community rather than continue to focus on logistical efforts, which often seem crucial to success, especially because I enjoy process and the logistical side of projects.

The whole processing got me thinking about the line between trying to do good and serve and making sure you are organized around a mission and plan. How do we make sure we are actually serving people and not just planning? At the same time, how do we make sure that we are taking the logistical steps to make change? All three courses I took for the Peace Certificate highlighted the importance of looking at the heart of a problem versus simply trying to fix the symptoms of the problem. I think that helps answer the question of balancing serving and planning. The root issue the Louisville Community Grocery seeks to address is the injustice caused by the dominant food system in Louisville. The people in neighborhoods that face food insecurity are the victims the organization is trying to serve, and should therefore be foundation on which the organization measures its success. If people's lives aren't being touched by your

work, how can you measure your efforts to change the community? The logistical aspects are still crucial, though, to implementing the change, but if the logistics pull you away from serving your mission, then you have to refocus your efforts.

Keeping this balance isn't easy, and it takes dynamic leadership to excel at both. This semester I have learned the importance of building a team of individuals with a wide array of talents, strengths, and backgrounds. There are some board members who have backgrounds in business and without them I think a lot of crucial steps would be missed. At the same time, there are also quite a few board members who have backgrounds in social work, and their commitment to the community and service (even when it doesn't make complete business sense) is key to keeping us directed towards our mission. I'm incredibly thankful for the people I have met during my service learning, even if I wasn't out meeting the community directly. The members of LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery give me hope that positive change can take place in our city and around the world.

Ever since taking Food and Body Politics, I always dreamed of starting an organization that could address food injustice in our community while supporting local producers and makers, specifically through a grocery store. But before I found the Louisville Community Grocery and LACE, I thought it would be a mission I would have to pioneer on my own, because I didn't see others doing it. For our final project in the Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation class, Dr. Russ encouraged us to look for organizations in the community already doing work that we were passionate about. Had I not done this I might not have found the Louisville Community Grocery. Once I found the Louisville Community Grocery I realized just how important it is to actively search the community for the service work being done and not simply assume that just because it isn't readily visible doesn't mean people aren't working towards it. Starting a community grocery

store takes a lot of behind-the-scenes work and planning. It's gives grassroots a new meaning when you consider how much the foundation of a movement grows and takes root underground before you can see the actual product of the time and energy.

In addition to teaching me lessons about organizing community change, this past semester of service learning has stretched and grown my self-management skills and discipline in a couple of ways. First, my supervisor took a very hands-off approach. Prior to the start of the semester, my supervisor, Liliias, and I developed a plan of action and established objectives for my service with LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery. After we set this plan, I was expected to follow it throughout the semester and course-correct if the board needed me to do something else or I wasn't getting the results I expected to help me meet my objectives. Liliias was always available if I needed her, but she trusted me to come to her rather than micromanaging. Additionally, the organization is fairly new and does not yet have physical location, so most of my work was done remotely. Besides the monthly community meetings and any of my meetings with the outreach chair or the board, I spent most of the semester working from the library or coffee shops. There was a lot of freedom due to these two circumstances, but with freedom came the strain of motivating myself and making sure that I was doing the work I was supposed to be doing. I'll admit, sometimes it was difficult to make myself find time for the work, but my passion for the mission and my desire to earn respect really compelled me to serve as I had promised and to the best of my ability.

Service learning with LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery was the culmination of four years of developing a passion for serving people, specifically the communities that face food injustice. Each semester if felt as though every class I was taking was informing my understanding of social change, peacebuilding, and community engagement, whether it be a

Communication class, an honors seminar, a language class, or a Peace class. And I will take the intersection of these topics with me into the world as I graduate and begin my career.

I have worked at a digital marketing agency since the spring semester of my freshman year, holding a variety of positions with the agency over that time. When I began this semester and prepared for graduating I wasn't sure if I would keep working with the agency. I felt disenchanted with the work I was doing and felt like it wasn't making a meaningful impact on the community. Even as April rolled around and I knew I would have to make decisions about going full time or not, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to continue service and empowering communities to transform into more just and equitable places. But I didn't know how to even begin getting into that kind of work. Then, throughout the semester serving LACE I realized that I didn't have to quit my job (which was offering great pay and benefits to go full time) to make an impact in the community. All of the LACE board members and volunteers had full time jobs, yet also worked on the mission to open a community-owned grocery in Louisville. Through my time with them I saw examples of what my future could be like, working while still serving.

On May 12th, 2018 I will begin the next phase of life. I will leave behind lectures, long nights spent in the library, and the buzz of campus, but I will take with me all of the knowledge I have gained from professors and classes, the experiences I have gained from conferences, presentations, and student leadership, and the passion that was sparked by Food and Body Politics, developed by Mediation and Peace, Justice, and Conflict, and emboldened by service learning.