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PEACE 550 Reflection Paper

Introduction

“Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth” -Muhammad Ali

This quote spoken by the great Louisvillian Muhammad Ali has resonated with me ever since the first time I heard it many years ago. Whenever I think about this quote, which has been quite often ever since the beginning of my service learning, it gives me a reality check of why I was put here on this earth. The individualistic culture of the United States has always made me believe that each person has their own specific destiny and purpose they must achieve to have fulfillment in their life. Our culture teaches us to look out for ourselves, but this quote brings to light the truth of why we were put on this earth, to look out for others. My experience this past semester volunteering with refugees through Kentucky Refugee Ministries has only consolidated the truth behind that quote. This semester of service learning has taught me an invaluable lesson of the moral obligation to help others without expecting anything in return.

Throughout the course of completing my service learning project, I have had many opportunities to critically reflect on experiences that have made me question the way certain things are, ponder on our moral obligations as human beings, integrate experiences from service learning to the lessons from the PJCT classes, and use these thoughts to create core

principles of peace, justice, and conflict resolution. The purpose of this paper is to construe connections between my experiences volunteering with Kentucky Refugee Ministries with the elective and required courses taken to receive the Peace Justice Conflict Transformation Certificate. Throughout this paper I will explain the service learning site, share my responsibilities being a volunteer, express the challenges and opportunities I faced, and discuss the expectations and realities of the service project. I will also discuss course preparation and expectations along with my reflections and personal growth. Finally, I will share my intended career plans after graduation.

Service Learning Site

The service learning site that I chose to complete my hours was at Kentucky Refugee Ministries. KRM states that they are an outreach community that advocates for and provides resettlement services to refugees to encourage hope and an increased sense of belonging and inclusion to our future American citizens. The location of KRM is relatively close to Uofl's campus, right off Eastern Parkway on Cherokee Road. Their team includes over 80 staff of caseworkers, immigration attorneys, ECC instructors, and not to forget the hundreds of volunteers that all help to keep the organization as successful as it is. Their sole vision is to "compassionately welcome and serve the world's displaced people, encourage the hope that lives within each human being by providing an atmosphere of hospitality, responsiveness, mutual respect, trust and tolerance, and to be known for our reliability, resourcefulness, partnerships and comprehensive services.". Kentucky Refugee Ministries' mission statement is that they are "dedicated to providing resettlement services to refugees through faith- and agency-based co- sponsorship in order to promote self-sufficiency and successful integration into our community.

KRM is committed to offering access to community resources and opportunities and to promoting awareness of diversity for the benefit of the whole community.”

The different comprehensive services that KRM provides can be broken up into three branches; basic needs, self-sufficiency, and integration. The basic needs branch consists of the services refugees first receive when they arrive, designed to help them meet their basic needs during their first few months in Kentucky. KRM first secures initial housing placements for clients, ensuring that they have shelter when they arrive. Whether it’s a two-bedroom apartment or a four-bedroom family house, KRM ensures that all rental units are sanitary, safe, and affordable. Caseworkers then work with the families through the initial applications for documents, IDs, and temporary benefit programs for cash, medical support, and food.

The second branch that KRM provides is self-sufficiency. Soon after the refugees arrive they begin to participate in ECC (English conversation club) to help increase their language skills. They also provide job readiness workshops and job development services that connect them to their first job in the United States, ensuring they can support both themselves and their families. KRM also assists young adult refugees pursue their education and careers by helping them route the higher education system.

The third branch that KRM provides is integration. They provide refugees with cultural orientation classes that provides them information to help adapt to the United States. Along with cultural orientation classes to help adapt, they let the refugees give cultural presentations to share their own cultures with others. They also help refugees build social networks through connecting them with the wider Kentucky community, many times through volunteer events and activities. Lastly, refugees also receive legal immigration support to help them become permanent residents and naturalized United States citizens (Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Inc. (n.d.)).

Responsibilities

The responsibilities I took on as a volunteer at Kentucky Refugee Ministries were both tedious and rewarding. Throughout this past semester of service, I have truly come to realize that even the small jobs can still make a huge impact in others' lives. The first main responsibility I had at KRM was working with ECC every Saturday. ECC stands for English Conversation Club, and every Saturday from four to five thirty we would have it at the Iroquois Library. The way ECC worked was that volunteers would arrive at four and help set up by passing out conversation prompts, chess boards, vocabulary flash cards, etc. One of my favorite parts of ECC was watching all the volunteers arrive, so eager and ready to work with the refugees. It warmed my heart every time because these volunteers were under no obligation to be there, they showed up because they genuinely wanted to be there and help impact someone's life. The refugees would then arrive, find a volunteer, and work for the next hour and a half on something that they needed help with, such as speaking, writing, and studying the citizenship test.

The first time I participated in ECC was February third, and I won't lie it was a bit difficult communicating with the thirty-year-old from Sudan who had only been here for a few months. I wrote in a journal entry that it was difficult for me because I was trying my best to not seem patronizing in the way I would speak to him because I knew that he knew how much he was struggling to understand. This feeling of not wanting to seem patronizing or belittling continued with future refugees I spoke to in ECC, but as time went on I grew increasingly comfortable with those I spoke with and they grew increasingly comfortable speaking with me. I wrote in my first journal entry "I am so excited to continue helping with ECC and open my mind to new stories and lives of these courageous and beautiful human beings." Throughout the entire

semester in ECC I can honestly say that feeling of excitement to hear these people's stories never ceased.

The second main responsibility I had at KRM was helping with cultural presentations. I would have to say these cultural presentations were one of the things I would most look forward to during my service learning. Essentially a cultural presentation was when a refugee would create a presentation about their home country and culture then share it with a group of refugees and volunteers. I absolutely loved these presentations because I gained so much knowledge and new perspectives about places that I knew little to nothing about. You could tell that the person presenting had so much love and passion for their home country by the way they talk about it, which was also heart breaking because you can tell they miss their home so dearly. I would help with these cultural presentations by setting up the chairs, set up the computer for the PowerPoint, set out the food and drinks, and assist the presenter with any help they needed before, after, and during the presentation. The presenter was so grateful for my help and would always let me know that I was helping make things run so much smoother, emphasizing what I mentioned earlier about how even the smallest of things can impact others.

The third main responsibility I had at KRM was helping sort clothes. This may sound like a random, odd job to do, but believe me it took a lot more time and effort than you would expect. Essentially what I did was about once a week I would go to my church and sort through bags and bags of clothing donations to try to find specific clothing pieces that KRM needed (infant clothes, small women's clothes, toddler clothes, etc.). Every week my church would get clothing donations and it would take hours to sort through, but as I mentioned in one of my journal entries, "I have had the privilege my entire life to adequate clothing, helping these refugees get the clothing that they need is the least I can do. I know it may not be a big thing, but I know that

I am making an impact”. The responsibilities I held at KRM helped influence the thoughts I had about the impacting of others’ lives, including my own.

Challenges and Opportunities

There were both challenges and opportunities I faced while doing my service learning at Kentucky Refugee Ministries, in the end both helping me achieve better self-awareness and helping me grow as a person. The first challenge I faced while doing my service learning would have to be one that I mentioned earlier in this paper, language barriers. It began the first day at ECC and continued until the last day, although by the end of the semester I had made significant progress in understanding and being an aid to the refugees. I think one of the reasons it was such a challenge is because I was a bit hard on myself when I couldn’t understand them, feeling like I was patronizing or belittling them. Being patronized or belittled is one of the most demeaning feelings and it was a challenge to feel like I wasn’t doing that when we were having conversations. It began to lessen once I began to work with them regularly and used more of the active listening skills that I learned in the PEACE 350 class that I took last semester. By the last weeks of ECC I could understand them much better than in the beginning, and when I couldn’t I had to remind myself to not be so hard on myself for it.

The second challenge I faced was knowing who to report to at KRM with my time sheet and other papers to get signed and such. There are so many wonderful people at KRM that helped me with different areas of service that at times it got a bit confusing. For example, in the beginning I reported to Marissa Mason to get my initial paperwork signed, but once I started to do ECC and cultural presentations I was directed over to Sophie Maier who works with KRM at the Iroquois Library. I did most of my service under Sophie, who is such a hardworking, selfless, inspiring mentor. When it came to sorting clothes, I was sent to get my hours signed by Seble

Girmay, who is a Community and Volunteer Liaison VISTA for KRM. Many different amazing women were a part of my service learning, but I ultimately decided that Sophie should be the one to do my evaluation since I served with her and got know her the most, and all three of them agreed. Once I discussed with each woman about who should sign what, the challenge was eradicated.

The first opportunity I was presented with through service learning was the opportunity to rely fully on myself. Finding a nonprofit, going through the details, finding my place within the organization, and completing my 80 service hours was entirely up to me. Yes, Professor Russ would send out reminders and have us give updates (which were much appreciated), but for the most part it was completely up to me to make sure I was on the right track and getting it finished. I've had many classes in the past where I have had to write papers and even do volunteer work, but nothing on this level. This class and service learning experience has given me the opportunity to fully rely on myself to put in the effort and commitment to do everything I needed to do.

The second opportunity I was presented with through service learning was the opportunity to experience a group of people with a completely new perspective. Before this semester I had never worked with refugees or even been around refugees before, I only knew what I had heard and seen in the media. This service learning experience gave me the opportunity to get out of my comfort zone and interact with a group of people that I wouldn't have had the pleasure to get to know otherwise. I mentioned in one of my journal entries, "Working with these refugees for the past couple of months has really opened my eyes to the absolute determination and resilience these people show every single day. I cannot even begin to fathom what kind of perseverance it took these people to not only go through the process of relocating to Louisville from their homelands, but having everything they have ever known

completely ripped away from them and having to assimilate to an entirely new culture. I have witnessed these people work diligently to learn our language, customs, norms and just about everything in between to try to fit in with this country. These refugees have demonstrated to me what true perseverance is and that is something I will always carry with me.” This service learning experience has given me the opportunity to get to know an incredible group of people and see so many new perspectives, ultimately helping me grow as a person which is something I will be forever grateful for.

Expectations and Realities

Beginning this service learning experience, I had many expectations on how I thought it would go. One of the first things I had to learn with this service learning is how to adapt. I began my service thinking I would report to one person the entire time and have a set schedule that I would abide by the entire semester, but I soon learned that would not be the case. As I mentioned earlier, as soon as I began my service I was confused because I didn’t know who to report to, and that whole situation threw me for a loop because it completely went against my expectations. The reality of the situation was that my ideal structured schedule would not be the case and I had to learn to adapt.

The second expectation I had was that I expected to be able to hop in and aid in any area of service KRM provides easily without any prior training. For example, before my orientation to begin serving at KRM, I was on their website looking at the different programs that volunteers could aid in. I saw so many that interested me, I even made a list of different ones I wanted to try to participate in. At my orientation they gave me the reality check that volunteers can’t just jump into programs, it takes weeks to be trained and integrated into programs. They also explained how certain programs aren’t open to new volunteers at the moment because of reasons such as

they've reached full capacity or training sessions for that program weren't going on. Along with that they explained that they put you in areas where volunteers are needed, and that is how I ended up in the areas where I did my service. In the beginning I was a bit disappointed because I felt like I was going to be missing out on all these neat programs, but honestly, I think it was a blessing in disguise because I loved and got so much joy out of the programs I did do my service in.

The third expectation I had going into my service learning was that by the time I completed the eighty hours I would be ready for it to be over, but the reality was that I was in no way ready for it to be over. My expectation in the beginning wasn't that I was going to dread completing the eighty hours by any means, I just thought that by the end of the semester I would probably be ready for it to simmer down. On the contrary, I plan to continue to serve with KRM and help aid in the programs I am already involved with. Over the course of this semester I have grown a bond with KRM and formed relationships with so many amazing, good hearted people that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet if it wasn't for this class. I think this was the biggest reality check that surprised me the most, and I am so glad that it did.

Course Preparation and Realities Encountered

While completing my service work, I got the pleasure of getting to know a decent amount of the refugees that are a part of Kentucky Refugee Ministries. I got to meet women, men, and children from all over the globe each with a different and unique story. I got to know people from Cuba, Syria, Myanmar, Sudan, etc. each with their own beautiful and fascinating culture. One similarity I did notice between every single refugee who told me their story, was the reason of why they came here. Whether they were from Africa, Asia, or Latin America, etc., they all seemed to have the same devastating reason of why they had to flee their home countries;

because of war and corruption. Each time someone told me their story my heart would break repeatedly for them. For example, a woman named Oydin shared with me her own reasoning for coming to the United States, explaining the political turmoil and imbedded corruption of her country's government. She said that there is no freedom of religion where she lived, and that the environment was not a positive one. Sadly, stories like Oydin's of corrupted governments within a country are common among the refugees at KRM. Even worse, stories of violent wars that have destroyed refugees' homes and made them pick up and leave absolutely everything behind, just so they can have a chance of surviving.

All these stories of war and violence can all be connected to the teachings and concepts taught by Professor Russ in PEACE 325. One of the most impactful concepts that I learned in that class that can be directly related to refugees and their war-torn countries is the concept of structural violence. Structural violence can be defined as "The increased rates of death and disability suffered by those who occupy the bottom rungs of society, as contrasted with the relatively lower death rates experienced by those who are above them." (Vandenbroucke, 2016, slide set 4). In relation to my service learning, the refugees are the ones who occupy the bottom rungs of society and the corrupted political leaders and militia are ones who are above them. PEACE 325 taught me that structural violence prevents people from meeting their basic needs, which can easily be applied to refugees who must flee their country because their basic needs cannot be met where they are. My service learning experience has made me see the effects of structural violence because of these refugees and seeing it through this perspective gives me this sense of empathy that I wouldn't have had without experiencing that.

One of the core concepts that has stayed with me from PEACE 350 that I have tried to utilize in both my service learning and daily life is active listening. I mentioned earlier how once I started to implement active listening during ECC, the language barriers began to lessen. Active listening is centered around conflict management and resolution, which is crucial when refugees who already have language barriers are trying to express something to you. It is amazing how much you can learn about another person simply by engaging in what they are saying and letting them feel listened to and valued. Active listening allows you to empathize with others and trigger an emotional response that could potentially lead to healing and resolution. The skill of active listening has helped me many times during ECC when a refugee is trying to convey what they need to work on that day. Instead of just asking them to repeat what they had just said, I let them continue to talk and I actively listen to use the context clues they are giving me to understand and resolve the situation.

Another core concept that has stayed with me from PEACE 350 is the power of body language. This is especially important when it comes to working with refugees and there is that language barrier. Body language can let me know if they are engaged, disengaged, understanding, struggling, etc. which can be extremely helpful when it is difficult to verbally exchange words. In PEACE 350 Professor Rollins and Professor Curtin would make us do this exercise almost every class where we would get in pairs of two, get a mock situation and must read each other's body language. At the time I was questioning whether I would ever have to apply this knowledge, but now I am so grateful that they made sure we did because it was crucial during my service learning. When there are language barriers many times body language can speak louder than words.

One day this woman named Mariam who usually shows up to ECC every Saturday wasn't there. Mariam is a refugee from Syria, who fled here with her husband, two-year-old son, and daughter who is six months old. I've spoken with Mariam a few times and have gotten to know her well enough to know that she comes to ECC to practice English while her husband and children stay at home. Because Mariam is usually at ECC every Saturday, I noticed immediately when she wasn't there. I began to ask other volunteers where Mariam was, and they responded by saying that they were told she had to stay home today. My mind immediately went to the assumption that her husband was in control and made her stay home. Thinking back to the elective I took, SOC 201, I had completely stereotyped her husband. I remember discussing in my SOC 201 class that stereotyping is a widely adopted thought about certain groups of people or certain ways of behaving meant to represent the entire group as a whole. Instead of considering the many other possibilities of why she had to stay home that day, I jumped to conclusion that her husband made her stay home because of the stereotype that middle eastern men control their wives.

It turned out that she had to stay home because her son was sick, I was very much in the wrong to stereotype her husband and I quickly realized that after I had the thought. Within the program of PJCT we are taught to not be quick to judgement, but rather listen and have patience before criticizing somebody. In that situation I didn't take the time to fully understand the situation, I jumped to conclusions based on a stereotype instead of keeping an open mind. SOC 201 gave me the knowledge to realize within myself that I was stereotyping, and the PJCT program has given me the ability to see how I can avoid that fault in the future with some patience and understanding.

Final Reflection of Service Learning

To Personal Growth

This past semester working with Kentucky Refugees Ministries has honestly been one of the most rewarding and enlightening experiences I have ever had. In completing my service learning project with KRM, I have discovered so much about myself and others, helping me grow into a more aware, empathic, and culturally conscious individual. I have had many opportunities to critically reflect on experiences that have made me question the way certain things are, ponder on our moral obligations as human beings, integrate experiences from service learning to the lessons from the PJCT classes, and use these thoughts to create core principles of peace, justice, and conflict resolution. KRM has helped me become an overall better person and volunteer through challenges, opportunities, expectations, and reality.

Challenges within my service learning experience have helped me grow because comfortability is the enemy of growth. If I had gone into my service learning at KRM and everything was a breeze and there were no challenges what so ever then I wouldn't have had to get out of my comfort zone to adapt and grow. Yes, the language barriers throughout the course were difficult but in hindsight I think that was one of the biggest factors of growth for me. Also, adapting to the challenge of who to report my time sheet and papers to ultimately helped me grow and become a more flexible individual.

Opportunities within my service learning experience have also helped me grow because they helped me learn to rely on myself and open myself up to an entirely new perspective. The opportunity to accomplish something that was completely put on my shoulders to finish is honestly an amazing feeling. It shows me that I am capable of doing so many things when I put

my mind to it. Also opening myself up to an entirely new group of people that I had never had experience with before and taking in new perspectives has definitely been an agent of growth for me this past semester.

Throughout my service learning experience, I have certainly experienced my fair share of expectations followed by reality, that in the end looking back have only helped me grow into a way more flexible individual. I mentioned earlier how I began my service thinking I would report to one person the entire time and have a set schedule that I would abide by the entire semester, but I soon learned that would not be the case. This reality made me adapt to the way that other people did things, which was something that I wasn't necessarily used to. Another expectation that was soon followed by reality was when I expected to be able to go into any area of service at KRM, but I soon realized that wasn't possible and I had to be okay with not being able to do that. Again, going back to adaptability, a key function of personal growth is being able to adapt easily when something doesn't go as expected.

Three key factors to my personal growth within my service learning experience are the three prerequisite classes I had to take to be able to do my service learning. The first class was PEACE 325, which focused on non-violent ways to achieve peace and end injustices. Taking this class before doing my service learning was very beneficial to my personal growth because it gave me the knowledge to connect the stories that refugees told of their home countries with the structural violence that we discussed in PEACE 325.

The second class was PEACE 350, which focused on mediation and conflict transformation. Taking this class before doing my service learning was beneficial to my personal growth because it gave me the knowledge to use the powerful effects of active listening and apply that to my service learning when conversing with refugees. PEACE 350 also gave me the

knowledge to implement the useful strategy of reading body language into the way I interact with the refugees at KRM.

The third class I took was the elective SOC 201, which was an intro to sociology class. This class gave me the knowledge to realize when I was jumping to conclusions because of a stereotype and do some self-reflection on why I did that and how can I change so that will not happen again in the future. This situation made me stop and look at myself, ultimately making me more self-aware and grow as an individual.

Doing my service learning at Kentucky Refugee Ministries has changed the way I look at the world, the way I look at others, and the way I look at myself. It has opened my mind to new perspectives, experiences, and way of doing things, all for the better. I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to do my service at KRM and I fully intend on continuing my service there.

Career

I am only a sophomore, so I have some time before I graduate, but I have begun to think about what career I want to pursue. As of right now I am thinking that I want to pursue a career in clinical psychology. Therapy and the way the brain works have always been huge passions of mine along with helping others, so clinical psychology seemed like the perfect match. PEACE 350 really inspired me to take that leap and go for psychology, and I am very grateful for that. I am planning to go to graduate school for clinical psychology after I get my undergraduate degree at UofL.

Works Cited

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