

What is the Resilient Families Project?

The organization I served with this semester, the Resilient Families Project (RFP), is a weekly educational program meant to develop resiliency and wellness skills among individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Since 2011, University of Louisville faculty, students, and volunteers have served the residents at Wayside Christian Mission's Hotel Louisville and Emergency Homeless Shelter. The program seeks to promote healthy attachment relationships between caregivers and children, interactive reading between caregivers and children, a sense of belonging and community engagement, and school readiness for children and families.

RFP accomplishes these objectives with a three-part program every Thursday evening during UofL's fall, spring, and summer semesters. The first program hour, called Resilient Families Program, is a structured learning forum for both the parents and the children that is meant to strengthen interactive reading skills and shared learning activities. Carefully selected children's books are read aloud to motivate literacy and reading between caregivers and children, which will, in turn, assist in creating healthy and loving attachment relationships. The activities during this hour also create a sense of belonging and community involvement, in that attendees are encouraged to participate in community events and with community organizations.

The second part of the program, called Resilient Child/Adolescent Program, is devoted to strengthening school readiness and social and emotional skills among the children and adolescents that attend the program. This is done with activities such as arts and crafts, homework and tutoring, interactive reading, and music and dance.

The third part of the program, the Resilient Adults Program, is an empirically-supported program that provides education in resilience and compassion, communication skills, and child

management skills. These skills are taught using a variety of methods, such as arts and crafts, games, and personal reflection. It also involves the discussion of such topics as the importance of self-care, positive discipline, developing strong and supportive social networks, and effective communication.

What Were My Duties?

One of my duties for the Resilient Families Project was to assist in the research that Dr. Haynes and several other students are in the midst of conducting. Following last year's pilot study, other RFP team members refined an extensive tool for evaluating the content of children's storybooks that are currently in use in the family reading program. Current RFP team members were asked to read 31 books used (or proposed for use) during the family program and analyze the content of each of these books according to both the General Book Criteria and the six Core Ideas of the Resilient Families Project. The book evaluations served several purposes. First, the evaluation tool served as an objective assessment of the fit between the books currently in use and the stated General Book Criteria and Core Ideas. Likewise, evaluation outcomes helped to fine-tune the storybook schedule to follow the order of the Core Ideas. Additionally, the content analysis was used as a training tool, allowing the RFP team to become familiar with how and why books are chosen for the reading program. My duties with this project included distributing and collecting the book evaluations and ensuring that all RFP team members were participating. Likewise, I took part in creating the poster and presenting at University of Louisville's Undergraduate Research Symposium. Like all other RFP team members, I also took part in the study by reading and evaluating each children's storybook used during the first program.

I greatly enjoyed this aspect of my work. Being able to read and evaluate the children's storybooks allowed me to gain a better understanding of how each one contributed to the core themes and mission of the Resilient Families Project. I also believe it is very important to have an objective way to measure which core themes and how much of them are present in each storybook, to ensure the quality of each one.

Although I do believe the research aspects of my duties were highly important, I believe my duty as an assistant in the Resilient Adults Program was even more important. Before the program, I would assist in planning the curriculum each week and preparing the crafts, games, and other activities that were on the agenda. During the program, I engaged in discussion with the adults, participated in group activities, and assisted in arts and crafts. Most importantly, in my opinion, I was able to engage in normal, adult conversation with the participants, something I'm sure they don't get a lot of as parents and caregivers. Although I learned a lot while helping out in those other areas, I feel that I learned most when I was simply conversing about everyday life with the adults.

Prior to the program beginning in mid-January, I was given the opportunity to choose whether I wanted to work in the children program or the adult program. I chose the adult program for several reasons. Firstly, in previous semesters I volunteered in the children's program with the 0-4 age group. While I greatly enjoyed my time with the little ones, I wanted to change things up this semester. Furthermore, the idea of working with the adult group somewhat terrified me for reasons I'm only beginning to understand. Therefore, I believed this to be a great opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and become more familiar with the adults that I had interacted with from afar during previous semesters. I think another reason I became interested in working with the adults was because I was genuinely interested in hearing

their stories about their life and what events and decisions, whether within or outside of their control, had led them to this moment in their life.

Overall, my experience with the Resilient Families Project was a great learning opportunity for me. I was able to connect many of my experiences with concepts discussed in previous Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation classes and many of my sociology classes, along with several ideas discussed by Robert Coles in his book "The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism."

Resilient Families Project's Core Ideas

As mentioned above, the Resilient Families Project program is structured around six core ideas that demonstrate positive and healthy lifestyle goals. These six themes are (1) having the key to resiliency, (2) nurturing ourselves and 'keeping our glass half full,' (3) packing positive goals and values in our child's suitcase for their future, (4) compassionate listening as a powerful parenting tool, (5) conflict and poor choices offer a teaching opportunity, and (6) transforming our families to be more resilient, strong, and happy. Each of these core ideas coincide almost perfectly with ideas and concepts that have been discussed not only in my PJCT classes, but also throughout my college career.

Having the Key to Resiliency

The most important theme in the Resilient Families Project is teaching at-risk individuals and families to be resilient in all aspects of life. The idea behind this theme is that we, as individuals, must remember our past challenges and successes, but to not dwell too much on what cannot be changed. We have the ability to adapt and move forward, regardless of what

circumstances have brought us to this moment. Furthermore, we have the ability to teach this same level of resiliency and strength to our children.

In PEAC 325, we discussed in depth how there is much to be learned from personal conflict and struggles. When we take a step back and evaluate the situation, much like we did in the conflict analyses, we are able to learn from our past mistakes and challenges. However, evaluation is not enough. We must also be willing to adapt and change in order to prevent similar events from occurring in the future.

Similarly, RFP is designed to give families experiencing homelessness the tools they need to evaluate and adapt from their current situation in order to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness. It is the hope of the creators of the program that we will not see our participants or their children back in Wayside Christian Mission's shelters ever again.

Keeping our Glass Half Full

Another core theme of the Resilient Families Project is the idea of nurturing ourselves in order to 'keep our glass half full.' Parenting can be challenging. When all of the other pressures of life are added into the equation most would agree it can be downright stressful. That is why it is very important for everyone, especially parents, to find positive techniques and practices that help with managing stress. Techniques such as meditation, affirmations, positive social supports, healthy choices and exercise can help restore our energy and joy. This will allow us to be more productive in every aspect of our lives, including our parenting.

One week of RFP was devoted entirely to teaching the importance of self-care and some skills and practices that will facilitate. During the Family Program, Dr. Haynes read the children's book *Peaceful Piggy Meditations* by Kerry Lee Maclean, which was about a pig who

relied on the practice of meditation to calm himself during and after stressful situations. The book taught both the children and adults the concept behind meditation, how to practice it, and why it should be an important part of each person's day. In the hour and a half that the parents and children split, the parents were given tools that would allow them to engage in self-care that would promote inner-peace. After discussing different ways to deal with the stresses of life, we introduced and practiced the art of meditation. Many of the adults were very engaged in the process and interested in establishing a meditation practice into their daily routine. For those that were not quite as interested, we discussed other ways they might de-stress, such as surrounding yourself with positive people and exercising.

One mother even elaborated on why it is so important to establish these techniques by discussing how she often has to go sit in a quiet room for several minutes when she is feeling too overwhelmed. She mentioned that before she began doing this, she often found herself snapping at her children over minor problems. Now, however, she feels a sense of peace and calm more often and has learned to react better to her children and to the problems she faces.

In PEAC 325, we learned that inner-peace is just as important as outer peace. In order to actively promote peace out into the world, we must have a positive and peaceful outlook and learn ways to deal with the stresses that the outside world can cause. Similarly, we read an excerpt from *Being Peace* by Thich Nhat Hanh, in which he described how our inner-peace, or lack thereof, can affect the people around us. "If we are not happy, if we are not peaceful, we cannot share peace and happiness with others, even those we love, those who live under the same roof. If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace," (Hanh, 2005). In other words, our

energies, whether positive or negative, will flow beyond ourselves and into other aspects and individuals in our lives. In order to project peace, we must be at peace internally.

Packing Your Child's Suitcase

The third core theme of the Resilient Families Project is the idea of packing positive goals and values into your child's suitcase for their future. In other words, we must instill these goals and values into our children's lives with our day-to-day actions that promote self-awareness, communication skills, problem-solving, and commitment to family. Furthermore, we must begin this process with our children at an early age so they are competent in such areas when they are older.

Because conflict is a common part of every life, RFP is very devoted to teaching our participants how to deal with conflict. This includes helping parents be aware of how their advice to their children about the conflict they experience can have positive or negative consequences. One RFP program was devoted to this idea. All semester, the older children have been reading *Smart Butt* by Erin Fitzgerald (a Louisville native and volunteer at RFP). In the story, the main character, Earline, is having a problem with a bully at her school. As an activity, the RFP children pretended to be Earline writing a letter to her Aunt Nettie asking for advice on what she should do about the situation. The adults, then, were given to opportunity to write a letter as Aunt Nettie in response to the children's letters. All of the advice that was given by the parents, whether good or bad quality, could be accounted for in Kraybill's Conflict Style Inventory discussed in both PEAC 325 and 350.

The advice of some adults was to tell a teacher or another adult about the problem. While this may be a necessary action as a last resort, other methods should be sought first. Telling an adult or teacher does not allow the child to learn how to deal with the conflict themselves. There

will not always be an adult present in every situation in their lives, so having the knowledge and skills to effectively handle conflict is an important ability to have.

Another piece of advice given to the children was for them to simply ignore the bully. While this can sometimes be enough to deter the bully temporarily, it typically will not last. Furthermore, this action promotes avoidance of problems, which is a negative coping strategy.

Some adults even suggested physically harming the bully, with the idea that once the child stands up to them the bullying would end. However, this advice teaches the child that aggressiveness is the best way to deal with problems, when, in reality, it can be the strategy with the most negative consequences.

The best piece of advice that many of the parents gave was to be honest with the bully and tell them how their actions and words can be hurtful. This strategy could best fit under the collaboration category of conflict management style. Sometimes, simply informing the person that what they are doing is hurtful is enough to cause their empathy to take over. Once that happens, they may think a little more about the consequences of their actions.

Compassionate Listening is a Powerful Parenting Tool

Another theme of the Resilient Families Project is the idea that compassionate listening can be a powerful tool for strengthening relationships with our children and others as well as a great instrument for relieving stress. When we set aside the concerns and distractions of our daily lives in order to practice compassionate listening, we are showing our children and others that their wants, needs, and concerns are significant and, most importantly, that they are loved.

In PEAC 325, Eileen Blanton came to class to introduce PeaceEd to us. While she was there, we did an exercise that allowed us to better understand the importance of active listening. In groups of two, each person took a turn telling a story that meant a great deal to them.

Meanwhile, the other person did everything in their power to not listen to what the other was saying. Afterwards, we discussed how it felt to be ignored. As one could imagine, everyone unanimously said that it didn't feel so good. Some even mentioned that their anger began to flare. If these negative reactions tend to occur when conducting a simple exercise, it is safe to say that those reactions would only be heightened in a real-life situation.

One evening during RFP, we conducted this same experiment to demonstrate to our participants how important it is to actively and compassionately listen to others. Afterward, we had some very productive discussions about how communication can be even more difficult with children. Although many had a good time finding unique ways to ignore their partners, I think most left that night with a better understanding of the important role compassionate listening can play in everyone's lives, especially when parenting. Likewise, they learned how a lack of active listening can sometimes even result in conflict. We also went over ways to show our children that we are listening to them and that we are aware of their concerns and problems. Many agreed that the best and most obvious way of doing so is to verbally express this fact to them. This will result in more open and honest communication between parent and child.

At one point, we had a mother express the problems she has been having with miscommunication with one of her children. She had recently had a new baby and her older daughter (about 2 or 3 years old) was feeling neglected. She had been acting out, even toward the new baby, because she was jealous of the attention the baby was getting. As one can imagine, the idea that a mother can love each of her children equally would be difficult for a three-year-old to understand. Since there were many other women in the room who have been through a similar situation, they began to give her advice, such as taking time out of every week or even every day to devote solely to the older child. Eventually they will see that when a new

child is born a mother doesn't love her other children less. Although I am not a mother and have very little experience with such a situation, the advice the mother got from the other women seemed very helpful to me.

This exercise reminded me of a topic we discussed at length in PEAC 350. In that class, we referred to this idea as empathetic listening, but it is very similar to compassionate listening. We discussed how empathetic listening is much like a dam. We, as human beings, have many emotions. If we do not proactively express those emotions, they may build up and build up until one day they come out without our permission. However, when someone is there to listen to our problems and can serve as an outlet for expressing our emotions, we often feel much better and are more capable of keeping our emotions in check. Empathetic listening means suspending all concern for ourselves for the moment and being completely present and compassionate to another individual. Even though we may not have the answers, simply listening can often be enough.

Conflict Offers a Teaching Opportunity

The idea that conflict and poor choices can provide teaching opportunities is another core theme of the Resilient Families Project. Instead of having a negative reaction when our children misbehave, we should view their misbehavior as an opportunity for calm and consistent teaching. Likewise, adults in the program gain a new perspective on their own poor choices and personal conflicts and can learn techniques that seek to end a cycle of poor decisions.

This concept is something we discussed at length in both Peace classes. In PEAC 325 we read *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* by John Paul Lederach, in which he discusses the important distinction between conflict resolution and conflict transformation. We learned that conflict tends to happen for a reason and that "resolving" it may cause us to sweep problems

under the rug that ought to be dealt with. Instead, we should view conflict as a “catalyst for growth,” (Lederach, 2003) and evaluate and understand the system of relationships and patterns that caused the conflict (Lederach, 2003).

Many of the ideas introduced to me through Lederach’s writings were discussed in the Resilient Families Project as well, especially the week that conscious transformation was the theme. We began by discussing how many of the negative things that happen in our lives are, in fact, great opportunities to transform ourselves, whether that be transforming our habits, transforming our attitudes, or transforming our energies, etc. Although many view conflict as a negative and inevitable part of life, it can actually be a positive thing. When we take a step back from the conflict and evaluate the triggers, escalators, and the actions of all parties involved we can address those issues in order to prevent future conflict. This is what we did in PEAC 325 with the conflict analyses.

After we discussed the concept of conflict as a teaching opportunity, we discussed their current situations. Instead of seeing their current situations of homelessness as a negative moment in their lives, it should encourage them to reflect on what circumstances got them to this moment and try to find ways to adjust those circumstances. During our discussion, one woman courageously told her story about the circumstances that brought her to Wayside. She had previously lived in a rough neighborhood in Chicago. After watching her teenage son bury several of his close friends, she decided that a change was necessary for her and her son to feel safe. She decided to move to Louisville even though they had very little money and no place to live. Despite the fact that they were living in a homeless shelter at the time, she said she still felt deep down that it was the right decision. Although some may classify this decision as “running away” from her problems, I don’t see it that way at all. I think staying and ignoring the problem

would have been turning a blind eye. Instead, her courage and dedication to her son allowed her to leave behind a life she knew was not right for them.

Transforming Families to be Resilient, Strong, and Happy

The last, and perhaps most important, core idea of the Resilient Families Project is the notion of transforming our family members to be more resilient, strong, and happy individuals. Teaching the previous five core ideas of inner resilience, optimism, packing our child's suitcase, compassionate listening, and conflict transformation to our children can transform their lives for both the present and the future. Many of the skills and concepts taught in the adult program of RFP can be adapted and simplified for children of all ages. It is RFP's primary goal that the parents take what they've learned in the adult program and use it to educate and nurture their children in order to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness.

The Resilient Families Project, in my opinion, is helping to promote positive peace. In PEAC 325 we learned that positive peace is, "the condition characterized by the existence of peaceful and cultural beliefs and norms; the presence of social justice at all levels (economic, social, and political)," (Oxford Dictionary of the U.S. Military). By teaching these skills to at-risk individuals, we are attempting to create a culture of peace. Not only will these skills help to better themselves and their families internally, it will give them a greater chance at succeeding in life, thus supporting social justice for those who typically get treated worst in society.

The Call of Service

The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism by Robert Coles contained many ideas and concepts that paralleled well with my work at the Resilient Families Project. Reading the book and critically thinking about its contents allowed me to evaluate my time at RFP and to look

deep inside myself to determine what I hope to accomplish and what aspects have meant the most to me.

Type of Service and Struggles

In chapter two, Coles details several different kinds of service in which most volunteers engage. Out of the seven categories he describes, my work with the Resilient Families Project can fit into at least two. Firstly, I believe the work RFP does is a community service. We are doing a service to the community of Louisville in that we are attempting to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness by giving parents and children the skills they need to survive and thrive in the world. Likewise, we hope to reduce the length of time that each family stays in shelters and to keep them from coming back in the future, both of which can greatly reduce the cost of government assistance given to shelters throughout the community.

I also believe that, in a way, RFP is an active member in a great social and political struggle. In *The Call of Service*, Coles uses the example of southern civil rights activists in 1960s and 1970s to describe the ins and outs of the social and political struggle category. Like the men and women who fought for the rights of African Americans, I believe RFP is fighting for the rights of impoverished individuals. Although we are attempting to make a difference at an individual level, we are attempting to equip the men, women, and children of RFP to beat the structural forces that are ceaselessly attempting to bring them down. While I will be the first to admit that there have been some poor choices made that have contributed to these individuals' current situations, there are many forces outside of their control that put them in positions to make poor decisions in the first place. Such structural forces include lack of affordable housing, cuts in government funding of subsidized housing, lack of a living wage, and poor inner-city

education, just to name a few. RFP is attempting to provide the skills and practices so that these individuals can thwart such forces.

Like many of the individuals described by Coles, there are many conflicts and misgivings that can occur when undertaking community service and political activism work. The feeling that the social reality of the individuals we are attempting to assist is too grim to make a difference is something that I have felt at several points throughout the semester. Despite all the work we do, there are still several individuals that either can't seem to catch a break or have no desire to help themselves. When we see the same families come back time and again, it can make our work seem hopeless and not worth it.

Another phenomenon that Coles describes is the feeling of being an outsider. There have been many times during my time with RFP, particularly the first few weeks, that I felt that I could not possibly relate to the individuals we serve. I have been a middle class, Caucasian female my entire life. I've never had to worry about where I'll sleep or where my next meal will come from. To make matters worse, I've never been a parent, so I felt that I had very little in common with the adults in our group. I fully expected them to, for lack of a better word, hate me because of my privilege. However, I soon realized that this was not the case. On the contrary, I felt respect and gratitude from them; not a program went by that at least one person thanked me for being there. As one will find in any group, there was the occasional negative attitude that made me feel completely separate from them and their situation. However, for the most part I felt welcomed and appreciated. I'm ashamed to admit that my expectations of the adult group were so negative in the beginning, but I couldn't be any more pleased with the way my relationships with them have turned out.

Satisfactions

In *The Call of Service* Robert Coles also address a few of the reasons people volunteer. After reading his descriptions and engaging in some introspection, I would say that I have two reasons and motivations for my work with RFP. Firstly, I would say that my work will accomplish the goal of “something done, someone reached,” particularly the ‘someone reached’ part. I’m not naïve enough to believe that every single person we work with at RFP will understand what we are attempting to teach them and use it to better their lives. On the contrary, I know that many of them do not want to be there and could care less what we have to say. But I know, somehow, that the concepts and skills we teach will reach and affect the life of at least one person. To me, that is enough to get me through some of the negativity and outright hostility we may sometimes encounter.

I also believe that personal affirmation encourages me in my work with RFP. As selfish as it sounds, I like going every week because I have a good time. I love meeting new people and having everyday conversations with them. I love to assist in making a craft or participating in a game with them. Throughout this entire semester, I went home every Thursday night happy and content. Because of such rewarding experiences, I have decided to continue my volunteering opportunities at RFP during the summer and, class schedule permitting, in the fall as well.

Urban Sociology

Along with the connections I found between my experiences with the Resilient Families Project and my previous peace studies classes, I found many associations with my Urban Sociology (SOC 305) class as well. After hearing many of the individual stories of our participants at RFP, I learned that many of them are residing at Wayside and awaiting an assignment to subsidized housing. I do not have the exact numbers, unfortunately, but the

growing trend I found was that the waiting period for a subsidized housing assignment was several years long. From this it is clear that what I had learned in my urban sociology class was indeed true: there is a lack of funding for subsidized housing and that it is one of the primary contributors to the high rates of homelessness in this country.

The most disheartening fact I learned in my class was that there were many correlations between poverty and education. A study conducted by JCPS in 2013 found that within the school district poverty was negatively correlated with kindergarten readiness, reading proficiency, and college/career readiness, and positively correlated with percentage of suspensions. In other words, children from impoverished families are less likely to be kindergarten ready, less likely to be proficient in reading, less likely to be college/career ready after high school, and more likely to be suspended. These results are devastating, especially considering that our society has this wild notion that anyone can get ahead with hard work and education. On the contrary, children from impoverished families start out with stark disadvantages that few can overcome. Yet we wonder why poverty tends to be passed down through multiple generations.

I feel that RFP is working to combat these statistics. By promoting literacy and interactive reading between parents and children, we are one step closer to helping these children overcome the disadvantages they experience at an early age.

Contributions to Academic and Professional Careers

My experiences working with the Resilient Families Project had a great impact on both my academic and professional careers. Not only did this service-learning experience fulfill requirements and allow me to receive my undergraduate certificate in Peace, Justice, and Conflict Transformation, but it allowed me to connect many of the concepts and ideas I've

learned in numerous classes throughout my college career to real-life experiences. Furthermore, this class, and Robert Coles in particular, inspired me to not just serve, but to think critically about my service and the experiences I have while serving.

Prior to this semester I knew I wished to be a social worker. My previous work with the children's group at the Resilient Families Project revealed to me that working with at-risk children is what I wanted to do with my life. While that is still an important goal of mine, working in the adult program this semester has caused me to realize that working with adults experiencing homelessness is a passion of mine as well. The best way to fulfill both desires is to be a case worker for families experiencing homelessness. I have even had such a connection and passion for Wayside Christian Missions that I hope to one day work for them.

My time with the Resilient Families Project has been a challenging yet highly rewarding experience for me. My experiences while there have taught me so much about the world and about myself. I can only hope that I will one day make a fraction of the impact on the lives of at-risk individuals as the Resilient Families Project has made.

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