

Service Learning at The Center for Women and Families

Catherine Mittel

University of Louisville

Peace 550 Spring 2018

For as long as I can remember, service has always been something that I had to do. Whether it was a requirement for grade school or a mandatory fulfillment for my sorority—service was obligatory. Going into this semester I was not really excited about this class, mainly because of the eighty hours of service that was required. This eighty hours of service were in addition to the regular course load, learning journals, and attending classes. I was going into my last semester of college, and juggling a great deal of other stuff with my school schedule. I had the mindset that I would do my hours, all of the other requirements to receive a good grade, and check—class was over, I would be that much closer to graduation. However, what I did not realize is how I would not leave this class as the same person who entered back in January. This class, this project, this journey made a significant impact on my impressionable college self. Service has become a joy, and is no longer felt like a burden. Because of that, I am truly grateful. This semester, I chose to do my service learning project at the Center for Women and Families. I am excited to share my experiences that I have encountered over the past four months.

Introduction of Center for Women and Families

The Center for Women and families provides trauma informed advocacy and support for individuals (men and women), families, and communities affected by intimate partner violence. The Center is crucial for the well-being of many people in the Kentucky Area. Last year, the center advocated for over seven hundred sexual assault survivors. The Center offers a variety of services, including but not limited to, Emergency Shelter, Crisis Response, Advocacy and Support, and Children's Services. Everything that they offer is free of charge for everyone in need. Because of this, donations and volunteering is crucial to the Center's ability to help

victims. Fundraising is a very large aspect of what volunteers and employees at the Center are asked to do.

My Responsibilities at the Center

When I started at the Center in January, I was tasked with helping plan and execute Denim Day. The Center is always planning an event or helping in the community so my supervisor was thrilled to have an extra hand. She trusted me with planning this Day so that she could focus on other things. Denim Day became my event! Since I was new to the center I was a bit overwhelmed in the beginning because this seemed like a lofty task. It was not just the planning and executing of the event, it was doing that coupled with my regular life duties, internship and course load. However, all of that pressure did not compare to the internal pressure I had related to this special day knowing how important it is to the community at large.

Denim Day fell on April 25th this year. Little did I know that Denim Day was actually celebrated nationwide. While the date varies year to year, they try to keep it on the third Wednesday of April. April has its significance, too. April is sexual assault awareness month. Naturally, it is a very busy month for the Center because “we” are constantly doing our due diligence to inform, educate and advocate for victims in the community.

I was glad to have taken this class in the Spring semester because of the opportunity to plan for the month of April and for Denim Day. In full disclosure, I thought I would have been bored, sitting with my phone in a large warehouse with nothing to do; however, that was far from the case. I had work to do when I first arrived. I became more confident around the people at the Center because I dove right into the tasks at hand preparing for all of the April

events along with the day to day operations. Because I had some time before Denim Day, my focus in the beginning was with events that the Center was hosting in closer months.

The 31st Annual Celebration of Survival and Service

The 31st Annual Celebration of Survival and Service dinner was in February. This celebration is the highest grossing event for the Center with Denim Day following behind in a close second. While my part during the week was with the planning and executing of the event, my position on the night of the event was trivial. I volunteered at the dinner by checking people into the dinner and giving them their number for the live auction items and raffle. While it was not what people would consider an important task, I enjoyed this because I was able to interact with donors and survivors. To me, this was huge! Interacting with those who have been through the unspeakable and with those who were there to support those who had been through the unspeakable.

During the Celebration of Survival, a survivor of rape was honored at the dinner and shared her journey of sexual assault. It took the police and elected officials over fifteen years to catch the man that broke into her house and raped her. Hearing her story was surreal. To put into words the feelings, emotions, and reactions that the guests encountered that night during the dinner was incredible. Tears, hope, anxiety—you could feel that in the room. You could truly feel it. I can hardly begin to describe what it was like, but I remember it closely. It is as if from that moment on, something changed. It was not a feeling of happiness per se. It was a feeling of gratitude. Grateful that I was able to share in this special experience. Grateful that I was a part of this event to celebrate victims, and grateful that the victims found their voice.

It was in that moment that my service learning journey began to feel all the more worthwhile. It felt meaningful because I was able to hear how exactly the Center for Women and Families helps those in need. Because of the horrific nature of the events that victims experience, I do not usually get to hear about specific cases. (I think that is for the best.) Details must be kept confidential. But at the Celebration of Survival, this specific victim was comfortable sharing her journey with the people in attendance. At the end of her story, she thanked the Center for their work. While I was not there during the time that the Center assisted said victim, I felt a little proud moment knowing that my services may have helped some current victim, and maybe even some future victim.

After the event, I was speaking with some of the survivors –one on one. We were gathered around in a circle, and they were thanking me for volunteering, making small talk, and asking me about what I did, and why I chose The Center for Woman and Families. As we were finishing up our conversation, one of the ladies used the quote from Harry Potter’s Dumbledore. She repeated, “Light can be found in even the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.” When she said this, emotions ran rampant through my body. I was brought to tears. I cried in front of all of these women. Here was this woman that had been through so much and lost so much yet she was being positive. *She* was grateful. I think that is why I was able to pinpoint the emotion/feeling of gratefulness when I reflected upon my working at the event. This woman’s gratefulness was exuding. I learned to be grateful from *her*. I learned the *true meaning* of gratefulness that evening. I learned in that moment that no matter what, there is always something to be thankful for. This event made a difference in me. I

knew that my life was changing. I knew my life would change as I began to work on my event—Denim Day. After this event, the remainder of my volunteer work was involved in Denim Day.

Denim Day 2018

Denim Day in the USA raises community awareness about the devastating impacts of sexual violence and how one can help bring such issues to light. In 1992 an 18-year-old in Italy was raped by her driving instructor. She pressed charges and won her case but the perpetrator appealed and it went to a higher court. The High Court of Italy overturned the case since the victim wore “very tight jeans”, the instructor could not have removed them himself; therefore, the young girl MUST have willingly participated. Today, all around the world, organizations coordinate community wide Denim Days to show support of survivors and raise awareness about the crimes of sexual assault. Before I started, I had never heard of Denim Day but was elated to be a part of it, even if it were a small part.

I was in charge of fundraising. I had the task of reaching out to local businesses from Humana to Heine Brother’s Coffee and asking if they would be interested in allowing their employees to wear denim. If the companies agree to this fundraiser, the companies tell employees to bring in a donation for the Center for Women and Families in exchange for wearing denim. All of the proceeds are sent directly to the Center in which they use for supplies, food, and other routine expenses.

This year’s fundraising task was a true challenge for me. I wanted to make sure I was able to raise monies for all of the expenses of The Center. I was excited to get I was able to get Ann Taylor, Dillard’s, The County Clerk’s Office of Louisville, some of the faculty at The University of Louisville and many other new organizations involved in the Denim Day

“challenge”. Not only did I get them to become involved in Denim Day by letting their employees wear denim, but I also emailed packets and information that explained in detail about workplace sexual harassment.

In addition to raising money for Denim Day, I helped plan and coordinate the big event that was in Downtown Louisville at the Muhammad Ali Center. This year’s mantra was about sexual harassment and sexual assault in the work place. This event was open to the public and breakfast was provided to all morning attendees. We had keynote speakers, violence prevention experts, legal and governance panels in attendance who were available to answer questions that anyone may have, free of charge. Experts even gave recommendations about how to address workplace sexual violence in a way that was comfortable for the victims. That being said, this was not just your typical “eat a Danish and listen to a speaker type of event”.

The audience was encouraged to interact by answering polls about sexual assault asking whether you were a bystander or a victim. The speaker changed his or her speech based on the results of the live polls that were projected on the board. I really liked that because it made the audience think and have a connection to the speaker. It was personal to them. While a person may not think they were a victim, they could have been that bystander who had no idea what to do when a co-worker encountered that awkward interaction. What I found so interesting and useful was when Aarika Mack-Brown, the key note speaker, suggested that when someone is in an awkward situation they start out by saying “I’m saying this out of love...” I believe this diffuses any potential awkwardness or negativity by addressing your intention immediately— “making you a better and more effective person”, said Mack- Brown. I really

enjoyed this event. To say that I impacted others is an understatement, I think that I was the one who was truly changed for the better.

Personal Growth

My communication and organizational skills drastically improved over the course of the semester. Because I was representing the Center and contacting people that are very influential in their respective organizations, I had to make certain that my speech and the way I carried myself was professional. I became more self-reliant in my ability to communicate my thoughts and ideas. I was able to develop the skills that I had learned in my English, Communication and even my Management classes, while I was doing tasks with the Center. My Peace Justice Conflict Transformation skills that I have acquired most definitely started to develop over the course of the semester. I was able to apply the knowledge I learned in the classroom to real world examples.

When watching the news or hearing survivor's stories at the Center, it was easy to focus on the negativity and evil that is in the world. Rather than focusing on the negativity, I celebrated the seemingly little things. One of my favorite things was when I would get responses from people that I emailed or contacted about Denim Day. Even if they told me their organizations did not allow the employees to wear jeans because of company policy, constituents wanted to know how they could help in other ways. I was reminded here, that there is good in the world if you look close enough. I was happy just to educate the public on what exactly Denim Day entails and why it is important in our modern society. Awareness is crucial in order to help cure the epidemic that sexual assault has become.

Just as I didn't know much about the Center or the details of Denim Day, the people in my life were not aware of the specific particulars either. Getting to share the resources that the Center offers with the women in my life was rewarding. My sister, who is in public education, shared with all of her friends the importance of Denim Day. She even suggested that the employees at her school plan for next year and gather monetary donations even though jeans are acceptable any day. Many girls I have met throughout college thanked me for being so vocal about the Center stating that they wished they would have known about the Center and what it offers when they were sexually assaulted. I know how unfortunate it is to be in their position, but also how extremely hopeful it is to know that support is out there. I couldn't help but feel a strong-sense of self-worth when girls shared that with me. It was just another humbling moment of my service learning journey.

In my service learning journals, I discussed the definition of peacebuilding and how the Center's actions goal is to establish peace among the community. Peacebuilding can be defined as: a process that facilitates the establishment of durable peace and tries to prevent the recurrence of violence by addressing root causes and effects of conflict through reconciliation, institution building, and political as well as economic transformation. I can't think of a better way to describe the work that the Center for Women and Families does than the aforementioned definition. At the Center, we try to establish a feeling of peace and comfort to those affected by a terrible shortcoming. Through helping these victim's get a sense of comfort our hope is what gives them a voice. A voice that will allow them to share their story. By giving them a voice, I believe that it can help other people who have suffered a sexual assault or been a victim of domestic abuse. By this support, they may feel open to sharing their story as well.

Everywhere you look you see another story about a new allegation about someone being sexually assaulted. It has become an epidemic. An epidemic that is slowly engulfing the lives of many. As a human, you feel for those victims. How they have been violated, in the most intrusive manner. What the news usually fails to report on is the emotional status the victim feels after the physical violation. Physically, the scars will heal. Emotionally, those scars remain for decades. They remain and in some cases never heal.

The news airs and the story is seen for a week, or a month, but then another headline appears and the abuse or rape story is finished. It is like the old adage “out of sight out of mind”. The news ceases to report on the tragic violence, but those lives are still finding ways to cope. At the Center, our mission is to help those affected through many different ways of healing. I feel blessed to have had such a small part in helping people through these shortcomings and in turn these experiences are helping me in so many ways.

Violence being Normalized

Reflecting on Peace 325, one specific example we talked about in class sticks out to me in correlation to my service learning journey. We discussed war and guns and how society has become numb to the prevalence of them. We are not as fazed by shootings or bombings as we used to be because we have become accustomed to hearing about it or watching a movie on it. War and violence have become trivialized. This thought came to me when I was working at the Center and heard the statistics for sexual assault and other abusive acts. Through movies, books and television shows such as *50 Shades of Grey*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, and *Bitter Moon*, sexual violence is portrayed as normal by showing viewers that it can be seen as sexy. The boundaries that this genre of media reaches normalizes sexual abuse, in my opinion. Series like those

mentioned above prey on human's innate feeling of need for attention and the need to feel wanted.

Rape is never the victim's fault, but I believe that normalizing sexual violence has only created a more prevalent environment for sexual assault and domestic violence. Viewers and criminals think that sex is owed to them. They have seen it too many times on the screen and because of that, they could feel entitled to "take what they want", all while leaving behind shattered human beings who are left picking up the pieces of their life and trying to rebuild to a sense of normalcy.

By the "#MeToo" movement being prevalent on social media late last semester and early this semester, it has been a tangible catch phrase in how we approach sexual violence in society. The movement brought to light to the ill-effects that media portrays of domestic violence causing a chilling effect on survivors voicing their stories. As more and more survivors joined in the conversation, and we as a nation could see the responsiveness, there was a sense of empowerment that could and should be continued. That being said, in my opinion I think the "#metoo" movement, may have even trivialized sexual assault. While I am not saying that it did matter of fact, I personally felt that a "catch phrase" was somewhat an irreverent way to "announce" that someone had been a victim of sexual assault. The reason I think this was because it was so easy for people to post about it that people had the opportunity to fabricate their story.

Last November, a family friend of mine took to social media to use the "Metoo" platform. This was when a majority of posts on Facebook were centered around awareness for rape victims. What is interesting about this story, and somewhat intrusive is that the said family

friend posted on his deceased wife's timeline, "I was raped by my high school principal, but no one believed me. #MeToo." I felt uncomfortable. I felt as if this "platform" of social media was flippant. His wife had been dead for four years and he used her Facebook to post something that was so delicate and personal to her life, that it was offensive, since she had passed four years earlier. I make this bold statement about his careless post now, because I was with women who were abused in the Survival Celebration Dinner and they spoke for themselves as a part of healing and awareness for others that they would survive this horrific act. I was present for that, and I felt it. They did not have someone speak for them or tweet about it and then never come to support it. I believe men and women, alike, share their experiences to help one another, to support one another, and to raise awareness for their fellow citizens, not get back at the rapist, but to use their experiences for good. This I have learned in my experiences while working at the Center and in this class.

Applying the Knowledge

Using what experiences, I have learned this semester, I am better able to approach situations such as abuse in everyday life. An old roommate of mine is in her first year of law school and had a Criminal Law course in her first semester. The gut-wrenching stories of rape and sexual violence that were addressed in that course made her beside herself. She would voice to me how the women in the class approached that portion of the class with unease and fear. There were several men in her class that would chuckle at the mention of details and how the case was handled. There would be days she would get come home crying because of how the outcomes of cases left survivors with little to no options for relief. The law, and how rape is handled in the criminal justice system, is rarely humanized. It is infrequent that

we can turn on the news and not hear of an accusation made by a woman in our country and how commentators will note personal attributes of the woman, bringing an insinuation that it was her to blame.

In discussing these issues that she has encountered in her coursework, she has approached me seeking advice about how to best handle the processing of the material, and what she could do to make a difference. It has been inspiring to know that there are means through my Peace courses that have equipped me with aptitudes to speak to those colleagues of mine in how they can make a difference in this community through *their* work. Again, society needs the awareness of these issues that are generally hushed because it is uncomfortable to talk about. We need only to breach that line, whether it be with close loved ones and friends or with complete strangers that have a change of heart, to make crucial difference.

My classes have helped me have this staunch opinion on using one's voice and healing others. It has made me increasingly want to have conversations with those that may be feeling alone and without a voice. Although from a very young age I realized I wanted to utilize my love for people to mediate, I had never felt the true courage and bravery it takes to have tough conversations with people in need. These crucial conversations need a starter—a kindling of spark that can get the attention of the community around us—and through the coursework of Peace 325, Peace 350 and this class specifically, I believe I have gained the necessary tools to want to be that person for others, that mediator, that confidant.

Class Elective

In Sociology 202, Social Problems, a majority of the class discussions focused on humans and our biases towards one another and the power that our ever-evolving brain has over our

thoughts and actions. The book that we read and were tested over was titled, "Mind Wars." In the first few chapters of the book, I learned the view that humans have already "met the enemy" whose actions cause war and atrocious crimes to be committed. The enemy, the author writes, is our biases towards people that do not have shared beliefs and backgrounds. Our reluctance to open our minds to people's beliefs is what he believes creates strife. Critical thinking and the opening of our minds is a remedy to the biases that we have acquired through our lives. The opening of our mind to other opinions is an ongoing process that we have to continually put effort towards because nothing is constant. Solutions change and therefore the necessary steps to get to solutions must also evolve. Recognizing this, is essential to peacebuilding. Checking my biases, and recognizing them was a practice that I instilled on myself daily this semester. Whenever I would get upset about something that seemed unfair or rude, I would take a step back and recognize my privilege. Having had worked with so many caring women and families at the Center really opened my eyes to see other shortcomings in a new light. I was able to think about what a specific person had been through that could have made them act the way they were acting. Remembering that we all come from different backgrounds, different levels of hardship, allowed me to not take things so personally but instead, began to truly understand others. In the definition above regarding Peacebuilding, preventing the recurrence of violence by addressing root causes goes back to the idea of biases and generalization. Humans tend to generalize people or events with past experiences the and equate that to the answer of WHY such thing is happening again. What I learned here is that over-generalization and narrow-minded thoughts inhibit our ability to address the root causes and create transformative solutions to the violence.

Through my classes at the University of Louisville I have learned many specifics that are essential for my future career. What I did not expect to happen through my undergraduate curriculum, though, was the extent to which I have learned about myself through the dealings with other people. When I began college four years ago, I thought of education as a means to an end. If I received a degree I would be able to make more money and have a better life, freshman year me, thought. My Peace Justice Conflict Transformation core classes have been my favorite classes of my college career because these classes have been crucial to helping me find out who I am and what exactly it is I love. These classes opened my mind to other opinions and views through interactive class discussion and the readings that we were required.

Commented [VJ1]: needs specifics

I tend to gravitate towards people in the sense that I yearn to give advice through emotionally connecting with struggles, contentment and joys that I am so amiably presented with in those around me. For this reason, I truly resonated with the *Call of Service* reading and class discussions. Pursing this certificate, was about learning the skills necessary to help make the world a better place, but what this certificate has given me is the means to make myself a better inhabitant of this place we call home and has given me more than I think I could ever have expected or imagined. Coles sums up my thoughts perfectly when he states, “There’s a moral asymmetry that takes hold of us teachers rather too commonly—we think of ourselves as offering service to others, giving them our best, and forget what’s in it for ourselves, the service that we are receiving from our students” (Coles).

Career Plans

For as long as I can remember, I have been in school. Studying topics that range from sciences to art in order to be graded on those topics. In a few short weeks, I will graduate

college and no longer be tested on the knowledge I learn. School is comfortable for me. I have been in it since age five. As I embark into a new job I cannot help but be a little frightened. Everything seems like it will be new and challenging. One thing that I know will stay constant in my life as everything begins to change, is that I will always learn. Learn from others, learn from new experiences and hopefully be a part of helping others learn as well.

By 2022, I want to have my Masters in the Psychology of Business. I want to do this because I enjoy understanding why people are the way they are. I am going to work in the Human Resource industry for a couple of years to gain experience and ensure that I the psychology of business program is something I want to do. I'd like to eventually get my PhD in Educational Leadership and Organizational Development from the University of Louisville. My big, hairy, audacious goal is to own consulting firm/be a life coach. This is something that I have always dreamed of and I think that the previous steps will aid me in getting there. Education has always been a priority for me. I believe that by continuing my education, the degrees I have in mind will keep me up to date on current trends in business, as well as maintaining my interest in life-long learning. I am confident that my background in Peace Justice Conflict Transformation will only aid my succession in my career as well as my life in general.

Conclusion

While I learned a lot about myself and enjoyed my time on this journey, at times it was difficult to recognize if what I was doing was actually beneficial for others. Last summer I read the book, "The Five People You Meet in Heaven", by Mitch Albom. In it you read about the death of an older man named Eddie who had lost his purpose in life. When he died he was granted the chance to look back on his life and truly see who and how he has impacted the

world at large. Eddie is shown that while he was just a mechanic at an amusement park, his life and good actions mattered and were impactful even to strangers. I cannot help but think about this book when reflecting about my service learning journey. In life, it can be easy to forget your purpose and to question if the actions you are making have substance. What my service learning journey showed me, is that no matter how trivial the task may seem, if it is done out of the goodness of your heart *it matters*. Helping others and realizing that the world is so much bigger than you and I is critical for goodness to prevail. Service is essential for there to be peace.

425,

no specifics 325.350

References

"Home." *Center for Women and Families*, www.thecenteronline.org/.

Busch, J. *Mind Wars: Battels for Our Future in a Transforming World*, 2009

Coles, R. *The Call of Service: a Witness to Idealism*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.

Albom, Mitch. *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. Hyperion, 2003.