



2017

PROGRESS IN PROCESS

STORIES OF GROWTH
TOWARDS JUSTICE

The International Center
for Ethics, Justice and Public Life
Brandeis University

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Concluding and Celebrating 20 Years of the Sorensen Fellowship: Reflections from the Director

Marci McPhee



My few inches of column space here began as a report (boring even to me as I wrote it), and ended up as a love letter. “Privilege” doesn’t begin to describe my feelings of walking alongside 121 remarkable individuals on their often-pivotal yearlong journeys, as I have overseen the Sorensen Fellowship program from the start.

With this anthology, the Ethics Center concludes the Sorensen Fellowship, capping off 20 years of supporting incredibly talented, dedicated Brandeis undergraduates in ethics-related summer internships in the U.S. and abroad.

Each year I began meeting with many of these remarkable individuals in October. They optimistically but nervously asked for coaching on their applications for the Sorensen Fellowship, seeking the opportunity to explore a particular passion, address a troubling injustice, or test a potential career path.

I then met with the Fellows in the spring as a cohort of (usually) six, carefully selected for their individual potential and accomplishments, but also for what they contributed to the group, with each cohort having its own personality and dynamic. I helped them get ready, intellectually and logistically, for a summer internship that may be around the corner or around the world. In addition, each Fellow took a spring course which they selected as a part of their

academic preparation. And then they headed out....

All summer I read their updates and fielded phone calls as Fellows processed often mind-bending experiences. The most common observation was something like, “You don’t get what you think you’re going to get.” I listened as students figured out how to mop up after naïve missteps, always emerging stronger and wiser; how to endure another day of incessant marriage proposals from strangers and even professional colleagues in developing countries; and celebrated with them their hard-won breakthroughs. I listened in as students challenged and refined their worldviews, and contributed with energy and sensitivity to organizations doing good work.

In many other programs, students have stretching, challenging, and complex experiences like these – and then wrap up the internship, write a report, and move on. But Sorensen Fellows did more. In the fall, they devoted an entire course to reflection as they integrated the spring academic learning with the summer praxis, unpacked experiences in light of academic frameworks alongside their peers, reflected deeply on assumptions and followed threads of thought, sometimes unnoticed at the time.

Having listened in on their experiences in real time over the summer, I was fascinated to see how Fellows shaped and processed

them, probing deeper for insights that only come with effort and intellectual work. (This publication includes some of their work from that course.) Many thanks to fall course instructors Jim Mandrell, Dan Terris, Mitra Shavarini, Cynthia Cohen, Leigh Swigart and Patricia Chu. Special thanks to Barbara Strauss and David J. Weinstein and for their phenomenal support of the Fellows throughout the Sorensen Fellowship experience over the years.

One might think that after the Fellows and the Center spent an entire year in each other’s back pockets, everyone would move on. Instead, we have been delighted that many Fellows remain connected with us, sharing ongoing choices and changes. We are “trench buddies,” having gone through an intense year together, understanding what it meant in ways few others could.

“In a certain way, the Fellowship informs everything I do,” remarked one alumnus. “Look at us,” said another. “We’re all becoming these really accomplished people who are building and doing meaningful things in the world! Can you believe it?” “Yes!” I replied. “We knew you had it in you.”

The Sorensen Fellowship has been a signature program of the Ethics Center since the very beginning of the Center itself in 1998. As Center Director Dan Terris recounted in a video about the Center’s history, “The first thing we did was to create

a program with undergraduates [later named the Sorensen Fellowship], partly to show our commitment to young people, and partly because it's an investment in the future."

As undergraduate interns, 121 Sorensen Fellows worked with remarkable individuals and organizations on six continents on a wide variety of issues, laying the groundwork for careers and lives that are attentive to social justice and foster richer, more ethical public life. In the 20 years of the Fellowship, the Ethics Center's investment has paid off in ways we could never have anticipated.

We are immeasurably proud of our Sorensen Fellowship alumni. They will always be a part of the Ethics Center family. Through their lives and work, the impact of the Sorensen Fellowship will continue to be felt for decades to come.

Guiding and supporting these remarkable individuals – and learning from them along the way – has been more than a privilege: it has been a life highlight and an honor.

Marci McPhee
Sorensen Fellowship Director
Director of Campus Programs

To read the writing of Sorensen Fellows from 1998 to today, or to read more about the conclusion of the program, visit go.brandeis.edu/sorensen.

Sorensen Fellowship Program

The Sorensen Fellowship Program of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life honors Theodore C. Sorensen (1928-2010) for his lifelong commitment to public service and for his 10 years as Founding Chair of the Center's International Advisory Board. Ted Sorensen was policy advisor, legal counsel and speechwriter to President John F. Kennedy. In 2008 he wrote, "We shall listen, not lecture; learn, not threaten. We will enhance our safety by earning the respect of others and showing respect for them. In short, our foreign policy will rest on the traditional American values of restraint and empathy, not on military might." In focusing their internships and their writing on themes of empathy, respect and trust, the Fellows pay fitting tribute to the public servant for whom the Sorensen Fellowship is named.



Ted Sorensen with President Kennedy

Introduction

Patricia E. Chu

The essays in “Progress in Process: Stories of Growth Towards Justice” collect the summer internship experiences of the 2017 Sorensen Fellows: Michelle Dennis '18, Zeynep Ece Esikara '19, Mrudula Gadgil '18, Max Gould '18, Paul Sindberg '18, and Leah Susman '18.

The summer internship in social justice is the centerpiece of the Sorensen Fellowship, but there is long period of application and commitment leading up to that point as well as a period of reflection when the Fellows return. These students independently found and applied for their own internships as well as for the Sorensen Fellowship itself in the year previous. Each then completed a spring course that would prepare them culturally and intellectually for the work of their internships. When they returned from their internships in the fall, the six Fellows together took PAX 89, a course in which they reflected on the experience of their internships and wrote the essays you find in this volume. This is also the time of the Fellowship during which Sorensen Fellows work together most closely.

I was fortunate to be their instructor for this latter time as they wrestled with issues of accountability, fairness, history, leadership, national and cultural identity, community life, and law – really, how we might understand the social arrangements of the past and present and alter those of the future. This may sound like an extraordinary

arrogation. But what always struck me over the months we were together was the deep humility with which the Fellows undertook their task of reflecting on and communicating what they had experienced and learned.

The title of this volume (which they chose) exemplifies their individual and collective sense of self as activists and social justice fellows. They all see themselves as having spent their Sorensen year learning and growing in ways they will be continuing.

They carefully considered the potential pitfalls of defining their positions as interns and holders of a fellowship in social justice. They were mindful that there can be a fine line between being part of the problem and being part of the solution, and of the limits their personal perspectives and cultural backgrounds placed on their ability to fully understand the experiences and needs of others and the politics in which their internship organizations operated. They questioned the ethics of taking on leadership in movements that might not directly affect them. They pointed to the enormity of what they did not know and of outcomes they could not predict.

But in the face of all this they remained determined to quest for lives in social justice work. Their title reflects this determination, as well as their acknowledgement of the complexity of taking up such a vocation.

Each week we met around our seminar table, in our cozy glassed-in classroom at the Ethics Center on the Brandeis University campus. As the view (though not the curiosity of the neighborhood squirrel) changed, from green and glowing summer to steely and cold New England winter, the Fellows wrote about their internships, offered up their drafts to each other, and found the words both to question and to encourage each other. An image from this time that captures for me the way they worked: six laptop power cords plugged into the table outlets, snaking out and entangling with each other, as if the six Fellows were all working on one document.

We almost always followed a writing or brainstorming session by passing the laptops around the circle so that each Fellow received input from all of the others. Discussion ranged as far afield as their internships had been from each other in focus and geography: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Ghana, New York City, South Africa. Unjust convictions; performing arts education for children; police violence; extending healthcare outside urban areas; immigrant, refugee and asylee assistance; violence against queer people and their communities; access to mental health care.... They may have had different entrance points into their missions but the experience of wrestling with the meaning and efficacy of service was something they all had.



Prof. Chu (center) with the 2017 Sorensen Fellows.

Now they shared their insights. Each listened carefully to the concrete details of the others' work, daily life, doubts, triumphs and reflections on the summer. How does one's social identity affect one's site of intervention? How does one know if one is having an effect? How do we understand our social responsibility? What are the best ways to speak about difference? How should we understand the contradictory feelings raised by our service? How do we handle organizational and institutional politics? Where is our service self-interested?

The reader will notice that these essays are very different in style and focus. Throughout the semester the Fellows challenged each other to move beyond their initial narratives and also to write in the mode that was truest for each. This was collaboration in its most constructive and respectful form, and I am grateful to have been present to experience it.

The 2017 Sorensen Fellows:

Michelle Dennis '18 is a biology major and Posse Foundation Leadership Scholar from Atlanta, Georgia. She is a Community Advisor to first-year residents, and a

teaching assistant in the biology laboratory. She also serves on the Student Leadership Board of the Student Support Services Program. Michelle has studied ballet since she was five and was Artistic Director of the Brandeis Ballet Company (2015-2016), choreographing "Hidden Language of the Soul," which was performed in the 2016 Leonard Bernstein Festive of the Creative Arts. This year, she performed at Brandeis University's 13th Annual Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. For her Sorensen Fellowship, Michelle interned with Light for Children in Kumasi, Ghana. Light for Children is an organization that focuses on the full development of orphans and vulnerable youth through its many programs in physical health and holistic wellness, education, literacy and against sexual violence. It also supports health clinics for all ages in the northern region, where many people live far from healthcare facilities. During the first part of her internship, Michelle taught introductory ballet technique at five schools that partner with Light for Children. During the second half of her internship, she worked at Hart Adventist, a hospital, assisting with patients' laboratory tests and examinations.

Zeynep Ece Esikara '19 is majoring in politics and economics. A Wien International Scholar, she is from Istanbul, Turkey. Ece is Director of External Relations for the *Brandeis International Journal* and in her work there organizes panel discussions among experts on global political issues. She works at the Brandeis libraries as an Access and Common Services Information and Borrowing Assistant and at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies as a student research assistant. Ece has served as treasurer of the New England Turkish Student Association. She has also worked at the Brandeis University Hunger and Homelessness Case Management Program at the Community Day Center in Waltham. Her internship for her Sorensen Fellowship was as a career coach and program assistant in the Refugee Services Department of Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) in Boston. Ece helped refugees, immigrants and asylees to prepare their resumes and job applications and coached them on interviewing for jobs. She spoke to other organizations about job placements from JVS and arranged for clients to receive other help such as English language classes, cultural orientation classes, and support in their new jobs. Ece also taught refugees how to navigate their new city and escorted clients and their families to medical and social services appointments, assisting with applications for aid such as childcare.

Mrudula Gadgil '18 is a double major in biology and Health, Science, Society, and Policy from Chelmsford, Massachusetts. She is co-president of the South Asian Students' Association, captain of the Brandeis Bhangra Dance Team, and a community advisor. As the Brandeis campus project coordinator for the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MASSPIRG) she advocates for the reduction of antibiotic use on factory farms. For her Sorensen Fellowship, Mrudula interned

with the Pro Bono Counseling Project in Baltimore, Maryland, an organization that connects Maryland residents with organizations that can provide free mental health care. She worked on updating Pro Bono Counseling's mission statements and other informational materials, but her primary placement was with Counselors Helping South Asians (CHAI), a formerly independent organization now under the auspices of the Pro Bono Counseling Project. A central part of CHAI's mission is to end the stigma in South Asian communities against mental health treatment. Mrudula worked to recruit South Asian clinicians for CHAI, and worked on outreach to South Asian organizations such as temples, mosques, and community groups through calls, meetings and attendance at cultural events. As part of this outreach, she organized and facilitated a workshop at a Muslim community center for young South Asian women on healthy friendships and family relationships.

Max Gould '18 is a philosophy and American studies major with a legal studies minor, from Maplewood, New Jersey. He has been a writer for *The Brandeis Hoot*, a member of the Brandeis University Mock Trial Association and is a varsity épée fencer on the men's fencing team. He has worked at the Kathryn A. McDonald Education Advocacy Project at the Legal Aid Society, the Public Integrity Bureau at the New York State Attorney General's Office, and the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. For his Sorensen Fellowship, Max interned with the Jeffrey Deskovic Foundation for Justice, in the Bronx, New York, which works for the exoneration of wrongfully convicted people. As part of his internship, he did research for the Foundation such as evaluating the work of New York City's Conviction Integrity Units, established a new social media plan, assisted in fundraising and education initiatives such as a documentary series

about the experiences of exonerees, and contributed to case evaluation. During his time with the Foundation, Max also traveled to Albany, New York, the state capital, to lobby for legislation establishing a prosecutorial oversight board, and attended court hearings. He has recently begun work as a research assistant at another innocence initiative organization: the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism in the Justice Brandeis Law Project.

Paul Sindberg '18 is a politics major with a double minor in legal studies and music, from Oakwood Hills, Illinois. As the Coordinator of Community Engagement at the Brandeis Office of Prevention Services, he works to end sexual violence while building community understanding of the intersectional relationship between sexual violence prevention work and all anti-oppressive work. He has served in several positions with the Brandeis Student Union, including as services and outreach committee chair, executive senator, and vice president. Paul approached the Sorensen Fellowship program after developing his advocacy skills in internships with political campaigns and labor lobbying organizations. He completed his fellowship as an intern with the Love Not Hate campaign at OUT LGBT Well-Being in Pretoria, South Africa. This campaign provides myriad services to LGBTI survivors of hate crimes, including coordinating the first parliamentary lobbying program for LGBTI people in South Africa. Paul participated in direct client advocacy, case management, and legal research for survivors and their families in courts and police stations. Other aspects of his work with OUT LGBT included organizing formal and informal community programming, setting up safe spaces, and assisting OUT LGBT's Peer Outreach Team, which provides free HIV testing services and information. Currently, Paul is working as

a discrimination complaint intake intern at the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination.

Leah Susman '18 is from the Chicago, Illinois area. She is an education studies major and a Latin American and Latino studies minor. In her work as J Street U's current National Campaign Chair, Leah takes it as her mission to shape the activism of the rising generation of the American Jewish community. At Brandeis, she has served as co-director of the Brandeis - Al-Quds Student Dialogue Initiative and co-chair of Hillel Race Talks, a program that promotes an anti-racist and inclusive Jewish community on campus. Leah's Sorensen Fellowship internship was with the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA) in Chicago. She became part of their Community Organizing Team, with a primary focus on a campaign for police accountability in Chicago, in which JCUA joined forces with a diverse array of community groups.

Patricia E. Chu was a Lecturer in Peace, Conflict and Coexistence Studies at Brandeis during Fall 2017.

Instituting Unvisualized Change: Trusting the Faith Walk

Michelle Dennis '18



Act One

Opening: Arriving to Atonsu, Kumasi

It was finally time to leave behind the rigid but cushioned seat that had gradually given my muscles small aches over the five-and-a-half-hour bus-ride from Accra to Kumasi; to leave the sweet middle-aged woman, Ms. Theresa, who was kind enough to let me use her phone to call Mr. Dao; to pick up my belongings and finally be immersed in the city of my internship.

Mr. Dao had told me, “Debby is a Light for Children Volunteer. She will be waiting for you when you arrive at the station. Look for a young woman in a yellow shirt.” I held my book bag, my carry-on, and snacks given to me by Akwasi and Kwame in Accra. With my hands full, I descended the steps and was met by a swarm of taxi drivers reaching for my bags to guarantee themselves a passenger. Aghast by the sudden attention and confused by their words that were in Twi, I gripped my belongings tightly and continuously shook my head “no” as I looked for Debby. I didn’t see the young woman in yellow anywhere; I stood alone in the crowd, lost.

I walked along the side of the bus, trying to continue my search for Debby and retrieve my two large suitcases all the while wondering, *How will I possibly carry all of this?* As the bus aide passed forward my second turquoise suitcase, I heard my name being called. I stood erect and turned to see a beautiful woman in a bright yellow shirt. I was too grateful to be found to wonder how she identified me. She later told me, “Only foreigners carry suitcases that large.” But in the moment, I did not care about the reason. I saw the yellow shirt, and saw rescue.

Debby scanned the taxi drivers, turning to select one who then grabbed my suitcases. He seamlessly placed the largest bag on his head and used his other available hand to roll my second suitcase to his car. I offered to help to no avail as he marched onward.

After Debby and the taxi driver negotiated a price, we got into the taxi and Debby explained that we were headed to Mr. Dao’s apartment, my long-anticipated summer home. Upon arrival, we managed to take the luggage across the sea of rocks to the apartment building and up the three flights of stairs to my new home. A man named Papa opened the door and introduced himself as a housemate of Mr. Dao. This stranger who eventually became like an older brother to me took my luggage and led me down the entrance hallway to my room.

Directly adjacent to my entry door was a second door in my room. I had never had a room with two main doors, so I was drawn to open the second. It led to the balcony where I felt that I could see most of Atonsu: its tin-roofed houses, its compound style of living. Underneath the view of hanging laundry, I could see a group of kids playing and dancing. I was uncertain if there was music playing or if I was too far away to hear it, but I was entranced as they moved their tiny bodies. I leaned on the banister, watching the kids move so deftly in a way that signified maturity despite their young age. *They were dancing already; what could I possibly teach them?*

When I was applying for the Sorensen Fellowship, I contemplated my purpose for teaching ballet in Ghana. After much introspection, I realized that I wanted to complement, not change, cultural ways of self-expression. I hold the opinion that our



"From my balcony," M. Dennis, June, 2017; A panoramic capture of Atonsu where I would watch town members and their children move about.

bodies can be viewed as a place of residence. One can change or alter their physical body to better suit who one is as an individual. However, in one's lifetime, a body is the single home that a person cannot move out of. Therefore, it is of importance to create and/or develop a sense of ownership of our bodies. I believe that while learning different forms of movement is not the only approach to accomplish this, nonetheless it is one of significance.

Dance has the potential to manifest bodily ownership by encouraging individuals to physically translate mental and emotional processes, effectively enhancing modes of self-expression. Whether taught by an instructor or self-instructed, many individuals who dance learn where and how to place their body to articulate a particular curvature, an elongated line, a certain isolated popping motion, with the

As I watched those kids dance, my purpose was not so easy to remember. I was so absorbed by what I was seeing and by my own thoughts that I forgot I was standing on the balcony.

understanding that each gesture signifies a different message. With time, novel steps become familiar, and with the growing insight of body placement, the dancer begins to understand how their body moves and the messages communicated in the absence of words.

The intersection of cross-cultural learning and dance movement, I believed, would make possible the ability to bend, fold, and turn in more ways than my prospective students previously knew. Ballet could challenge them to intentionally engage in the creative medium of movement where, from my experience, it is possible to engage in the most impactful ways of learning. It would be mistaken for me to believe that everyone I encountered would share the same opinions of the potential for dance to foster many socially relevant qualities. But my simplest hope was that the elements of ballet would add to my students' movement repertoire as a mechanism for self-expressive practices.

Yet in the moment as I watched those kids dance, my purpose was not so easy to remember. I was so absorbed by what I was seeing and by my own thoughts that I forgot I was standing on the balcony. Papa's emergence from the apartment surprised me as he came to keep me company. He began explaining the area and identifying the different buildings within it. A small distance away was a three-story, mint-green building.

"On the first floor, that's the Light for Children office. I'll walk you there tomorrow morning."

Pas De Deux: Mr. Dao and His Commitments

Light for Children (LFC) began 12 years ago in Kumasi, Ghana and was co-founded by Mike Owusu and Sebastian Lindstrom. My program advisor for the summer was Mr. Dao. The nonprofit organization prioritizes the development of orphans and vulnerable youth in many arenas that include physical health and advancement through education. In the Kumasi area, LFC works to improve literacy by asking volunteers to assist students with reading in the local libraries. They administer student workshops on sexual assault and child abuse. They facilitate health clinics in the Northern Region, where many patients find themselves long distances from care. And also in the Northern Region, LFC conducts outreach to local communities informing citizens of the importance of child immunizations such as Hepatitis B. It was their physical health work coupled with their recognition of different mediums for youth advocacy that enticed me to the organization. LFC's values matched my ideas of holistic well-being. I intended to intern in the organization's clinics at local schools and teach ballet.

Mr. Dao seemed to singlehandedly oversee each program of the organization from the small Light for Children office. The demands of the day-to-day logistical work consumed much of his time and attention. The position required him to occasionally travel to assist volunteers at the satellite locations of the clinics in the Northern Region. When he was in town, he would often go to the office around 8:00 am and return to the apartment around 9:30 pm. He owned two functioning cellphones. I initially thought one was for business and the other was for personal use, however time showed that both were used

for business affairs. I rarely saw him without one of the two phones attached to his ear – speaking in Twi, English, or a combination of both.

I remembered what it was like to be on the other end of the phone call before my arrival. Our emails and Skype calls gave me the impression that Mr. Dao was a man of few words and vague explanations. I would try to be conscious of the number of questions I would ask Mr. Dao, so as not to annoy my (then) future supervisor. But even the questions I did ask remained mostly unanswered at the end of our conversations. One week prior to my arrival in Ghana, my host family was not yet selected, I still needed clarity about the logistics of balancing the school health program with teaching ballet, and I had not received much indication about Mr. Dao's expectations for me as an intern. I convinced myself that our communication would improve once we were in each other's presence.

It was not long before I realized that Mr. Dao was simply a quick-paced, busy-minded person. He was the type who would lose his glasses because he forgot that he had placed them on his head; the kind of person that would search for a particular piece of

paper in a pile of many by hurriedly shuffling through them, skipping the details, as opposed to systematically searching through the stack. He was effectively a staff of one person for an organization that served a few hundred; of course a few tasks went awry. But unfortunately, I often felt that what was forgotten was me.

Whenever I was not teaching, I would situate myself in the square LFC office, where I periodically found myself without assigned tasks, so I established my own. Occasionally I would draft lesson plans that refined the goals for my students based on their progress; at other times, I transcribed Mr. Dao's meeting notes or funding reports to an electronic format, or assisted Debby with organizing and filing documents in the office. I knew very little about LFC's fundamental needs, so the lack of given responsibilities in the office was disappointing and occasionally infuriating. Nonetheless, those sentiments were difficult to sustain, because I knew Mr. Dao's circumstances and admired his commendable, tireless efforts to manage LFC and its many programs. In a mahogany, wooden frame hanging on the wall above Mr. Dao's desk was a quote. "All children smile in the same language." I felt that Mr. Dao continued to do this form of service

work, no matter how much time it took, because he made it his mission to diminish any forces that would interfere with a child's reason to smile.

Mr. Dao's time was occupied with projects, meetings with donors, and meetings with volunteers, yet he managed to cement valuable relationships with many adults and children in Atonsu. There were three neighborhood kids in particular who adored him. Most Saturdays and/or Sundays, they would routinely come to the apartment to play games, eat, and then repeat. Junior, Brubi, and Seth, ages 14, 10, and 9, were my first instructors of Twi, the local language, and popular dances. During my first weekend in the apartment, Mr. Dao was reading an article on one of three brown living room seats and allowed Junior to play music from his DVD player. As the music played, Mr. Dao hummed the songs while Seth and Brubi began dancing in one corner across the room. I asked for them to come teach me their moves but only Seth came forward. As Junior translated my words to him, I realized that Brubi did not speak English. Seth engaged his small muscles and began to push the two other brown seats away from the carpet to create our dance floor. This became our bonding place.

Seth was my predominant dance teacher, as he was apt to start dancing at any moment. He would shake his head in dismay at my attempts to imitate his movements. Brubi would laugh tirelessly, and when he would finally collect himself, he would make a remark to Seth and Junior in Twi. I always assumed Brubi to be a comedian, as Seth and Junior would sometimes refuse to translate and only respond to Brubi with heartfelt laughter.

Mr. Dao, who was occasionally present, encouraged the boys to ask me to teach them bits of ballet, but they never did.



"And hold..." M. Dennis, June, 2017; Students stand at their "barre" maintaining their passé balance until the end of the combination.

Beginning With the Plié: Cultivating Ballet as an Additional Tool for Self-Expression

Well-rested and in high spirits from my first weekend with the boys, I arose the morning of June 5 anxious but prepared to work. I would be teaching at five schools: Hybrid Montessori, Rojel Montessori, High Academy, Future Leaders, and the Careeken School. Thus, there would be five headmasters to meet – all on my first day! What a way to start an internship. I would enter each meeting unsure of the questions they would ask, how often I would work with the students, or even the age of the students I would be interacting with. Knowing that I had many meetings ahead, Mr. Dao considerately offered me advice about a breakfast that would give me endurance for the day. I accepted his guidance, and went into the small kitchen adjacent to my room to prepare a scrambled egg, half of a tenderly ripe avocado, a slice of fresh bread, the sweetest mango slices, and strawberry-flavored tea.

With an overly satisfied stomach, and a water bottle, journal, and ballet slippers in my backpack, I was off to the office to meet Debby.

For the 15-minute commute to the office, I walked along the edges of the road to avoid any unintentional interactions with honking drivers. I passed the fruit and food vendors, the tailor and hair parlors, the wandering roosters and hens, and the small convenience shops with many packaged snacks and bottled water. I walked alongside adults walking to work with purpose but, oftentimes, without haste. I passed men playing dam, a board game, to pass the time. Amidst the morning bustle were many children walking to school in their uniforms that differed in color and style to indicate their school of enrollment. As I was nearing the office on the main road, Debby noticed me and began to wave to an oncoming *tro tro*. We would be taking the ride to attend our first school, Hybrid Montessori.

Once settled in our seats, Debby tapped the conductor's shoulder, "Mate, mepakyew, Aputuogya junction," informing him where we would like to get off.¹ I spent the ride capturing mental pictures of everything we passed and listening to the local music that the driver was playing from the radio. I was elated and hoped that the mental pictures and music would remain keenly in my mind as a documentary of the first day of my internship. The *tro tro* passed through many other towns and eventually came to a stop in front of a long and narrow cement school building with a vast dirt field behind it. On the field seemed to be 200 students in their uniforms: mustard yellow polos, brown bottoms, and black shoes. Most of the students were focused on an ensuing fútbol match. Because we got off the *tro tro* in front of this school, I assumed that these athletic students were mine for teaching. In my soft-soled sandals, I followed Debby's steps as she walked past the unnamed school, around the playing students on the field, and towards another dirt path.



"Showtime," M. Dennis, July 2017; A student in orange stood close to the performers as they danced in front of their peers and parents.

We arrived at another, gated school that had a multicolored tiled courtyard and a playground set instead of a field for recess. The school was quaint and seemed to be built with ivory stones. Behind the gate sat a security guard, whom Debby greeted. "Mepakyew, we are working for an NGO, Light for Children, and would like to speak with the headmaster." And without any follow-up questions, the guard opened the gate and pointed in the direction of the office.

A tall man, at least in comparison to me, with a boisterous voice and inviting smile, introduced himself as Headmaster William of Hybrid Montessori. "Oh, I am so happy to see you have come. Please, come in." Debby and I reciprocated his warmth in our own introductions. He allowed us to sit in his dimly lit office that contrasted with his seemingly beaming personality. His

dark brown eyes were direct as he listened intently to my responses to his questions. His welcoming aura and genuine interest in who I was and the program LFC was offering were matched by those of the headmasters who followed. Like others I would meet, he asked about my African American identity and what it meant to be black in America. Considering my heritage, many were astonished when I relayed that this was my first time in Africa, let alone Ghana.

Some of the headmasters showed that they were somewhat familiar with ballet by asking, "Is this the dance that they do on their toes?" followed by reports of seeing pointe on the internet or television. Their openness extended to skepticism about the Light for Children initiative in ballet. They wanted to know why I came to Ghana to teach ballet. This I understood. When preparing for my internship during the spring semester, I struggled with the ethics of teaching a Western-derived art form in a country that has been subjected to the ravages of colonization and is in the midst of discovering and dismantling means of neocolonialism.

Although I have been raised in a Western society, I thought that there was something empowering about black people embodying an art that has historically been elitist and discriminatory. After a bit of deciding what would be the most important part of my answer to the headmasters in our first meeting, I explained the role that ballet played in my life and my belief in the power of any dance movement for self-development. After explaining and sometimes demonstrating ballet in the confines of their office space, I found that my explanations varied and developed with each meeting. By the fifth meeting, I was truly able to articulate my personal definition of ballet – and my pirouettes were crisper and sustained, my lines and extensions felt more elongated. I defined ballet as "a westernized

dance form that teaches a form of technique intertwined with grace and elegance; synchrony with different forms of music; cohesive group work; and adds versatility to nonverbal schemes of communication."

By the day's end, Debby and I established a schedule for the times and days that I would meet with each school. Monday through Thursday I would teach at two schools a day and three schools on Fridays. At the two Montessori schools, I would work with grade one students (seven to eight year olds) and at the remaining three schools, I would work with grade five and/or six. Each session would be at least an hour. Although the days would be hectic with all the traveling and dancing, I was enthused. I was finally going to teach ballet in Ghana.

* * *

Each of the five schools had an unroofed, concrete or tiled common area that served as a courtyard and, usually, a lunchroom. The classrooms surrounded the open space and contained thin bars that served as a physical barrier separating the area for recess from a productive learning space.

The headmasters designated either a classroom or the courtyard for my teaching purposes. This was nothing like the "orthodox" dance studios at home. At both Montessori schools, I taught outside on colorful tile floors. At the remaining three schools, the students stacked desks and removed the chairs, transforming the classroom with concrete floors into our dancing space. In place of a thin wooden barre – a tool used to support dancers when conducting their exercises – we used stacked desks and bare walls. The uniforms that the students wore for school were constricting to movement, as all girls wore skirts or dresses while the boys wore non-stretchable trousers, so they brought whatever "play" clothing they had

instead of the standard leotard and tights. I unfortunately was not able to obtain donated ballet slippers, but was relieved to discover that some students did not like to dance with even socks on their feet, opting to dance barefoot. Rethinking the standard tools demonstrated that for ballet, though it was usually accessorized with manufactured barres and store-bought attire, at its core, the only necessities were bodies and open space.

* * *

The grace of ballet was innate to some students as they manipulated their bodies into the differing positions I displayed, able to emulate me as though they had experienced these movements before. But even the students without natural balletic ability emitted an energy of exploration as they continued to arrive to classes aspiring to progress. We danced without ballet music, or music of any kind due to electricity shortages, lack of speakers, or a combination of both. To improvise, I counted aloud and verbalized the combinations as an accompaniment to their movements.

We began each class with jumping jacks, high-knee runs, plank positions, and push-ups to warm and engage our muscles. Starting with a fun, non-ballet activity seemed to ignite enthusiasm before they positioned themselves in the unnatural shapes of the barre exercises. After each exercise, they would balance in the assigned position as I counted down from 10. As I sculpted their bodies and corrected their limb placements, my students would laugh and jokingly complain, "Madam, please, no more." The sight was comical to me. While holding their positions, they freely vocalized every discomfort they were experiencing – everything I have never had the courage to tell my own ballet instructors. They were not afraid of this experience, or of me. Instead they were immersed in

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By June 15, I'd completed my second week of teaching and begun mastering my student's names as well as the *tro tro* system. Riding on the most common and affordable form of transportation was initially intimidating, but Debby was always with me. That day on our ride back to the office it occurred to me that I'd been observing an identical uniform. "You see those uniforms? Those there with the mustard yellow shirt, brown bottoms, and black shoes?" I said to Debby while pointing outside of the *tro tro* window. "Why does it reappear in certain towns as opposed to others?" She explained that the mustard yellow and brown uniforms were for students who could not afford to attend private school and therefore were students

of the public school. I recollected the uniforms of my students at the five schools: High Academy dressed their students in a blue print, the students of Rojel Montessori had colorful polo shirts with embroidery of the school's name, Hybrid Montessori had both polos and uniforms with white shirts and navy bottoms, Future Leader Academy students dressed in a mix of yellow and green uniforms, while the Careeken School, located in the neighboring town of Atonsu, wore a royal purple.

It was June 15, the end of my second week of teaching. *How did I not notice that my students were not the financially disadvantaged students I had anticipated working with?* The programs afforded by the Light for Children Organization are geared towards children of "vulnerable" backgrounds – or so their website said and my conversations with Mr. Dao confirmed. From these conversations, I envisioned my time in Kumasi interacting with students who did not have access to any art platform. When I discerned that I was working with private school students, I felt uninformed, blindsided, and perplexed. I could not decipher whether teaching the "vulnerable" demographic of children was more important than the work that I was currently invested in at the private schools. *Was the motivation behind my work complicated by my personal ideas of who I "should" be helping, and was that wrong?* There was not an immediate answer to that question. I continued the work that I'd started, with the students of private schools, confused and uncertain of my role.

* * *

My students were quick learners with keen minds. By the third week, they had learned the fundamental aspects of introductory Cecchetti ballet technique: the five positions, the importance and structure of barre combinations, *pliés, tendus, deggages, rond de jambes, développés, and grand battements.*

I made study guides that included detailed stick figures demonstrating technique, step-by-step, and gave oral quizzes that they routinely aced. With all of the progress, I was contemplating ways to begin a transition in my method of teaching. I wanted to facilitate exercises that allowed students to synthesize their own combinations of their own style of dancing and the knowledge they'd attained from ballet instruction.

A fusion of their style with ballet could reasonably enhance their physical storytelling skills. I wanted to inquire about their potentially forming this connection to ballet, and about the lives of each student beyond our impromptu dance studios. However, I needed to find a delicate way to ask my students my questions. I found myself continuously adjusting to cultural norms, trying to find the best phrasing, and deciding, based on observations, whether informal interviews would be permissible. When talking to students after classes, most seemed to be outgoing but did not speak openly about their home lives. Hence, I felt that interviews would be invading personal privacies and never conducted the informal interviews with kids.

There were students who never had interest in learning ballet and others who stated ballet was "too hard" and stopped attending class. But for the students who remained, was it not enough that they were showing up bravely, to transform their classroom for alternative forms of learning, to indulge in this "foreign" form of movement, to trust me, a foreigner, and to push through their oftentimes uncomfortable exercises? I remember when they began to call me "Aunty Michelle," an endearing name that my own niece and nephew never address me as. And whenever they addressed me during class, they were asking for corrections, affirmations and validations. "Aunty Michelle, did I do it?" "Aunty Michelle like this?" We were developing trusting bonds in our studio. And though the students

referred to their academic teachers as “Aunty” or “Uncle,” it was a privilege to be addressed as such and I wanted to honor the way that they allowed me to engage with their lives.

Corps de Ballet: Working Collectively through Choreography and Performance

I’d tailored specific tasks and goals for the students of each of the five schools, but I did not envision choreography joining the list. I was completing a class at the Careeken School when Headmaster Alberta asked to speak with me. I followed her to the fan-ventilated office and sat in the chair across her desk. “So the students will be having their graduation on July 14th. Will they have something ready to show their parents?” I masked my bemused face with an uncomfortable, unnatural smile. Most art forms take 10 years of rehearsal to master and ballet is no exception. *I knew she was not expecting perfection, but I had only been teaching for three weeks!* If I choreographed, within the following two weeks I would need to teach synchrony, counting with classical music, body-space awareness, transition steps, formations, in addition to fortifying the technique they had learned thus far. But more importantly, if I did the choreography, I knew that I could not facilitate any methods that would encourage student-led self-expression, even without the interviews. Time would not enable me to take on both tasks. Without seeing any other option, I responded, “It will have to be a short piece but I’ll definitely make sure they are ready.”

“From the top!” I yelled. It was July 13, one day before their performance. The students of the Careeken School, who were very chatty that day, organized themselves into their starting positions. It usually took them a while to settle down to rehearse the dance again, but on that day, we did not have a minute to waste. Tomorrow would be the performance for their graduation.

They would be dancing in front of friends and family members, as well as Headmaster Alberta, who had not seen any of the classes or choreography. My voice, hoarse from the continuous loud speaking, tried to hurry them, “Ready? 5, 6, 7, 8.” I began to sing my own rendition of Sir Edwin Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance” as there was no electricity. “Lights out.” I was hopeful that the electricity would be restored by tomorrow.

Where’s the record button on this thing? Found it. Is everyone in the shot? Perfect, all 14 of them are standing in the “V” shaped formation, just as we rehearsed. All bodies are finally still? Check. Standing in first position? Check. Hands on their hips? Check. Smiles on everyone’s face... Kojo! Please smile Kojo! Why am I so nervous for them? Inhale, exhale, they’re going to be fine.... “Okay, they are ready. You can play the music.” The DJ queued the music and as he did so, I prayed that they would move in unison. And they did, jumping in perfect coordination as a single moving body, at least for the first eight counts of the routine. The entirety of the dance was not as timed but they performed their best effort, correcting many of the mistakes I had told them about the day before. Once the dance concluded and they struck their final poses, the audience responded with light applause. I’m not sure if their parents enjoyed the minute-and-a-half piece, but I did. The biggest congratulations may have come from me.

Intermission: Costume Changes and Mental Processing

I remember the moment Debby explained the differences in the uniforms that mirror the nuances of socioeconomic status. And by teaching private school youth, I didn’t feel that I was assisting social change. I remember the meetings where Headmasters asked me to choreograph for their schools’ end of the semester ceremonies. But by teaching choreography,

I could not decipher whether teaching the “vulnerable” demographic of children was more important than the work that I was currently invested in at the private schools. *Was the motivation behind my work complicated by my personal ideas of who I “should” be helping, and was that wrong?*

I felt that I was passing off steps in place of tools for students to create their own artistic works. And I remember waiting weeks for Mr. Dao to inform me of my starting date with the health clinics. But by the end of June, that hadn’t come to fruition. Reflecting on my summer, I realized that I had mentally written the narrative of my internship before I’d even arrived in Ghana. And that was dangerous, because it led me to have difficulty recognizing the vitality of my work, the vitality of dance, as I was matching my reality to my expectations. I felt ashamed

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to admit that I was searching for validation of the importance of my internship, and I'd forgotten that the principle and strength of art learning was validation enough.

I arrived in Ghana intrigued about physical health and the influence of the arts on self-expression. With ballet instruction not going as I'd hoped, the idea of more direct impact was appealing, and it led me to conclude teaching ballet and begin volunteering at a local hospital for my last two weeks in Ghana. I knew this was a significant shift, but the clinical setting was my comfort area as I'd worked in clinics and hospitals at Brandeis and in my hometown. After submitting my resume, cover letter, an appeal for partnership with the hospital from Light for Children, and an informal interview with the head of Human Resources, Ms. Doloris, I was permitted to volunteer at the hospital. The decision to change the focus of my internship was distressing, but it couldn't surpass the difficulty of saying goodbye to my students. I had become quite attached to our interactions. Although my students weren't always easy to work with, they added cultural learning, humor, and unexpected happiness to my life; I hope I contributed in some way to theirs.

On the final day at Hybrid Montessori, we had a freestyle dance party to the tracks of Mr. Eazi. When it was time to depart, I was tackled with hugs by my students who were half my height. Walking away from that cherished moment caused me to revisit the questioning of my decision to leave, but I continued walking. The next day would be my first at the Hart Adventist Hospital. Ms. Doloris had not informed me of which department I could intern with, but she said we would figure out those logistics the following morning at 8:00 am.

Act Two

A Little Variation: Working at Hart Adventist Hospital

I arrived at Hart Adventist the next morning at 7:30 am. My excitement and nerves reminded me of my first day teaching ballet. I was starting anew. I intentionally arrived early to demonstrate my professionalism and interest. I entered the building and climbed the steep marble steps to the third

and highest floor of the hospital – to be greeted by a locked door into the human resources suite. After looking around I realized I was the only person on the floor. *Well, I am early, but where is Ms. Doloris? Maybe I could give myself a tour of the hospital.... Maybe not. At least not on the first day.*

I walked back down the steps to wait in the empty lobby area where the nurses were placing chairs for anticipated walk-in patients. I sat directly in front of the automated main door so as not to miss Ms. Doloris when she arrived. I pulled *Americanah* from my satchel to pass the time, occasionally looking up to observe the system of service. With not many patients around, there wasn't much to watch and although I loved Adichie's writing, I was ready to get the day started. The hospital didn't seem to be a large building but I could imagine the possibility of another entrance existing. *Maybe Ms. Doloris entered through another door, I thought to myself. Fifteen minutes later, I closed my*



"Medicine in Atonsu," M. Dennis, July 2017; The plain three-story building filled with warm health professionals; Hart Adventist.

book and trekked back up the steps to find the door, which remained locked, and the HR suite, still empty. I sulked back down the stairs and told myself to sit idly, but I couldn't. I watched as the nurses dressed in forest-green gowns walked back and forth conducting their morning rounds with the inpatients.

After 30 additional minutes, I stopped a woman wearing a white lab jacket. I knew she didn't know who I was, but her demeanor appeared friendly and I figured she was a member of the staff. "Excuse me, hi, do you know if Ms. Doloris, the woman who works in Human Resources, will be in today? I was supposed to meet her at eight this morning." Instead of answering my question, the woman sat next to me and asked where I was from and what I was doing at the hospital. I explained that I was an intern and shortly after, she swiftly grabbed my hand in a warm grasp and began to give me a tour. In that moment, I was assured that this woman would be my supervisor. I didn't see Ms. Doloris until three days later, but I was no longer searching.

Esther, my hospital supervisor, is a biomedical lab technician who allowed me to work with her. She was a sweet and caring person as she was a mother of two, nonetheless, she taught very quickly and expected excellence on the second attempt of any protocol. After she gave me a tour of the hospital, she proceeded to give a tour of the small lab. She defined the abbreviations the hospital used to label tests, followed by explanations of which tests the hospital conducted and which had to be sent to outside labs with a greater source of funding. On that first day, she gave a crash course for obtaining miniscule blood samples for malaria, random blood sugar (RBS), and hemoglobin tests; vein invasive blood samples that were often used for a variety of tests such as examining for STIs (Hepatitis B, Syphilis, and HIV), white blood cell counts, and identifying blood groups or sickle cells; and for conducting

microscopic urine analysis, urinalysis reagent strips, and *H. pylori* detection tests. I went home the first day and immediately began studying so that I could be prepared to perform any test she asked.

My shifts normalized to nine to 11 hours a day, and I was enjoying the busyness of the work. Hart Adventist tends to citizens of varying income in the surrounding community and makes an effort to make medical care affordable under the National Health Insurance Scheme, a commitment of the government to attaining universal healthcare. Under Esther's supervision, I would document the test(s) that the doctor requested for a patient. I would write the test names into a bound notebook and input the information into the data system. There needed to be both an electronic and manual copy for days the electricity would not be reliable.

When engaging with the patients, it was hard to make conversation as outside of the schools, many citizens preferred not to speak English. Over the course of my six weeks in the Kumasi area, I managed to learn common phrases of Asante Twi, however, my medical vocabulary was exceedingly limited. Esther eventually taught me how to give one set of instructions in Twi, "Please, go to the bathroom, urine into the cup, and bring it [the cup] back." Even when I would recite the sentence as instructed, I was sometimes met with laughter and puzzled faces at my attempt. Esther would repeat the sentence, with the correct accent, and then the patient understood.

Esther incorporated me into many of her daily responsibilities, whether it was tending to outpatients or inpatients. I felt like I was another employee of the hospital. But one day I was reminded that I was not. It was a Wednesday, the time was approaching noon, the morning influx of patients had finally slowed, and Esther was getting hungry as it

I'd been working in the laboratory for a week and I suppose she felt comfortable leaving me alone to run the lab if any patients came along. She reasoned that it was the middle of the week and the middle of the day thus it was less likely for a patient to come. "You'll be fine." Esther was normally right, but not that day.

was time for lunch. Normally, Esther would summon a student nurse and give them money to purchase her food. But that day, most student nurses were preoccupied. I'd been working in the laboratory for a week and I suppose she felt comfortable leaving me alone to run the lab if any patients came along. She reasoned that it was the middle of the week and the middle of the day thus it was less likely for a patient to come. "You'll be fine."

Esther was normally right, but not that day. A woman in her mid-30s entered the lab shortly after Esther left. She was an outpatient, present for her first antenatal care (ANC) visit which is a combination of screenings and diagnostic tests. I had seen Esther perform ANC tests on several occasions but never had I conducted this test alone. I made small conversation, but it was shortened due to language differences. I asked for her hospital identification card, as standard, and recorded her personal information slowly in an effort to delay the test until Esther returned. *Okay, maybe*

I am not sure how I temporarily forgot that the emotional needs of any individual are not always visible and that they are indiscriminate of person. I will never know the exact impact teaching ballet had or what elements my students found applicable to their lives, if any.



“Aunty Michelle, don’t go!” Anonymous, July, 2017; Held down by a few of my students on the final day of teaching.

Esther will be back within 10 minutes. Don’t be nervous. Just do the simple parts of the protocol. I decided to begin with obtaining the miniscule blood sample for the malaria and RBS. I wanted to avoid invasive parts of the tests; therefore, once that was completed and recorded, I recited my one sentence to instruct her to bring a urine sample. To my luck, she understood me and went to the washroom while I waited in the lab, hoping that Esther would return in time. There was a short wait for the woman, but Esther arrived in time to retrieve the intravenous blood sample. She laughed, saying I was capable of obtaining the sample but I knew I was not properly trained. *I’m not a phlebotomist!*

During my second and final week, I was walking to the hospital one morning and ran into one of my students from Future Leader Academy. “Aunty, Aunty! Where have you been? Will you be coming back?” I was surprised and ecstatic to see one of my students so close to the date of my return home. I gave her a hug and reminded her that I had completed teaching the previous week. There wasn’t much time to talk but we hugged, once more, and I asked her to say “hello” to her classmates for me.

Coda: Battling with Savior Complex

Every element of arts advocacy has purpose. Every. Element. Of. Arts. Advocacy. Has. Purpose. That’s a statement that I wish I ingrained in my mind before teaching ballet this past summer. *When your experiences are not what you expected, what do you do?*

Under the self-inflicted pressure to have an experience that positively affects others and abstains from the perpetuated “American goes to save Africa” narrative, I didn’t know how to answer that question. In my confusion, I lost faith in the mission of my internship and I doubted my work because I feared the invisibility of art’s impact. My role in arts advocacy this summer was experienced

through dance instruction, through teaching. And because I couldn’t see the immediate effects of dance instruction, I was uncertain if the ideology of dance had real, universal, power. Nonetheless, it’s interesting how distance via time and space has permitted me to gain a different perspective. As I reflect on my internship, the idea that every element of arts advocacy has purpose has transformed into a fact and is engraved in my heart.

If I had the opportunity to repeat my internship, there are a number of things I would do differently: bring my own portable speaker, and be more intentional in my preparation for learning Twi – but more importantly, I would tell myself not to be fearful of life’s surprises or my own mistakes. In my interview for the Sorensen Fellowship, one of my notes from an interviewer stated, “She could meet failure head-on and not be discouraged,” or something to that effect. I am not sure how I allowed myself to become detached from my core belief in the intrinsic freedom that dance brings. I am not sure how I temporarily forgot that the emotional needs of any individual are not always visible and that they are indiscriminate of person. I will never know the exact impact teaching ballet had or what elements my students found applicable to their lives, if any. But as Professor Chu has told me, that’s what teaching is. It’s a faith walk. Many times you don’t know what your students took away and must hope that your time together was, at the very least, useful.

The “failures,” and reflections on my experience, allow me to believe more now than I did before that dance is a performative art form that is not solely for its audience members. There’s a mental release that is embedded in the physicality of dance; that’s why so many cultures do it. Dance tells our stories when words aren’t enough.

Notes

1. *Mepakyew* [meh-pa-cho] means “please” in Twi.

A Plaza into Eternity, or One Step Closer To Self-Discovery

Zeynep Ece Esikara '19



I realize that my slow-paced, distracted walk becomes faster and faster as I align myself with the rush around me.

The plazas around downtown Boston make you feel small. As you walk down the financial district of this beautiful city, you might think how little you have an impact on this world, how small you are compared to these huge plazas, to the system, to the order, and how hard it is to make a difference. This might make you feel depressed. It made me feel depressed.

I walk among the buildings of downtown Boston. They are huge. I bend my neck back and raise my head to see the sky. Concrete, brick, and glass block the light and make it so that I can only see a little bit of the sky. Light, pale; pastel color varying from pink to grey and brick to glass makes you think they should look humble but they do not look humble at all. Instead, the enormous walls and indestructible glass windows look intimidatingly pretentious. I wonder if the light and pale color is supposed to keep them from being overwhelming. If that is the plan, it is not working for me.

The wide steps in front of each building look as if they are scaled and built for giants. I look at how oddly people climb down, climb up, and walk across these stairs. They are for sure not made for normal human legs. I wonder whether the people walking across these steps are aware of this irrational scale. But they seem unsurprised. In fact, everyone around me looks far from overawed or intimidated. It is only me, it seems. People of downtown Boston know where they're going and what they're doing in their summer business formal clothing, at this morning rush hour. They carry important looking briefcases. I wonder what is there inside those important looking briefcases. They must have important papers in them. I am wearing old blue sateen pants and a white blouse, and carrying my black purse that I bought yesterday. It looks uncomfortably new and uselessly small and matches with my vulnerable clothes. It is almost empty

other than having the confirmation letter of my two-month internship at Jewish Vocational Services.

It is not just the scale and the height of the buildings. Each time I look at the reflection in a glass window, more and more plazas – a plaza into eternity – stretch out ahead of me. I see my own reflection in the corner: a small woman facing a walk into infinite plazas with no clear end. Not being able to see around the buildings because of a plaza blocking the view across the next plaza contributes even more to how incompetent and insignificant I have been feeling since I stepped out of the subway this morning.

Squaring my shoulders, I join the human flood and walk down towards the financial district with my empty-feeling small black leather bag. As we all as one body pass by Winter Street, the main street leading to the

. . . the enormous walls and indestructible glass windows look intimidatingly pretentious. I wonder if the light and pale color is supposed to keep them from being overwhelming. If that is the plan, it is not working for me.

I am relieved to find JVS, but the gold walls and shining marble floor make me doubt myself again. I wonder how refugees feel when they enter 75-101.

financial district from the Park Street Station right in front of the Boston Common, some of us turn off at Caffè Nero for morning coffee, some of us decide to wait until the next Starbucks, and some of us start heading towards CVS for who knows what. We divide further into several streams after passing Downtown Crossing.

I check the maps on my phone for the millionth time, as I realize that it is time to leave the main body of rush-hour pedestrians to find my building. I find Federal Street, where JVS should be, and look for 75. I walk down. There is 75-101. What does that mean? I walk up but there is no just 75. I am bad with maps. And of course – I am late. Ten minutes late. I stand in front of building 75-101 and stare at all the floors, or should I say the stairway to heaven? I turn around. Oh there it is – the biggest bank I have ever seen, with huge glass windows. Wanting to do something rather than stand there, I enter 75-101. Inside, the walls are gold and the marble floor is shining. As I walk up to the information desk I see signs for 75, thinking how silly I was to look for 75 alone, and start walking in that direction. I am relieved to find JVS, but the gold walls and shining marble floor make me doubt myself again. I wonder how refugees feel when they enter 75-101.

Trying to find my way in the building, I see Devi, my supervisor for the summer, walking towards me, with a huge smile on her face. Later, Devi shows me around, introduces

me to her coworkers and other interns. I cannot help but be surprised that everyone treats me as if I am one of their coworkers rather than an intern who will be there for just two months. Almost all the employees are young, new college graduates and other people in their 20s. I do not see a single important looking briefcase around. I will be working in the Refugee Services Department, and Devi introduces me to everyone there and trains me for two hours. She explains via PowerPoint how JVS works in general, and then gives me the specific details about the Refugee Services Department.

“The Refugee Services Department provides direct employment services to local refugees, political asylees, Cuban and Haitian entrants who are the majority of their clients, and other work-authorized immigrants. Direct employment services include job search assistance, resume and interview preparation, vocational English language classes, cultural orientation, job placement and post-employment support.”

She talks about the differences between the backgrounds of clients and differences between the statuses refugee, asylee, parolee, and immigrant.

“A refugee is a person who cannot return to his or her country because of persecution or fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership to a particular social group, or political opinion. A refugee receives this status before entering the U.S. An asylee is a foreign-born resident who is not a United States citizen and who cannot return to his or her country because of persecution or a ‘well-founded fear’ of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, as determined by the Department of State or the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). An asylee receives asylum (also called “political asylum”) status after entering the United States. A parolee is an alien who has

been given permission to enter the United States under emergency conditions or when that alien’s entry is considered to be in public interest. Cuban/Haitian entrants are all nationals of Cuba and Haiti who applied for asylum, or are in exclusion or deportation proceedings but have not received a final order of deportation, as well as persons who are granted parole status or special status under the United States immigration laws for Cubans and Haitians. Cuban/Haitian entrants are eligible for federal benefits in the same way as refugees. Refugee Services Department also serves other immigrants with work authorization, including those who hold Permanent Residency (Green Cards), Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and marriage visas.”

I did not know the differences between the legal definitions of these words before Devi explained it to me. I would realize later how learning all these would contribute to my worldview, which in return would affect how I interacted with the clients at JVS.

After telling me about her department, Devi shows me where I will be working, a huge cubicle with a bunch of computers for the use of interns and volunteers. After that, I help with the setup of the celebration of World Refugee Day.

If I had known I would be welcomed this much, I would have slept more last night rather than staring into the dark, awake.

At the end of the day, as I leave the building, I see my reflection in the glass door. I do not look quite as small as before, I think.

The rest of my week goes slowly as I learn my job at JVS. My second and third days at work are not as instructive as the first one. It is more doing than sitting and hearing about things I will be doing. Amy, the volunteer coordinator, divides my time between the Refugee Services and Secure Jobs departments.

On Wednesdays and Thursdays, I am expected to work for the Secure Jobs Department. "The Secure Jobs Partnership is a regional collaboration aimed at demonstrating a replicable model for connecting homeless families to career ladder employment and for improving coordination of services among the local housing/homelessness and workforce development systems." Unfortunately, Secure Jobs doesn't have a lot of work for me right now, and so I do not have a lot to do. I help Aisha, my supervisor at Secure Jobs, find some jobs for a client who is interested in restaurant services, which involves providing assistance to customers and offering dining and table service. Other than that, I have a few small tasks such as creating an Excel spreadsheet for clients' appointments. I had hoped, especially after my orientation, to be doing less in the Secure Jobs Department. Later, I talk with Devi and Amy about it, and tell them that I would prefer to learn more about Refugee Services than Secure Jobs. They take care of the situation by reorganizing my schedule.

* * *

An office is a space used "for commercial, professional, or bureaucratic work," according to the *Oxford Dictionaries*. Everything has an order in the office. And I am learning to fit myself into that order since I have started working in JVS.

Although this is my third internship since I began college, I realize that I have not been taught before how to be professional. My first internship was in an office in a think tank in Istanbul, Turkey. I wore jeans to work, I left early when I did not have work to do, and I even chatted sometimes with my coworkers during work hours. Just like my clothes that I wore to work every day, everything was informal in that office. This year, before I started working at JVS, I had another internship in Hamburg, Germany. That was also far from requiring standard office protocols, since I was assisting an anthropologist in the field.

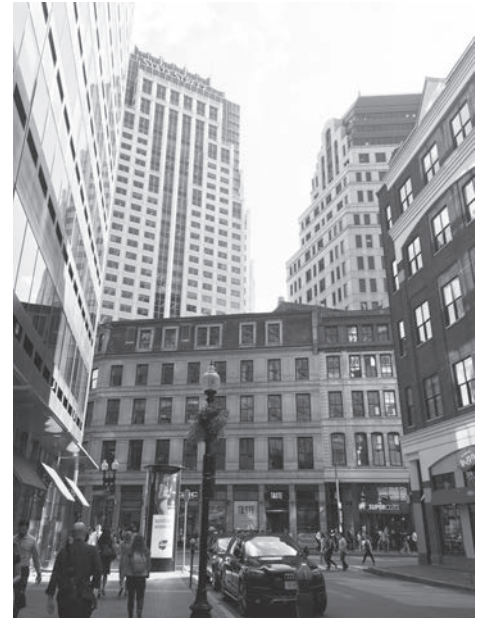
Now that I am one of the office workers going into a glass-fronted building every morning, I realize I have no clue of what it means to be professional. There are strict rules. There are deadlines. There are expectations.

I fail at a couple of tasks. Katherine, one of the career coaches, gives me a task to finish in two hours. I am supposed to organize two client files, print out missing forms and complete some intake forms based on the information provided in the files. At the same time, I am emailing Amy and Devi for a change in my schedule. I realize now that I did not know how to prioritize one task over the other so I fail to finish Katherine's task on time. And I do not inform her beforehand that I will not be able to finish it. Luckily there are no serious consequences. But I've learned some important lessons about doing three things at one time!

* * *

The next week I start working directly with a client from Haiti. As we look for jobs in cleaning services, I learn that she was a biology teacher with a master's degree back in Haiti. Until that moment, I was unaware that most of the new immigrants and refugees are starting from the bottom; highly qualified refugees find lower level jobs, and this is the way to make local integration faster and more efficient. This is a way for JVS to empower its clients from diverse backgrounds to build careers through fighting racism within the system itself by forming close bonds with employers and sponsors, and to prepare clients for their jobs through vocational English classes and/or job workshops and trainings. All this creates a good reputation for the agency, and thus for the clients and the skills and work ethic they offer.

As I work with the client on her job applications and interviews, I realize with surprise that being an international student



Plazas of Boston from Ece's eye.

does not really help foster any bond between us. I remember how I thought the clients would feel closer to me than to an American person since I am a foreigner here, just like them.

As we do more and more of the mock interviews to prepare her for the cleaning job interview she will have in the afternoon, I realize that while dreaming about the bond I would form with my clients I forgot to consider my privileges or the fact that

Now that I am one of the office workers going into a glass-fronted building every morning, I realize I have no clue of what it means to be professional. There are strict rules. There are deadlines. There are expectations.

One afternoon, however, a client makes me realize that professionalism is more than what I have learned so far. And my “business formal” clothes, the training I’ve had to speak in certain ways and with certain words, and all the knowledge I’ve acquired about my job does not make the personal go away.

coming here was my choice. *How simply I had been thinking*, I whisper to myself.

* * *

I am at my desk doing job applications as usual. Devi approaches the intern/volunteer area. She has a big smile on her face. After sitting down next to me, she tells me that the client I have been working with got a job yesterday at the company that we applied to together, and JVS exceeded the minimum quota of clients getting hired in order to get the amount of financial assistance they need from the government. My heart warms as she congratulates and thanks me. I think about all the “boring administrative work” I had to do. Helping someone to start a new page in their life by doing so little amazes me. This must be the source of the motivation that keeps people working here.

* * *

As days pass, I think I am becoming more and more professional. I observe my coworkers so I can change the way I dress. I expertly manage numerous tasks in

order, every day. I speak to the clients as a representative of JVS. The glass door makes me seem more like an office worker at JVS than just a summer intern. One afternoon, however, a client makes me realize that professionalism is more than what I have learned so far. And my “business formal” clothes, the training I’ve had to speak in certain ways and with certain words, and all the knowledge I’ve acquired about my job does not make the personal go away.

My task for the rest of the day is to help a woman from Bangladesh with her bank job application. As we are doing the application, we start to chat. She asks where I come from. When she hears about my home, Turkey, she asks if I am Muslim or not. Considering her age, about 50 years old, and her headscarf, I tell her that I am a Muslim. In reality, I am culturally but not religiously Muslim, neither practicing Islam nor actually believing in it. Because of experiences back home, I know where this kind of conversation can go, where I am being judged for not practicing. But I decide that a discussion about that would be inappropriate. I am her JVS coach assistant; she is my client. So I keep it simple and short and try to move on.

As the conversation goes on I see the lady looking at my tattoo very carefully since usually Muslim women do not have tattoos. Then she goes on: “Do you celebrate Eid?” I know this is a question meant to find out if I am a practicing Muslim or not, although Eid is celebrated among most communities regardless of whether those communities

practice other traditions as well. At the same time, I am concerned about how having this conversation is breaking down the professionalism of our interaction. But I do not know what to do or how to stop the conversation. There is no way for me to tell her, “None of your business.” So, I uncomfortably go on: “Sometimes.” Then comes the question “Why?” And I stutter. Then comes another question: “Do you go to a mosque?” I shake my head no. And it goes on for another 20 minutes. I listen to this lady talk about why I should go to the mosque and why I should practice the Muslim tradition. I try to be respectful and preserve the client-employee relationship as much as I can. This was not in the training, I think.

As a victim of political Islam back at home, however, it is hard for me to stay calm and do my job. I am trying to find something to say that will emphasize the professional relationship between me, the JVS employee, and her, the client. But everything is so



At the volunteer/intern area, working on organizing the case files. Case files have information for clients. (Intake forms, photocopies of their ids, resumes, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance referral forms, etc.)

personal right now. I am judged for what I believe in or don't believe in, even though I did not have any intention to start a discussion on religion, and my religion or lack of it has nothing to do with helping her get a job.

I do not know how to separate my job from my personal experience. I feel desperate when I think about being a minority at home. I feel desperate when I think about being here but not being able to express what I am thinking while still being professional. I also think about how much this woman has suffered from discrimination because of her religion. Everything starts to get mingled. I cannot get out of this situation in my mind.

The client leaves, and my mind is full of questions. How can I act professionally when my personal experience, identity, and beliefs become part of a conversation with a client? How can I keep calm when I belong to a minority, and someone who has the same rhetoric as the majority but from a different country and context questions me?

I certainly acted professionally in avoiding

Everything is so personal right now. I am judged for what I believe in or don't believe in, even though I did not have any intention to start a discussion on religion, and my religion or lack of it has nothing to do with helping her get a job. I do not know how to separate my job from my personal experience.

the argument I had the impulse to have. But what I wanted was to make the client understand that it is not professional to ask so many personal questions or try to persuade me to believe in what she believes in. I stuttered. I got annoyed. I got sad. Professionalism kept me from saying what I feel I needed to say. Lack of professionalism, on the other hand, kept me from putting more distance between me and the client. So, is professionalism something that can protect me or something that keeps me quiet in a way that hurts me? Or both? Maybe neither.

* * *

My job at JVS showed me that my two years in the United States had given me more knowledge about navigating the infinite plazas of Boston than I would have imagined before I started the job. There is a day on which I help a woman to get to the office of Child Care Choices of Boston (CCCB) to re-apply for childcare for her six-year-old son. It takes less time than I anticipated to walk from the financial district to Chinatown. I am perplexed that I am not lost. We find the office easily and submit the required forms, hoping to get the aid soon.

* * *

When I look back at my time at JVS, one of the things that stands out is how different my days were depending on what part of the mission I was working on. Sometimes I was taking clients to doctor appointments, childcare meetings, and interviews, which was a lot of fun. Sometimes I would spend five hours doing file sorting or organizing, which got boring

Is professionalism something that can protect me or something that keeps me quiet in a way that hurts me? Or both? Maybe neither.



JVS is a place of acceptance. Respect and acceptance are what I have observed here. Clients, volunteers, employees, and employers, regardless of their background, get help from and work with each other. I believe that I fit into this picture.

over time. Now I understand that both of these kinds of things are part of making the mission of JVS happen. Looking ahead, I am thinking about what it might mean to find a good balance between these two parts, which I do fit into, differently. I wonder where I will go next to keep learning and discovering more about myself and the world around me.

Changing Perceptions of Mental Health: Reflections on my Community

Mrudula Gadgil '18



New City, New Community

I applied to work at the Pro Bono Counseling Project of CHAI, a program devoted to providing affordable mental healthcare to South Asian clients, with a clear mission. Eight months earlier, I had started going to the Brandeis Counseling Center. It was a decision that I had agonized over for two semesters, and finally determined was in my best interest. At my first few sessions, I was tense; I would walk into Mailman Building hoping that nobody would see me, sit straight-backed and cross-legged on the plush therapy couch, and walk away from the building as nonchalantly as possible. The BCC was a compartment sealed off from other parts of my life. During the week I was South Asian Student Association treasurer, Bhangra dance team captain, and a community advisor, but every Thursday from 10 to 11 am I was a patient.

I firmly believe that mental health is an integral part of well-being and that we should not be ashamed of it, but when it came to my own, I was ashamed. I feared the judgment of my peers, my boyfriend, my family, and myself. Over time, the surrealism of going to the BCC wore off, and I began to incorporate my visits into the visible equation of my life. During the week I was a student, a friend and a mentor, and on Thursdays from 10 to 11 am I was a girl proactively tending to her mental wellness. After one particularly productive session, I recall stepping out of the building and taking a deep breath, feeling my muscles and mind relax. "I wish everyone could feel what I am feeling right now," I thought.

My fellowship began with a drive from Long Island, where my family had been conducting its annual visit to my cousins' house, to the unfamiliar city of Baltimore. I departed from my cousins' house with my parents (or Aai and Baba, as I refer to them in our native language Marathi) after a game of Settlers of Catan we squeezed into the morning. Five hours and a road trip McDonald's meal later, we stepped out onto the driveway, hot from the Baltimore sun. Brick and stone Tudors bordered the cul-de-sac and Elise, my new housemate, sat rocking in a chair on the broad porch of her house. At age 74, Elise is the former editor of the Johns Hopkins magazine and an activist for environmental protection. As we entered the house, she told us of her aversion to paper towels, Ziploc bags, and other paper

and plastic products. The living room was full of old books, newspaper clippings and other textual goodness, and we were soon to find the other rooms in similar condition. We began moving my bags to the guest room upstairs, and Aai recited her list of suggestions about regular cooking, safe driving, and calling every night.

"Yes, yes, I'll send you pictures of my food everyday so you know I'm not starving," I replied, attempting to deal with the knot in my own stomach. I felt some relief when we entered the guest room, which was decadently furnished with a queen bed, rocking chair, and lacy curtains. While Baba and I admired the room, Aai was busy counting and recounting every bag and box we had moved in.

Once we finished unpacking, we left to meet Swaran, my mentor in Baltimore, for dinner. I knew that Swaran was a licensed social worker who has worked in mental healthcare and public health for over 50 years, and was eager to see her in person. On the way to the restaurant, an Indian place just a two-minute walk from the house, Swaran called me to say she was running late. After 15 suspenseful minutes at our table, Swaran walked in with a smile that belied her old age. She was dressed in a white salwar kameez and greeted the waiter as though she had known him for years. As she came over to our table, Swaran pulled me into a hug and expressed her joy at finally meeting me. She was soft and warm and I relaxed into the embrace.

I tried to imagine myself being asked about my mental health. I imagined the question could feel invasive and presumptuous, as though there were something about me that indicated my mental health was subpar. But if mental health concerns are not something to be ashamed about, shouldn't the question feel as natural as asking someone about their physical health?

As we dug into the naan and curry, she reemphasized that I should call her Swaran, and not Mrs. Dhawan. We learned that Swaran had immigrated to the United States from Kashmir, a northern Indian state in the Himalayas, 50 years ago with her young daughter. She had settled in Baltimore and began a career in social work, and over time became an influential voice in the field of mental healthcare. She fielded Aai's numerous questions about the city and my internship, and ended with a statement that abolished Aai's worries on the spot: "I will look after Mrudula like she is family. While she's here, she is my granddaughter."

A Writing Lesson

Pro Bono is in the business of

Pro Bono gives people free counseling

The Pro Bono Counseling Project helps underinsured residents

The Pro Bono Counseling Project provides eligible Maryland residents access to free mental healthcare.

I watched as the Pro Bono Counseling Project's mission statement took form under my pencil and Barbara's watchful eye. Well, technically Barbara was in the office next door, presumably writing a grant proposal, taking phone calls and scheduling interviews for her successor all at once. My supervisor and Pro Bono's executive director was, to say the very least, a busy woman. Despite the physical distance and wall between us, I felt the self-consciousness produced by the presence of a new supervisor. Barbara had already edited – twice! – a short introductory email I planned to send to a potential partner organization. The main hitch was in my statement of Pro Bono's mission.

In my office, I mulled over my revisions and dreaded the prospect of bringing a paper copy to Barbara's office for another round of ruthless editing. The email was just one item on a list of basic tasks I had been given for the week. Make a new logo for CHAI, reach out to past partners, update CHAI's webpage, etc. Deciding to take things one step at a time and focusing on the task at hand, I composed myself and headed back into the lion's den. Barbara took her red pen to the paper, crossing out words and underlining others strategically.

Why is she being so picky? I thought.

"I'll tell you why I'm being so selective about this," Barbara began, as though I had spoken aloud. "We have to represent Pro Bono's services correctly so you have to be careful with your words. For example, you can't say we provide free therapy, because what we actually provide is access to that service. And when you write to potential community partners, stay away from the term 'mental health.'"

"How about holistic health?" I proposed.

"Hmmm... holistic health is not exactly mental health. We need community partners to understand the goal of our work without

explicitly stating that it deals with mental health," she replied.

It seemed to me that Barbara was looking for a code word, something that community members could interpret as "mental health" and use to talk about it discreetly. Could it be that "mental health" held enough negative verbal power to necessitate the use of code words? I reflected on something my sociology professor had said about the term "mental health" in my health and sociology class. She claimed that the question "How is your mental health?" is frequently interpreted as "Are you feeling bad?" The term "mental health" is so closely linked with mental illness that it is difficult to use one without implying the other.

I tried to imagine myself being asked about my mental health. I imagined the question could feel invasive and presumptuous, as though there were something about me that indicated my mental health was subpar. But if mental health concerns are not something to be ashamed about, shouldn't the question feel as natural as asking someone about their physical health? To be honest, the multitude of email revisions had left me in a state of semantic satiation with regard to



Meeting Razia Kosi, one of CHAI's original founders.

the phrase “mental health.” I had repeated it so many times it had temporarily lost its meaning. I decided to quit my ruminating and pick it up another day.

CHAI’s Roots

The following day, Swaran and I met with Razia Kosi, one of the co-founders of CHAI, which was an independent organization before it merged with Pro Bono. CHAI originally stood for “Counselors Helping Asian Indians” but the phrase was changed to “Counselors Helping South Asians” to be more inclusive. Razia’s office housed the remnants of the old CHAI; dozens of pamphlets and materials translated into South Asian languages filled up the closet, while boxes of books were stacked to the ceiling in the adjacent corner. There were materials in Hindi, Punjabi, Telugu and Urdu, but even that represented only a tiny fraction of the existing South Asian languages. On the other side of the room were Razia’s polished wooden desk and two computers, allowing her maximum efficiency in completing her PhD thesis. I perched on the edge of a couch clutching my Ethics Center notebook and fixing my dupatta. I had dressed in a casual but very Indian dress, anticipating that Razia would do the same, but I was wrong.

“So tell me what you want to know,” Razia said, settling her tall, Western-dressed frame into an office chair.

“OK, what inspired you to create CHAI?” I asked.

“Years ago, a friend and I were discussing the treatment of mental health within the South Asian community, and the stigma that keeps it fixed as a taboo subject. We realized that there weren’t any organizations dedicated to tackling that problem, so we founded CHAI,” she responded.

“And have you run into obstacles since then?” I asked.

“Of course, it’s difficult to get community members to participate in our activities and workshops if we present ourselves as a mental health-related organization. And of course, we could always use more money to keep things running,” she laughed.

I was confused about the particulars of Razia’s response to my last question, and in retrospect, I wish that I had asked her to elaborate. Why exactly was it difficult to get community members to participate in workshops? Were they uninterested in the topic of mental health, or interested but afraid to take part in the workshops? If it was the latter, what exactly did they fear? Instead of asking her to clarify, I moved on to my next question.

“Why did CHAI decide to merge with the Pro Bono Counseling Project?”

“After 15 years of being an independent organization it became difficult to sustain our work, especially with staff members moving into new phases of life. We realized that Pro Bono has a very similar mission to ours, and that joining a larger nonprofit could help us reach more people and provide more services. Pro Bono is not specifically geared towards South Asians, but they share our vision of a stigma-free society in which people can access mental healthcare,” Razia replied.

“What kinds of services does CHAI provide, as an independent organization and now as a special program of Pro Bono?” I continued.

“We’ve always conducted workshops and presentations about mental health, illness, care and related topics. The presentations are culturally competent and geared towards a South Asian audience. We also provided referrals to mental healthcare providers and as a part of Pro Bono, we can actually

Why exactly was it difficult to get community members to participate in workshops? Were they uninterested in the topic of mental health, or interested but afraid to take part in the workshops? If it was the latter, what exactly did they fear?

connect people to therapists on the spot. Ideally, we’d like to be able to connect them to South Asian therapists,” Razia responded.

I wrapped up my interview questions, quickly jotting down notes to ensure I could articulate well CHAI’s mission and avoid Barbara’s red pen in future writing assignments. I went home that night and reflected on what stigma looked and felt like to the average South Asian American person. From my personal experiences with family friends and relatives of my parents’ generation, mental health seemed to be a topic that is acknowledged as valid, but inappropriate to bring up in polite conversation. Accounts of mental health concerns are best kept within the family, either out of loyalty to family or fear of shame, or both. By contrast, South Asian Americans of my generation (like my friends and cousins) are far more vocal about mental health concerns, at least in the company of their peers.

My personal experience with addressing mental health concerns had been relatively easy and ultimately hugely cathartic. Before going to Baltimore, when I finally confided in my parents that I had been attending BCC sessions and explained the reasons why, I



My mentor Swaran Dhawan enjoying Thai food – our favorite!

was met with unconditional understanding and love. Baba listened carefully while I explained the situation. His views on mental health have always been on the progressive side; he believes in the importance of discussing mental health with family and obtaining mental healthcare for those in need. He held me in his arms and told me that I should never hesitate to talk to him because his family is the most important thing in his life. Aai was equally supportive, although I know her views on mental health are closer to those of the South Asian cultural norm I've observed. It seemed that in that moment, the bond of family overcame whatever stigma around mental health there may have been in our household. Even my sister, with her big-sisterly judgmental streak, had only comfort and understanding to offer.

Honestly, I think that most of the shame I felt came from myself. The hardest part of my journey was taking the first step to go

to the BCC, something that I was stopping myself from doing out of fear. I knew that I was privileged to have a supportive family whose views on mental health aligned with my own, and that other South Asian Americans may not be so lucky. Still, I wondered how much of the stigma other South Asians feel is also self-generated.

Dinner with Swaran

A few days later, Swaran invited me to her home for dinner. Swaran's house was decorated with traditional Indian paintings and ceramic vases full of dried flowers. My stomach growled in anticipation as we carried plates of salmon, Indian peas and potato curry, soybean salad, and *parathas* (Indian flatbread) to the table. The mix of ethnic influences on my plate reflected the eclectic mix of décor around the house.

I returned to my contemplation from a few nights before, when I had attempted to categorize attitudes on mental health by generation. I had come to the conclusion that individuals of my parents' or grandparents' generations would treat mental health as a taboo topic, but here I was in the company of a glaring contradiction to that conclusion. Swaran, a woman of my grandparents' generation, born and raised in South Asia, had committed herself to a lifetime of advocating for the recognition and destigmatization of mental health. She had spoken to countless people openly and honestly about it, all while maintaining the reputation of being an influential and respected member of the South Asian community. Perhaps attitudes about mental health were not so easily categorized by age.

"Swaran, how is it that you have such a progressive view on mental health? Given that you were raised in an older time in India?" I questioned.

"I've always been in social work, and through my work I saw how much people suffer

from the stigma around mental health. It's important to me to break down that stigma," she replied.

"Well what exactly drives that stigma? Why is it so prevalent in South Asian culture?" I probed.

"Many South Asians have a stereotypical picture of the mentally ill in their minds – that of crazy people who cannot function in society. Stigma also gets perpetuated through family relationships. There is a lot of loyalty within and between families, and keeping mental illness quiet is a way of preserving family dynamics. Not everyone wants to keep it quiet, but it is hard for them to speak out," she explained.

I asked Swaran to elaborate, curious about the interplay of mental health and family dynamics. I recalled how Swaran had proclaimed me her granddaughter during dinner with my parents, and how consistently she had backed up that promise with her actions. Swaran valued family, and when she explained the role of family dynamics in the perpetuation of mental health stigma, it did not sound negative. Swaran did not scorn South Asian people for perpetuating stigma, but recognized that it comes from a positive place – the love of family. Many South Asians do not keep mental health concerns under wraps out of malice, but because they think it's the best thing to do for their family.

"And about the South Asian therapists, is it true that South Asian people always need or want a therapist of their own culture?" I persisted with my endless questions.

"No, that's not always the case. Some would actually prefer a non-South Asian therapist, because they fear that a South Asian therapist could hold non-progressive views on mental health or be associated with their social circle," Swaran replied.

Our conversation was raising more questions for me by the minute. I thought about Swaran's last response; it reminded me of a situation that a relative had experienced the previous year. Her primary care physician was South Asian, and while she performed the duties of a PCP well, my relative had been uncomfortable discussing issues of sexual health with her. She worried that her PCP might hold conservative views on sexuality due to her ethnicity, or reveal confidential information to family members who saw the same doctor, and switched to a non-South Asian PCP. Could a similar situation arise in a therapist-patient relationship, allowing preconceived notions of culturally formed viewpoints to interfere with the therapeutic process? I would need to consider this when recruiting new therapists for the CHAI program.

And what of my role as a representative of CHAI? Did my ethnicity afford me credibility in this work, or detract from it? Would community members appreciate connecting with someone of their own culture, or be put off by possible involvement in their social circles? In Swaran's case, her ethnicity was an advantage. She regularly attended theater performances, community dinners and philanthropic events, forming social connections with community members through their shared culture. Many of CHAI's partners were acquired through the trust and love she established with community members.

Small Steps

After getting more acquainted with CHAI, I focused my efforts on developing CHAI's network. The plan was to reach South Asian community members by partnering with places of worship that boast high attendance for prayer and social services. I shortlisted a few Hindu temples, mosques, and gurdwaras (Sikh temples), and started making calls. Seven unanswered phone calls in, I switched to email and established a solid 1/6 response

rate. I had been told that temples and mosques typically do not have full-time staff to take calls and check emails – a fact that I used to console myself. I reported the progress to Barbara, worried that it was not enough. To my surprise Barbara was excited by the progress, claiming that every response "is a start."

Pleased with Barbara's reaction, I headed to the break room and noticed something I had missed before – a spread of *Shooter* magazines on the coffee table. Confounded by the presence of a magazine promoting gun use, I asked a fellow intern to explain the situation. She replied that Barbara had been subscribing to *Shooter* magazine for a year in the hopes that the editor would publish an advertisement for Pro Bono. In case someone in need of mental healthcare was reading *Shooter* with malicious intent, they might then be inclined to contact Pro Bono instead of the gun sellers listed in the magazine. So far, she hadn't had any luck.

And what of my role as a representative of CHAI? Did my ethnicity afford me credibility in this work, or detract from it? Would community members appreciate connecting with someone of their own culture, or be put off by possible involvement in their social circles?



In my office, surrounded by boxes of CHAI's marketing materials and the new Pro Bono poster.

Baba once gave me a piece of advice that I try to live by: take every opportunity presented to you.

This new information gave me some perspective on Barbara's statement that "it's a start." Of course, convincing a magazine editor to publish an advertisement and establishing connections with community groups are two different scenarios, but a similar lesson can be learned from both. In community outreach, it is necessary to be patient and tenacious in your efforts. In the case of destigmatizing mental health within an ethnic community, it is crucial to establish personal connections, and those connections aren't formed overnight. Swaran has spent 50 years working in Baltimore and playing the long game of making CHAI a familiar name. As she once



Drawing a henna design for Barbara – the whole office took part in the fun after attending a Henna Night event.

told me, we did not want the community to view us as an unfamiliar organization trying to force its agenda upon others.

An Unexpected Conversation

Baba once gave me a piece of advice that I try to live by: take every opportunity presented to you. So I decided to join my housemate Elise at a meeting of the Citizen's Climate Lobby, a political action organization that lobbies for environmental protection policies. Elise has been an active member of the organization ever since she had a nightmare about a future in which her grandchildren would be displaced from their home because of environmental crises.

Elise and I pulled up to a sizable colonial house with an SUV in the driveway and manicured bushes along the patio. Betty*, the host, greeted us and we followed her to the kitchen, where a spread of refreshments sat atop a granite island. My skin reacted with goosebumps to the change in temperature; outside it was 96 degrees, but a hard-working air conditioning system maintained a cool 68-degree atmosphere inside the house. After pouring herself a glass of pink lemonade, Betty asked me what brought me to Baltimore. It was small talk, and I knew how this type of conversation typically went. I would give my spiel about Pro Bono and the Sorensen Fellowship, and the other person would respond with some variation of "I don't know much about mental health myself but that sounds like important work." This time, the conversation went in a different direction.

"I'm interning at the Pro Bono Counseling Project this summer to provide access to free mental healthcare to those in need," I said.

"That's wonderful, my son is schizophrenic and has been in the system for a few years. I'm glad to hear that there's an organization doing this work," Betty responded.

I hoped that my shock did not register too vividly on my face as I processed Betty's words. Betty had given me an honest and intimate peek into her family's life for which I had been unprepared. It was an image incongruent with the one I had conjured up based on her beautifully decorated and spotless house. I was shocked; subconsciously, I must have assumed that a family living in such a space could not possibly be affected by mental illness. I was ashamed by this reaction; did I really believe that mental illness develops and exists only in undignified, chaotic places? That a family living in this home could not be affected by an "unbecoming" affliction? My reaction to Betty's words revealed my own bias and self-propagated stigma.

I tried to formulate a response that struck a balance between empathy and sympathy, interest and nonchalance. I wanted to express that I could appreciate the difficulty of living with a mental illness, but not that I pitied her or her son. I wanted to show interest in the piece of her life that she had shared with me, but not seem shocked by it. I admired her honesty and ability to share this information without a hint of shame or hesitation. I admired her son for presumably taking the necessary steps to live with his condition. I stumbled and ultimately only managed a hesitant "I'm sorry to hear that."

Rejection

The following week was rife with ups and downs that made me think more deeply about the implications of our work. Our request to conduct a workshop for the girls' youth group at the Muslim Community Center was approved. On the other hand, our request to do a mental health and parenting workshop with a local Hindu temple was swiftly denied. Our contact at the temple claimed that the topic of mental health would alienate the parents at the temple. Frustrated with his narrow-mindedness, I brought the issue to Swaran.

“Our goal is to create acknowledgement and acceptance of mental health concerns in the community, and reduce the stigma around them. But we can interact with community members only as much as they permit us to,” she told me in response.

“Should I have called him back and asked again? I’m sure I can come up with a more convincing argument for the workshop than I did before,” I persisted.

“There’s no need for that, because we cannot force acceptance,” she returned.

I was tempted to say that unless we encourage people to get out of their comfort zones we cannot make progress, but then I considered an alternative. Like other proponents of mental health, I have always believed that talking about mental health is the ultimate solution to stigma. But is that really the case for everyone? I recalled a conversation I had with my friend Emily* last year, when she confessed to me that she had been struggling with anxiety. Upon hearing her story, I offered to accompany her to the BCC to make an appointment, but she refused. When I asked why she did not want to use the BCC’s services, she told me that in her culture, talking about mental and emotional concerns is unusual, and that talking about her problems would just make them worse. At the time, I assumed she was just scared. Of course the idea of discussing her anxiety was frightening; I had been plagued by the same fear at my first few appointments, but look how far I’d come! I’d made leaps and bounds in solving my problems, and believed it was only a matter of time and acceptance before the BCC would do the same for her.

But what if that wasn’t the case? Had I been narrow-minded and presumptuous in believing that what works for me will work for others? Perhaps the temple’s coordinator was not being narrow-minded,

but had a different method for tackling the stigma around mental health. Then again, who was he to decide for the temple members that the workshop would be poorly received? I thought of all the temple members that he had answered for. If mental health is kept hush-hush within the temple’s culture, how could the organizer know his members are uninterested or offended by the topic? Emily at least had the chance to turn down the talking approach to mental health, but the temple members never had that chance. If they did, what would they have chosen? I kept these questions in mind as I prepared for our first workshop at the Muslim Community Center.

A Meeting with a Leader

In order to plan the workshop, Swaran and I met with Najma, the grandmotherly youth group coordinator at the Muslim Community Center. We had met Najma for the first time at a henna event at the mosque, where we had our hands painted with intricate designs and Swaran had struck up conversations with every woman in the room. She had greeted Najma with her customary hug, and within minutes had arranged for this meeting.

“So, what do you propose the topic of this workshop should be?” asked Najma.

Mental health, of course – I thought.

“We are hoping to instill the importance of mental wellness, and could do so indirectly through a workshop about family dynamics and friendships,” suggested Swaran.

“That’s a great idea, or perhaps a workshop on stress management? I know there are people at the mosque struggling with mental health concerns but they will be more willing to attend if the topic is something they feel comfortable talking about, like stress,” Najma added.

By the end of the meeting, we decided on “Friendships and Family Dynamics” as the topic for our girls’ youth group workshop. We hoped to incorporate mental health topics into the more “palatable” theme of relationships. Since my theory that categorizing attitudes about mental health based on generational differences had been debunked, I had no idea what to expect from the girls.

Wow – it was fortunate that Swaran had spoken before I did. It seemed that Barbara, Swaran, and Najma were utilizing code words to slowly lead people to the real issue. We narrowed down the potential topics and drafted an agenda for the workshop. Najma stood in complete contrast to the temple coordinator who had rejected the proposal for a workshop. She was not only cognizant of the need for mental health training, but was actively working to give her members the option of learning about it. I admired the way she tracked her members’ needs and made an effort to bring them educational programs. By the end of the meeting, we decided on “Friendships and Family Dynamics” as the topic for our girls’ youth group workshop. We hoped to incorporate mental health topics into the more “palatable” theme of relationships. Since my theory that categorizing attitudes about mental health based on generational

differences had been debunked, I had no idea what to expect from the girls.

Mental Health and Relationships: a Workshop

We gathered around the rickety folding table as I gathered my thoughts. Around me were 15 girls and women between the ages of 12 and 26, draped in hijabs of every color, curiously and patiently waiting for the workshop to start. Beside me sat Swaran, 83 years old and unstoppable, reclining in her chair and gazing at the attendees through softly wrinkled eyes. I stood up, dropped my pen, picked it up, and began.

“Hi everyone! Thanks for coming to our workshop, we’re so excited to have you,” I said in my best community advisor voice.

I ran through the beginning introductions: my university, my major, my reason for being in Baltimore, Swaran’s work experience, and the Pro Bono Counseling Project’s carefully crafted mission statement.

“The Pro Bono Counseling Project provides eligible Maryland residents access to free mental healthcare.”

I glossed over the sentence, moving swiftly onto our first activity before the girls had a chance to process the last two words. We played the icebreaker Color Questions, in which participants assign each other colors that represent different lists of questions. Once assigned a color, each player answers one question from the corresponding list. The game began:

“iPhone or Android?” I read from the blue list.

“iPhone, do you even really have a phone if it’s Android?” the girl to my left quipped. A wave of laughter passed through the group and I grabbed the next list.

“When do you feel most at home?”

“When I’m here – at the mosque with my friends,” the next girl responded. This time the response elicited sentimental agreements, and I smiled at the success of the game. While I grew more comfortable at the table, Swaran laughed and joked with the girls as though she had been 17 yesterday.

We then dove into our topic for the day: friendships and family relationships. The girls were a talkative bunch, and participated fully in our discussion of reconciling family expectations with societal norms, maintaining healthy friendships, and balancing Eastern and Western cultural values. Once the group was fully engaged in the conversation, I tried to work in the topic of mental health. However, Swaran seemed at ease with letting the conversation direct itself. It confused me at first, but then I recalled what Swaran had told me about community work and acceptance. Community outreach is a slow process, and people cannot be pressured to quickly change deeply ingrained beliefs. Nevertheless, I hoped to at least introduce the topic of mental health. Upon wrapping up the discussion, we asked if they had any questions for us. One of the more outspoken girls stood up and said, “I’d like to hear more about the signs of mental illness, and what to do if you spot one in a friend.”

I smiled at the comment, pleased to see a desire for knowledge balancing the reluctance to speak about mental health that we had expected. This girl was stepping into the cultural “comfort zone” we had created. Swaran answered the question briefly, and promised to cover the topic more fully in a future workshop.

The Last Day

On my last day at Pro Bono, I compiled a folder of information for the new intern who would take my place in the CHAI program. I inserted CHAI’s new program card and a list of (almost) community partners with notes about each organization’s response to our organization.

I had learned over two months that the interplay of mental health and South Asian culture is not as black and white as I used to think. The stigma around mental health cannot be pinpointed to a specific subset of people within the South Asian community. Age, upbringing and family dynamics are indicators of attitudes about mental health, but outreach should be conducted on a case-by-case basis. Groups of people will respond differently to various styles of outreach – some will appreciate a direct and informational approach, while others might need an indirect approach using code words. It takes time to observe a shift in cultural attitudes, but through consistent and careful interactions with a community, it is possible. Swaran and Barbara, with their 75 years of combined experience in the mental health field, exemplified the tenacity required to make change.

Before leaving the office, I thanked Barbara for her work, guidance, and writing advice. It turns out that practice does make perfect, especially when there is red pen involved. After work, I joined Swaran, at this point fully in the role of my grandmother, for one final dinner. I called my parents to plan my flight home to Boston, and Baba asked what I had learned at Pro Bono. I wondered how I could condense two months of experiences into a phone call.

“You’ll just have to wait until the Sorensen essays are out,” I laughed in reply.

**Names have been changed out of respect for the privacy of the individuals.*

“Nolo Contendere”: A Summer Inside New York’s Innocence Movement

Max Gould '18



Note to the reader: Violent crimes including sexual assault are discussed in this piece.

Stephanie looked over at me with endearing concern. “You good?” she asked.

I had never driven a van before; certainly not one this large, filled with people, on a busy highway. There were 18-wheelers surrounding us in nearly every lane and my technique of locking my elbows to reduce the natural sway of my hands on the wheel was beginning to wear on my arms.

“Yeah, I’m good. Thanks for asking.”

The van was quiet for large stretches of the ride home. Journeying from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania back to New York City would be an exhausting endeavor under any circumstances, but it felt even more arduous as I was continuously distracted by the thoughts swirling in my head, and repeatedly pulling myself back to reality to focus on the road. I was still attempting to process all that I had seen that day – the hearing, the verdict, the end of a 22-year-long battle. I couldn’t begin to guess what the others in the van were feeling, many of whom had been a part of the fight since the beginning.

The family seated in the back of the van were strangers to me, so Stephanie was a welcome presence in the passenger seat. In moments when the traffic died down I tried to listen in on the sparse conversation behind me. Laughter here and there, some more serious discussion in whispering voices. There wasn’t any of the meaningful conversation I had expected, just hushed relief.

At one point I quickly peeked into my rearview mirror and instantly met Robert’s gaze. His eyes were a deep brown, small and intense, dotted with tiny pupils. Now, however, they drooped with exhaustion.

Just eight hours earlier I had walked into the courtroom for Robert’s hearing. Jeff had caught my eye and patted the spot next to him on the gallery bench. I had just begun to feel like Jeff saw me as a capable worker, and maybe even a friend, after

interning at his foundation for a month. I took my first few steps toward him without thinking, then hesitated. He was in the first of five or six rows in a gallery inundated by journalists with notepads and advocates with concerned faces. Who was I to take a spot in the front of the room? There were people who had tirelessly dedicated their time and energy to freeing Robert, people who knew him personally and were affected by his incarceration, especially friends and family. And in the middle of them, sitting front and center, would be me, a volunteer intern, an outsider, who had had to do extra

He was in the first of five or six rows in a gallery inundated by journalists with notepads and advocates with concerned faces. Who was I to take a spot in the front of the room? There were people who had tirelessly dedicated their time and energy to freeing Robert, people who knew him personally and were affected by his incarceration, especially friends and family.

background reading the night before to get caught up on Robert's case.

Too timid to refuse Jeff's invitation, I took my seat.

Robert's lawyer from the Pennsylvania Innocence Project walked out in front of the gallery. He was a short man but stood tall, and spoke to the crowd of advocates and family members like he was a close friend. The Pennsylvania Innocence Project had been doing the litigation for Robert's case, while Jeff and his foundation had worked on the public side, building support for Robert's cause and filling the gallery benches with those who believed him innocent.

Ten minutes later Robert was brought into the courtroom, flanked on either side by a uniformed guard and met with barely restrained excitement from the crowd. The guards sat him down in a chair on the defense's side of the room, turning him around to face his supporters. Jeff leaned over to me and whispered in surprise, "That's a real act of human kindness. They aren't supposed to do that."

One of the guards then brought over a cup, placed it in front of Robert, and poured him water.

"They never do this," Jeff whispered, brow furrowed.

The evidentiary hearing we were attending was a promising step towards Robert's freedom. Jeff and I had talked about his case during the early morning ride to Harrisburg. Robert had been in prison for 22 years, his incarceration based entirely on eyewitness testimony. He had won his freedom a few years prior, but the Harrisburg DA's office had appealed his exoneration all the way up to the Supreme Court of the United States. The Supreme Court had deliberated without hearing oral arguments, eventually sending Robert back to prison after a year of freedom.

"Can you imagine that? Going back to prison after being freed? I don't think I could do it. I'd probably go on the lam," Jeff had said.

Today's hearing was going to call Robert's conviction into question yet again. Thorough investigation of the initial trial had revealed that one of the primary witnesses had a

pseudo-familial connection with the leading investigator. It was a striking conflict of interest that had never before been brought to light. This, and the fact that a new judge was going to hear all of the evidence for the first time, made Jeff hopeful. In fact, the odds were looking so good for Robert that the District Attorney's Office had called him the night before offering to release him at the hearing if he confessed to the murder. He could have his freedom, but he wouldn't be able to take his innocence with him. Jeff remained confident that Robert would not go for the deal.

Knowing that this deal had been put on the table, the magnanimous behavior of the guards was making me nervous. Robert's lawyer seemed to have immense enthusiasm for what was going to be an exhausting and serious day of oral advocacy. What I did not realize at the time was that his lawyer knew that he did not have a long day ahead of him.

"We have good news everyone. Robert is coming home today."

My breath caught.

The deal that Jeff had been certain Robert would not take had been made. Robert would gain his freedom today, though at an immeasurable cost. Of the injustices done to him - the 22 years incarcerated, the young-adult life he never got to live, the compensation he could never pursue - none would be answered. Without ever committing a crime, he would now spend the rest of his life an ex-convict, the chance to prove his innocence gone forever.

* * *

As Robert's lawyer delivered the news to the crowd, Jeff crumpled, his head hanging low. To him, this wasn't how freedom was won. It certainly wasn't how his own freedom had been won.



Sitting in the middle of a shoot for a potential docuseries about the Deskovic Foundation.

Nearly 30 years earlier in 1989, Angela Correa, a 15-year-old child, was the victim of a brutal crime in Peekskill, New York. Correa was raped, beaten, and strangled to death after going outside to take pictures for her high school photography class. The police investigators immediately questioned her classmates, hoping to obtain leads on a suspect. Several of the Peekskill High School students pointed to Jeffrey Deskovic, 16 years old, describing him as “weird” and a “loner.” Detectives took this lead seriously after deciding that Deskovic seemed unusually bereaved at Correa’s funeral, although the two had no known prior relationship.

For these reasons alone, Jeff would spend 16 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

Several months after Correa’s murder, a police cruiser drove Jeff out of Westchester County 10, 20, 30, and finally 45 minutes. Jeff trusted the detective, who told him that his assistance was needed in the investigation. At 16, he had aspirations of being a police officer himself, and the rape and murder of his fellow high school classmate granted him, he thought, an unwelcome opportunity to begin that path.

He had been picked up from school earlier that morning by the officer, who claimed that Jeff’s assistance in the case was necessary and urgent. In a town miles away from his home, without the knowledge of his family, Jeff was led into an interrogation room. The officer continuously poured coffee for Jeff, each cup causing his heart to palpitate more. After multiple cups, the ruse quickly fell away. Jeff was accused of rape and murder and threatened with physical violence. His mind racing from the accusations and his heart racing from the coffee, he was in a state of complete vulnerability.

Throughout the interrogation, Jeff continued to maintain his innocence. Hours of denial had passed when a plainclothes officer entered the interrogation room with a polygraph. Jeff remained adamant that he did not kill his classmate, but it made no difference to the officers.

“What do you mean you didn’t do it? This machine just told me you did,” said the man operating the polygraph.

Finally, after a nearly eight-hour interrogation without food or water, Jeff confessed to a murder and rape he didn’t commit. The officers left him in the interrogation room alone, an innocent 16-year-old bawling in the fetal position under the table. Another lifetime would pass before Jeff would taste freedom again.

In prison Jeff continued to assert his innocence to all in the outside world who would listen. Years of writing to organizations like the Innocence Project yielded no positive results. The technology that would eventually prove Jeff’s innocence wouldn’t be widely accepted by the legal system until the early 2000s. During his 16 years in prison, Jeff would meet 12 other men whom he believed had been wrongfully convicted.

* * *

In 2017, I found myself standing in a residential area of the Bronx, waiting to meet Jeff, now in his 40s, for the first day of my internship with the Jeffrey Deskovic Foundation for Justice. After being exonerated, Jeff had founded a small innocence organization with the money from his civil suit against New York State.

I had spent the previous fall trying to organize my summer and find an organization in the innocence movement willing to take me on as an intern. I had

The officers left him in the interrogation room alone, an innocent 16-year-old bawling in the fetal position under the table. Another lifetime would pass before Jeff would taste freedom again.

sent my resume and cover letter to a plethora of innocence organizations. Few responded, and most of those that did said they were unable to take on any interns. The innocence movement is dominated by nonprofit organizations with limited funding and resources, but I was lucky enough to be in a position where I did not need to be paid for my work. Even so, many ultimately said “sorry, but no.” The Jeffrey Deskovic Foundation for Justice, one of the organizations at the top of my list because of their policy and reintegration initiatives, responded saying they wanted to set up a time to talk. I was even more surprised to see that the email came from Jeff Deskovic himself.

A week after Jeff emailed me back I gave him a call at the time he requested. No answer. Hesitantly, I called him again. Still no answer. A week of no answers passed before I finally got Jeff on the phone, and though the call was marred by weak signal and dropped calls, by the time it ended I had an internship.

Standing in the Bronx, I didn’t know much about Jeff other than his story and the mission of The Foundation. I looked forward to being part of it no matter how infinitesimal my role. The Deskovic Foundation was so far responsible for the

exoneration of two men, and had aided other exonerees in reintegrating into society. The Foundation was adamant in taking on both DNA and non-DNA cases, a large undertaking for such a new and modestly staffed organization.

Several days before my internship was officially supposed to begin, I received a call at home from Jeff. The abrupt call was a relief to me, since I hadn't heard from him in several weeks and was worried that he had forgotten he had ever hired a nervous undergraduate. On the other end of the line his voice was as encouraging and friendly as ever, immediately relieving my fears. He told me that he wanted to nail down a few dates during the summer for interesting events outside of the scope of the daily work I'd be completing for the foundation. The initial event, strangely enough, would be on the first day of my internship, and instead of going to the office I was instructed to meet Jeff at his home so we could be on the road to Albany by 6:00 AM.

That morning I had made my way into New York from New Jersey by 5:00 AM and a 30-minute Uber drive later, was waiting

“Well Max, you're getting to see a less glorious side of advocacy.”

I, still nervous about my first interactions with Jeff and the other volunteer, nodded, smiled, and added in a light chuckle for good measure. Jeff would continue to deliver that same line many times throughout the summer.

outside Jeff's home. I texted him that I was outside but received no reply. The time standing on the sidewalk gave me a chance to come down from the travel adrenaline and focus on controlling my first-day nerves. The block was populated by two-family houses and Jeff's home was no exception, though his did stand out in other ways. His home had an outside area littered with nearly 10 pieces of patio furniture, giving the walk up to his door an outdoor beach bungalow atmosphere. On the right side of his yard stood a plastic-encased statue of the Virgin Mary. The case in which it sat was outlined by LED lights that transitioned between pink and purple.

After 15 minutes of taking in my surroundings, I finally heard the front door open.

“Max! Come in,” Jeff shouted. I turned and walked up the front path to a tall man with the frame of an NFL linebacker. Jeff has an innate kindness that radiates from him. With a big handshake and a welcoming smile, he led me into his home and explained that we would be on the road shortly, after he sent a few emails.

I took a seat on one of Jeff's massive brown leather couches and attempted to grasp what was being said on the Spanish news channel. As he fussed around with his email, cursing now and then out of frustration, his neighbor Nancy entered the apartment.

She introduced herself, and I soon learned about her Colombian heritage and her unusually fast, but high-quality, cooking. Soon enough we were walking down Jeff's driveway for the three-hour road trip to Albany.

“Jeff's nice car is in the shop,” Nancy explained, as we got into a nondescript sedan. Next to it sat a large Hummer with an

American flag detailed on its right side. “And that one's too big,” she added.

On the way up I had more of a chance to talk to and get to know Jeff. He explained that we were going to the courthouse up in Albany to meet with senators and other New York legislators, in an attempt to convince them to support legislation that would create an independent review board to oversee prosecutorial conduct throughout the state. He also talked to me about some of the existing oversight bodies, like Conviction Integrity Units (CIUs), and why he believed some to be more effective than others. Jeff talked with unwavering confidence, and even told me to record his miniature lectures at times “for my notes.”

An hour or so into the drive we hit heavy traffic going into Albany. Every few seconds our car was allowed a few feet to creep forward. Jeff, who was driving, shifted around in his seat and said, “Well Max, you're getting to see a less glorious side of advocacy.” I, still nervous about my first interactions with Jeff and the other volunteer, nodded, smiled, and added in a light chuckle for good measure. Jeff would continue to deliver that same line many times throughout the summer.

When we finally reached Albany, Jeff introduced me to other members of It Could Happen To You, a coalition of Innocence Network and criminal justice figures committed to fighting wrongful accusation. Two of the men I met were criminal defense attorneys; one from the city and one from the public defenders of Columbia County.

All of the men were incredibly friendly, and managed to introduce themselves to me in between frantically preparing for the small press conference during which they were going to present a report that showed the high costs for taxpayers of wrongful convictions. Jeff explained that this was a new angle they were using to frame the issue

of wrongful convictions, in the hopes that talking about economic costs would draw more bipartisan support.

Before the press conference Jeff kept pulling me aside and whispering in my ear, telling me who the key players were in the room. At one point he told me to come closer to him so he could talk to me, but as I leaned in he stopped me and added “subtly,” so that our conversation was not obvious. Being new to this environment I wasn’t sure if this was common practice, or if Jeff had just watched one too many political dramas and thought this was how the game was played. Either way, I was loving every minute of it.

After the press conference I was given a better opportunity to speak with Jeff and the other members of It Could Happen To You. All of the men spoke passionately about wrongful convictions and the challenges facing the innocence movement. There was a moment of raw conversation in which the passion of the movement really became clear.

“Man, you were murdered. You were judicially murdered,” one of the men said to Jeff. Jeff solemnly shook his head in silent agreement.

“I mean what else can you call it, they took your life away from you.”

* * *

Working at the Foundation’s office always felt productive. The entire office was hardly bigger than 300 square feet. It had a large wooden table along the wall to the right of the front door, posters on the wall about Jeff, his story, and his accomplishments since his exoneration, and files strewn everywhere. It was a small but homey environment, and I always felt like I could get work done there.

My first assignment was given to me by Roger Broffman, a part-time journalist and

professor and one of the few consistently involved members at the Foundation. According to Jeff, Roger was essentially the acting executive of the organization and responsible for screening and investigating claims of wrongful convictions.

Roger asked me to look into the Conviction Integrity Units that had been popping up in New York City since 2010, when Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance established the first unit to take claims of possible wrongful conviction. Since then, two others had been founded in Brooklyn and the Bronx with another approved for funding on Staten Island. The Queens district attorney’s office had remained adamant that wrongful convictions did not happen in their office, and that bad cases were weeded out in the investigation process.

Roger was hoping to receive some updated data on these units, and instructed me to find out how much funding was allocated to each unit, how many exonerations they had produced, and how many requests they had received and denied, among other statistics that would indicate the effectiveness of the CIUs. I was assigned this project in part because Roger and Jeff were skeptical of these units, fearing that they were simply official covers so that the district attorneys of New York City could say they looked into possible wrongful convictions in their boroughs without actually doing anything.

It was during this time that I was reading *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, one of the America’s leading civil rights lawyers. *Just Mercy* in part chronicled Stevenson’s journey from law school to Alabama, where he became involved in death penalty appeals, to the eventual establishment of his now-famed organization, the Equal Justice Initiative. In Stevenson’s tenure as a civil rights lawyer, he has argued before the Supreme Court numerous times, rescued countless innocent clients from death row, and created national dialogues on seldom-discussed topics like

Sitting in an office doing research or making copies, one can become disconnected from the mission at hand. I am motivated by the culmination in visible results, a mindset not likely to be satisfied in the business of exoneration, a process that on average takes over a decade.

the brutal history of lynching in America, the prosecution and incarceration of children, and mass incarceration.

One of the consistent themes throughout Stevenson’s experiences with America’s southern legal culture was the complete lack of empathy the system had for communities of color, and how the criminal justice system refused to acknowledge how an ongoing history of oppression against these communities affected prosecutions and convictions. While many of the clients Stevenson wrote about were wrongfully convicted, some were guilty of the crimes for which they were charged. *Just Mercy* put each case in context, addressing not only personal histories, but also showing that each client’s avenues of choice were limited by their race and socioeconomic status. Stevenson also showed that his clients were better than their worst moments.

For the majority of the time I was reading Stevenson’s story, I was filled with a certain drive towards my work. Both the interesting and the menial tasks took on a new importance. Sitting in an office doing research or making copies, one can become disconnected from the mission at hand. I

am motivated by the culmination in visible results, a mindset not likely to be satisfied in the business of exoneration, a process that on average takes over a decade. *Just Mercy* showed me what rested on the other side and depicted the success of dogged advocacy, though at times I felt guilty for needing this motivation.

Near the end of the book Stevenson reflected on what enabled him to work tirelessly for so many years. A person of color from a poor Pennsylvania town, Stevenson had faced many of the same hardships as his clients. Shortly after arriving in Alabama as a young lawyer, Stevenson was accosted by police and held at gunpoint in his own driveway simply because he was sitting in his car and listening to the remainder of a jazz album. The two officers spent the next few months trying to dodge Stevenson's formal complaints, but he refused to relent. Stevenson said that in order to advocate as vigorously as he did, it is necessary to actually understand the oppression that is being fought and to have been subject to it. He is not just fighting for his clients, but attempting to change a system designed to deny him his own rights.

This idea surprised me when I first read it. I began questioning the work I was doing for The Foundation, thinking that I was missing a key component as an advocate and that I didn't have the right passion for the work. I looked at Roger, another white man working for The Foundation who had been one career

I began questioning myself. What did this mean for me as an advocate? Is this the wrong field for *me* if I am incapable of truly fighting to the fullest extent?

move away from becoming a New York City police officer at a previous point in his life. Yet Roger's journalistic coverage of a 1990 murder helped exonerate a wrongfully convicted man. How did this balance with what Stevenson was saying? Roger has advocated passionately and persistently. I began questioning myself. What did this mean for me as an advocate? Is this the wrong field for *me* if I am incapable of truly fighting to the fullest extent? Was being an outsider disadvantaging me as much as Stevenson said? Was it a ridiculous idea to consider the value of being an insider in a community where insiders were systematically victimized by the legal system? I began to forget that there were actual victims to worry about. While I questioned my ability to be an effective advocate, there was no systematic bias threatening to put a white, middle-class, educated man like myself in prison. It took me some time to see how wrong and misdirected my questions were.

* * *

Back in the Harrisburg courtroom, Jeff was still sitting on the bench shaking his head when Robert's lawyer approached him.

"What's wrong, Jeff? You don't look too happy."

He posed the question in a manner that almost seemed instigative.

"Daniel, you know what this is about, and I know what this is about, so if we're not going to say it, let's just not talk about it."

"Jeff, I don't know what you mean," Daniel said, clearly taken aback.

"This is about proving people's innocence, not taking cop-outs," Jeff shot back. Daniel's demeanor shifted and his face contorted in palpable rage.

"You're so full of shit Jeff," he said simply. And then he walked away. Jeff remained seated, unfazed by the exchange.

Robert was not immediately released just because he accepted the district attorney's deal. He still needed to go through a formal process in which he would plead no contest to the original murder charges. An older man with thinning silver hair finally took the bench and initialized the proceedings.

Daniel, his two young co-counsels, and Robert all stood and walked towards the bench. After some deliberation it became clear that the prosecutor was going to read a detailed account of the crime and the charges therein, after which Robert would plead no contest. An interesting stipulation of the agreement required Robert to admit that if the case went to retrial, the prosecution would be victorious in proving his guilt.

As the prosecutor began to read the details of the grisly murder, Robert stood tall with his lawyers by his side. But as the description of the crime went on, detailing everything from the preparation of the crime to the actual perpetration, he looked as if he was beginning to sway in place. I'll never forget how he shook his head for the 20 minutes that the crime was described, all the while the shorter lawyer and Daniel rubbing his back in comfort. Each time the prosecutor mentioned a more gruesome part of the murder, Robert's head shook further to the side.

The judge, right in front of him, hardly made eye contact with Robert, keeping his head buried in his papers. For a man who was about to be freed after 22 years, the process seemed to be psychologically taxing. Two women were sobbing next to me; at first I thought they were crying from happiness, but as the sobs grew more violent and one woman had to leave,

I realized they were crying for Robert's innocence, something he would never get back.

Again I found myself questioning my position in this fight. What was I doing next to this sobbing woman, who I later discovered was Robert's wife? It felt wrong for me to be there in the forefront with others who knew and loved Robert deeply, those who were capable of feeling and experiencing the oppression that was supposed to be, or at least should have been, on trial alongside Robert's innocence. White lawyers and white judges had put Robert away over 20 years ago and had maintained that grave injustice ever since; and here I was, an aspiring lawyer.

I thought back to *Just Mercy* and Bryan Stevenson. Would it be irresponsible to go into this career and speak up for others without being able to truly understand what I'm speaking up for? It was impossible for me to be victimized by this system in the same way that Robert was. Given this, should I even be "speaking up for others?" I began to feel like the desire to have a leading role was wrong.

Modern mass incarceration had been catalyzed by the War on Drugs, an initiative that many believe was specifically designed to disenfranchise communities of color and create ideological differences within the slowly uniting working class, simultaneously excommunicating these communities from and using them as a tool of influence in political-decision making. I spent much of my summer reading about mass incarceration, and though I could understand it factually, there was no way for me to completely understand its effects. Racially coded rhetoric was disguised as "get-tough" policies. Robert stood there as the descendant laws from these policies kept him bound in chains, as was their intention. The judge asked Robert how he was pleading



Jeff Deskovic giving a lecture at Adelphi University about his exoneration and reforms he believes are necessary to prevent future wrongful convictions.

to the second-degree murder charge.

"Nolo contendere," he said, almost whispering. Robert would leave prison an ex-convict, not an exoneree.

After the formalities were over, the judge announced Robert's freedom.

"On this day, July 8, 2017, I proclaim you, Robert Johnson, a free man," he said, speaking as if it was his divine and kind judicial power that was allowing Robert to go home. He didn't seem to consider that his proceeding was condemning Robert in the process of freeing him. The judge complimented the Innocence Project lawyers, saying that it was because of their outstanding lawyering that Robert was freed today.

Daniel then took a moment to tell the court that this day was the proudest of his professional career. Watching Robert shake his head through the proceeding, seeing his supporters brought to hysterical tears, it was difficult for me to understand why congratulations were being passed around the room so liberally, as though this was a

triumph of the justice system instead of an utter failure of it.

In the end, the district attorney was successful in maintaining Robert's guilt, and I was sure that whatever praise the Pennsylvania Innocence Project was currently receiving, the district attorney would be exalted by his office twice as much for subduing what otherwise would have been an embarrassing and expensive outcome for the state.

Robert's whole life in the legal system had been a breathtaking example of justice delayed and justice denied. Perhaps this has become so normal that these white judges and lawyers only understood how to celebrate freedom, but couldn't fully comprehend its costs.

Ultimately a man was able to go home to his family after 22 years, and it was his decision to do this at the cost of his innocence, even if the offer itself was cruelly enticing. But the reactions of the judge and lawyers seemed almost sinister juxtaposed with the family and supporters watching from across the room.



At a lobbying event in Albany with other advocates who are seeking support for an oversight board on prosecutorial conduct in New York.

As is the nature of an adversarial trial, one side won and the other lost. It was curious to see both sides playing the victor while those actually affected sat in knowing silence, wise to the real crime 22 years in the making.

* * *

As the summer days got warmer and we fell into mid-July, I was gifted with more opportunities to work directly with Jeff. One day we met at the office to go over an award nomination letter that I was submitting on behalf of The Foundation. A two-page letter took nearly three hours to review. Almost like clockwork, each time we made progress, another call would make Jeff's phone dance frantically on the table. He took nearly every call, some lasting minutes and others half an hour or more; on some Jeff would put the caller

on speaker if he thought it would be an educational experience for me.

"A less glorious side of advocacy," he conceded with a shrug, somewhere after the fourth or fifth call.

Another day I needed to acquire trial transcripts from a client's family member, and find a way to copy all 500 pages so they could be stored at The Foundation. This would have been achievable with the office's scanner had it not been incapable of taking more than 10 sheets of paper at a time.

"A less glorious side of advocacy," I heard ring through my head without anyone having to say it.

After picking up the documents, I scrambled to find a copy center that could reproduce quality copies. Some charged as much as \$1.50 per page and none were cheaper than 75 cents, which still would have cost The Foundation hundreds of dollars. I lugged the pile of documents home with me to New Jersey and spent my night and the following morning scanning the documents on an app from my phone that Stephanie had suggested. It took hours, and all the while I heard Jeff talking about the less glorious side.

As the summer progressed, these moments stopped feeling so inglorious, especially when they were interspersed with more substantive projects. Eventually Jeff had me working on creating a new social media plan for The Foundation in order to grow a larger audience, and he even gave me my own case to screen and evaluate. These

more significant projects not only made me feel like I was contributing in meaningful ways, but helped me understand how important the "less glorious side" was to effective advocacy. The more I had the opportunity to work with Jeff and other advocates, the more learned that the constantly referenced "less glorious side" went hand-in-hand with nonprofit advocacy – it was a necessary condition for success. I started to realize how naïve I had been to think that the goals of exoneration, reintegration, and reform were anywhere near the immediate goals of The Foundation. Before an organization can have meaningful impact, it must function at a basic level. Business needs, whether something as minor as office organization or as large as securing steady funds so that The Foundation can keep the lights on, all come before the heart of the issue so the latter can be addressed. It simply cannot work any other way.

The less glorious side is vital. Without it, few would be able to tackle the real issues. By the end of the summer I didn't consider this part of advocacy any less glorious. Watching Jeff face the less glorious side was fascinating and inspiring. Anyone who tried to hold his ear for more than 15 minutes would have no luck before another pressing matter demanded his attention. His capacity for multitasking and systematically addressing issues is what keeps The Foundation alive, a required skill for the success of such a young organization. He has mastered this necessary side engrained in advocacy, and makes it look almost glorious while doing it.

Jeff was being humorous when he referred to organizational tasks as the less glorious side of advocacy. The day of Robert's hearing, as Jeff slumped in his seat, he was also teaching me about a tragically inevitable downside to advocacy, which I saw time and time again in the innocence community throughout the summer.

Organizations like The Foundation are up against an all-powerful institution, demanding that it admit its own fallibility. Robert's case was not an outlier or an exception; compromise and defeat is often the rule. This was the real less glorious side.

* * *

The small office felt even more claustrophobic with the plethora of camera equipment strewn about. To the untrained eye it looked like utter chaos, but to the film crew it was a systematic setup. I had been told that they were filming the "sizzle reel," a compilation of clips that would be edited and sent to Hollywood executives. "We're taking the format of 'America's Most Wanted' and flipping it on its head. 'America's Least Wanted,' we're going to call it," Jeff said as he smiled, admitting that the witty title was all Roger's idea.

The show was conceived as a way to spread awareness about wrongful convictions and broadcast the individual stories of those still imprisoned for crimes they had not committed. It would be a docuseries consisting of interviews from those at The Foundation investigating the cases. Throughout the day Jeff and Roger were both interviewed, along with another volunteer and one of The Foundation's frequently used private investigators.

The most memorable of those interviewed was Alexa Clark. Alexa is the widow of the late Bill Clark, a Foundation exoneree, who suffered a fatal asthma attack less than two years after he won his freedom. Bill was also a close friend to Jeff, and his death was an emotional subject. Alexa, average height, beautiful with light brown hair, and middle-aged, was wearing a short-sleeved top under which her tattoo was visible on her right arm. After the interviewer asked her what it was, she proudly rolled up her sleeve, revealing a large red heart under lettering

that read "Rest in Peace Billy." Jeff and Alexa were clearly very close, and Jeff insisted on standing across the table, awkwardly close behind the interviewer, after Alexa said she would be more comfortable with Jeff facing her.

Alexa began talking about how she and Bill had met, which to my surprise was after his conviction and incarceration in the late 80's for a brutal shotgun murder in Brooklyn. Bill and Alexa first met when she traveled with her friend to visit the friend's husband at the same prison in which Bill was incarcerated. Alexa told us that Bill had asked the friend about her, saying "Is this a present for me?" She was absolutely terrified of him at first, but after a few more visits and walking with him in the prison courtyard, they soon fell in love. More than that, Alexa began to truly believe in Bill's innocence, not because he had inadequate legal defense or because there had been official misconduct by the police, but simply because "such a nice man could not have been in there for such a terrible crime."

Several months later Bill and Alexa were married in the prison chapel. But, as she stressed, there was no honeymoon for couples like them, and the two were immediately separated. She spent the remainder of her wedding night crying at home. To the interest of everyone in the room, Alexa explained how the conjugal visits worked, and how they "weren't just about sex." The prison actually had small apartments fitted with a kitchen, a living room, two bedrooms, and a small outdoor area for barbecuing, in which couples could spend two to three days together. Those were Alexa's favorite times. The nights before she would go up to see Bill she could barely sleep even though she was exhausted from days of cooking and preparing food. And when those few days were up, the come-down was especially difficult as she returned to her home on the outside

without her husband. "You go to bed. You're alone. You wake up. You're alone." Without context, Alexa could have been explaining Bill's experience instead of her own.

Eventually Jeff and his foundation entered their lives, and soon after that Bill was exonerated. The day he was released from prison it was Jeff, not Bill's attorneys, who took him out for his first meal as a free man. Afterwards they made a beeline for the nearest store, where Jeff bought Bill new clothes, leaving his prison garments in the trash.

But life on the outside for exonerees is often complex and challenging. Bill needed to adjust to living a free life with his wife. Now and then he would wake up swinging in the middle of the night. At one point he got caught shoplifting, which Alexa believed was motivated by both his fear of and a partial desire to go back to prison. All the while she stood by him, a devoted partner. Through many trials and tribulations, the couple soon began to establish normalcy in their domestic life together. It was soon after that Bill passed away with Alexa by his side, giving him CPR and trying to resuscitate him. After the EMTs arrived and began taking over, one of the first calls she made was to Jeff, who rushed to the hospital.

The interviewer made a comment in a moment of teary silence following Alexa's testimonial. She repeated it, and then Jeff said it a third time, quieter and under his breath with his sadness still choking him.

"He died free."

* * *

In later interviews Robert would say that he took the deal for his family. "I had to end their suffering."

I had been nervously driving the van for nearly three hours when we stopped at Newark Penn Station in New Jersey. A few of the volunteers, including Stephanie, emptied out of the van to go home for the night, while others remained to be driven into the city. I had been anxious enough driving along an open highway, and there was no way I was going to drive on the crowded streets of New York. Jeff agreed to take over, so I replaced Stephanie as the navigator.

It was late, and the van was completely quiet. It had been a surprising day at every turn for me; I could hardly imagine how Jeff and Robert felt. I spent a lot of time wondering how Robert was feeling during that ride. I expected elation and wonderment at being free again, but he seemed completely contained. Eventually I told myself to curb my expectations; how could there be any expected way to react to such a situation? Robert had spent the first 20 years of his life being free and innocent, but for the rest of his life he would only be free.

After 40 more minutes we reached the Johnson family's residence in the Bronx. I looked at Jeff with exhaustion and trying to offer some words of consolation since he still seemed disheartened, told him I really appreciated him taking me along that day. As Robert and his family left the van, Jeff and I said goodbye, and I exited the vehicle as well.

Robert had spent the first 20 years of his life being free and innocent, but for the rest of his life he would only be free.



Advocates and exonerees gather at rally to show support for Jon-Adrian Velazquez, a New York man who was wrongfully convicted for murder and who is currently appealing his conviction.

I think we were all wondering, “What comes next for Robert?” I considered Alexa and the interviewer’s comforting words. Bill died free, but when considering Robert’s story, it seemed like a concession rather than a comfort. We wanted him to live free, not simply exist freely in the world. But these hopes were optimistic given the obstacles that exonerees face.

After two decades of wrongful incarceration, the District Attorney’s Office weaponized his own freedom against him just so they could maintain an illusion of infallibility. It was this, not long drives or broken copy machines, that was truly the less glorious side of advocacy. Jeff seeing a friend come home at the expense of his innocence, and another friend dying after such a short life of liberation – that is the most inglorious it can get. Yet many in the movement could still find solace in the fact that freedoms were won.

This encapsulated much of what I had learned that summer working in a small corner of the innocence movement in New York City. Declare victories where you see them, and cling to them. In the end, a man got to go home to his family. His victory might have come at the cost of his innocence and his release from prison did not set any meaningful precedents for future appellate cases, but for that man, if not for the movement, getting to go home to his family was everything.

The so-called glorious side of advocacy is an abstract idea of justice, one that presumes that hard work and truth will prevail over errors and travesties of justice. It is a goal to strive for, but one that is difficult to attain. Grunt work, concessions, and even losses are necessary in the effort towards greater progress. With each fight, the innocence movement learns more and grows stronger as a result.

Bill Clark was not the first and certainly not the last exoneree to live such a short life of freedom. Prison puts immense stress on individuals, especially those searching each and every avenue for legal representation.

“You know, you’re considered a senior citizen at 50 in prison,” Alexa told us the day she was in for the interview.

The fight does not end with freedom for most. Exonerees aren’t afforded most forms of assistance that ex-convicts are given by the state. The million-dollar lawsuits that often make the papers, in which exonerees sue their states, are multi-year processes. In between the time of release and the resolution of these civil suits, exonerees are often left destitute, without any work experience or means of earning an income.

This is what being an insider in this world meant. Bryan Stevenson personally knew the systematic oppression of the criminal justice system and he understood the role of poverty. Jeff spent 16 years in prison, and Robert 22. Lawyers hold the practical skills to exonerate, but each day it is exonerees or those close to them who make headlines for leading the innocence movement, for effecting policy changes, and in some instances creating their own foundations.

Again, I returned to the selfish question of what this meant for me. Much like the appellate lawyers involved in the innocence movement, who were outsiders to this cause, I understood that my role had to be one of support. I can bring my education, passion, and willingness to work hard and listen, and like Roger, I can make meaningful contributions to this cause. Though it is tempting to become involved in a movement and want to control as much as one feels capable of controlling, the work of shaping a movement is best and most rightly done by those who know the

struggle first-hand. These are the insiders, whose stories are molded by injustice but whose legacies are shaped by their resiliency and courage.

Wrongful convictions destroy lives, not just with unwarranted prison time but with total destabilization of life, liberty, and faith. Addressing and remedying this issue is incomprehensibly complex, because each facet of wrongful conviction ultimately leads to other complicated, systematic issues: corruption, procedural deficiencies, poor public services for the indigent, and more.

But small victories that keep the movement going are achieved constantly, and they are important to recognize. Bill was able to die a free man. Robert is able to live as one.

This encapsulated much of what I had learned that summer working in a small corner of the innocence movement in New York City. Declare victories where you see them, and cling to them.

Not Chickening Out: Moving Towards Queer Liberation in Pretoria, South Africa

Paul Sindberg '18



Note to the reader: The following essay discusses processes of power like homophobia, transphobia, cissexism, racism, and colonialism. In connection, the following essay also discusses intense material including sexual violence, murder, and other violence.

Over the course of my summer in Pretoria, South Africa with OUT LGBT Well-Being, I learned tactics for community organizing, histories of queer liberation movements, and strategies for meaningful legal research. On my third day, however, I learned how to eat with my hands.

My co-worker MacMillan had taken me to grab lunch at one of his favorite spots. We'd quickly become close friends, but in that moment, we were still getting to know each other, and I appreciated his willingness to show me around.

"This is a very common South African dish," MacMillan told me as the lady behind the counter handed me a Styrofoam box. "Pap, it's called. Everyone eats it, for lunch, for dinner."

We slowly walked back to the office – I was marveling at the beautiful weather – and we encountered another friend and co-worker of ours named Lesego. The three of us took a seat in the conference room, and broke open the Styrofoam containers.

Pap is a stiff corn porridge that is usually served with meat and some kind of sauce – I watched Mac grab a handful of pap, fill it with sausage, and dunk it in the sauce. I did the same.

"This one is easy," said Lesego, watching me chew but speaking to Mac. "You can take him anywhere; he's easy. Do you like it?" he asked of me.

I laughed, and nodded, thoroughly reassured by Lesego's comment even as I tried to keep my eyes from watering at the shock of the spice. I was working hard to be "easy" – I felt strongly that it was a priority to ensure

I wasn't a burden. I didn't want to ask undue educational labor from people who were not offering it – or expect my hosts to teach a white American activist how to eat. Lesego offered me validation: I saw his comment as proof that I was adapting to my circumstances with some measure of independence. I was so proud in that moment.

Then I moved to stand and fetch a jug of water, and promptly knocked my lunch to the floor.

"Maybe not so easy," cackled Lesego, laughing raucously as I sopped beef sauce out of the carpet with a towel. "But at least he cleans up after himself."

* * *

"Why didn't you just put some food out?" asked Moude, a few days later, as I was attempting to explain why I was late to the office. Moude – the office administrator for OUT – is always stylish, always wise, and always witty.

Admittedly, a trail of cornmeal from the bed to the door would have been much more effective – I had spent the better part of an hour attempting to prod the angry chicken lodged stubbornly under my bed with a broom.

OUT's offices themselves are wired with a pepper-spray system – should anyone attempt to harm the office, the thought goes, it's better to incapacitate everyone than to risk anything worse. In thinking about Fenway Health's grand glass entrance in Boston, this was a particularly stark contrast for me to take in.

I wish I could say that was a one-time occurrence, but the chickens that lived on the property with me were the most courageous creatures I've ever encountered. The poultry had a deeply ingrained caution-be-damned attitude, and would dart between my legs if I left the door open for more than a minute. They were constantly on high alert, and would take any chance they could to get in the house. I'm not sure what they thought was waiting for them in there, but much to my frustration, the birds were both vigilant and persistent.

It is odd to compare the frustrating chickens to an organization as noble and brilliant as OUT, but OUT is also both vigilant and persistent. It must be constantly on the lookout for opportunities – for funding, for advocacy work, for institutionalizing support for queer persons – and sometimes that means OUT pursues opportunities as narrow as the gap between my leg and the doorframe the morning the chickens invaded. The organization exists to provide medical and advocacy services to queer folk in South Africa, and because there isn't a lot of support – either governmental

or civilian – for that kind of work, OUT's programs must constantly assert themselves in spaces where they might not quite be welcome. In my experience, LGBTI advocacy organizations in the U.S. may wrestle with a similar problem, but they have also received a measure of social, economic, and political capital through which institutionalized opportunities have begun to present themselves.

OUT's initial mission was to provide health services and HIV-related resources to queer persons. My site supervisor, Johan Meyer, oversees the onsite medical clinic and health outreach programs that still form the backbone of the organization. My direct supervisor, Lerato Phalakatshela, manages the Love Not Hate campaign, which is a relatively recent addition to the 21-year-old organization. The campaign advocates for an end to hate crimes against LGBTI persons, and provides services like legal referrals, court support, support groups, and case management to survivors of hate crimes. It is responsible for the first parliamentary lobbying effort on behalf of LGBTI persons in South Africa, and it relies on the support of other LGBTI-related civil society organizations that act as campaign partners.

On my first day in South Africa, Johan and his partner Charlie picked me up from the Oliver Reginald Tambo Airport in Johannesburg. They dropped me off at my accommodations, and half an hour later, Lerato picked me up. We were headed to a township called Eersterust, where I was to assist Lerato in facilitating a safe space for trans women and nonbinary femme persons.

Lerato and I hit it off immediately, and I was excited to hit the ground running, just a couple of hours after I'd gotten off the plane. The meeting was to be held at the home of a woman named Mella; we arrived, and Mella promptly offered both of us steaming bowls of delicious stew. We sat and chatted for a while as guests began arriving – Lerato was

happy to see that people were in attendance. Usually, he expressed, there were more guests, but this was a new location for the safe space, and often any change in location brings fewer attendees, as it is difficult to know whether a new location will be entirely safe.

Lerato is particularly passionate about setting up safe spaces for LGBTI people, and Love Not Hate offers some funding to any organization or person looking to establish one. This program exemplifies OUT's vigilance in opportunity-seeking: whenever the chance to support queer communities presents itself, the organization makes an investment, regardless of expected attendance.

In setting up this "safe" space, Lerato expected fluctuations in his own safety and in the safety of the group. He was careful to hold the meeting only on fenced-in property, and was anxious to lock and re-lock the gate after each car arrived. OUT has learned a lot about how to keep itself, its membership, and its community as safe as possible. OUT's offices themselves are wired with a pepper-spray system – should anyone attempt to harm the office, the thought goes, it's better to incapacitate everyone than to risk anything worse. In thinking about Fenway Health's grand glass entrance in Boston, this was a particularly stark contrast for me to take in. Although I've had unsafe experiences in the U.S. because of my sexuality, my advocacy here has never demanded pepper-spray wiring.

Lerato eventually decided against doing any kind of formal programming, as the evening had taken more of a relaxed tone, and instead we distributed flyers about OUT's programs and contact information, and copies of Pretoria's LGBTI newspaper. After several hours of chatting, eating, and getting to know the guests, Lerato brought me back to my accommodations so I could rest and unpack.

OUT's commitment to a constant pursuit of opportunities was evident to me during a trip to the township Hammanskraal with the Peer Outreach program, under the Health & Wellbeing branch of OUT's work. The Peer Outreach team provides free HIV testing services to men who have sex with men, and does so by visiting town centers, shopping malls, and rail stations throughout the Gauteng province. We drove down early in the morning, and set up our bright pink tents in the parking lot of a strip mall near the town center. The tents are emblazoned with the words "OUT LGBT Well-Being," and this means that the work of the Peer Outreach team is twofold. The team members provide HIV tests, condoms, and information about sexual health to the community, but they also publicly claim space for queer people. It was never quite clear with whose permission the team set up its tents, but at one point, Happy Phaleng, the Peer Outreach Coordinator, left to scope out new places for the Peer Outreach team to set up its tent in the future; any park or parking lot might be an opportunity to do good.

* * *

At first, the majority of the work I was doing for OUT was administrative. I pulled and sorted client files, took minutes, wrote summaries, and made myself useful around the office. Early in my internship, the organization partially moved offices, choosing to designate its old office exclusively for the medical team and health outreach services, while moving its administrative team and Lerato (manager of the Love Not Hate campaign) to a new office a block away. At first, I split my time between the two offices, but as the summer progressed, I spent most of my time at the new office working with Lerato directly. I got to know the work of the organization better over time, and accordingly, my responsibilities shifted.

Before I joined the team, I was under the impression that the Love Not Hate campaign had more than 20 staffers. It wasn't until I arrived that I realized every aspect of the campaign was being run by Lerato alone.

One day, Lerato and I were packaging copies of research that OUT had conducted on experiences of discrimination by LGBTI persons for distribution to university libraries, the national Department of Justice, and other community partners. There was a knock on the door of the conference room, and one of the clinicians entered. She explained that they'd received a client from a rehab facility nearby, and that he was interested in pursuing a legal referral for case management. She asked if we'd be able to interview him. Lerato assented and set aside the bundle of reports he was sorting through.

Although there have been protections for LGBTI persons under South African law since 1994, reporting a hate crime can be a complicated process. Occasionally, the South African Police Service might not fully investigate a hate crime, or their investigation might be retraumatizing to a survivor. To help address this, OUT tries to match people seeking assistance with lawyers who will supervise criminal proceedings and ensure the process unfolds fairly.

Lerato and I jointly interviewed a man (referred to hereafter as Carl; his name has been changed for the sake of anonymity) about his experience. He was a gay survivor of sex trafficking who had escaped his captors two days prior to our first conversation, and he was worried that should he report his captivity to the police, they would dismiss the case because of his sexuality, or that they would arrest him for having performed sex work.

Before I joined the team, I was under the impression that the Love Not Hate campaign had more than 20 staffers. It wasn't until I arrived that I realized every aspect of the campaign was being run by Lerato alone.

I hadn't had an opportunity to prepare or confirm that I was asking the right questions. Lerato, characteristically, was impossible to catch off-guard, and asked considered, relevant questions as if he hadn't just been stuffing envelopes with me.

The process of securing legal representation for Carl was a crash course in survivor-centered advocacy. Carl revealed to us that his captors had taken his apartment keys, identification documents, and all of his money, heightening the urgency with which his case needed to be processed. When Carl left, Lerato expressed that he might be unable to offer too much of his time to this project, as a grant was up for renewal, and other Love Not Hate projects demanded his attention as well. Subsequently, as the days progressed, I found myself gradually assuming more responsibility for managing Carl's case.

I didn't feel prepared for this work, no matter how many late nights I spent researching Carl's options in the South African legislature. I felt that I needed far more training, and far more experience; without a concrete understanding of police jurisdiction law, or sex trafficking law, or pro bono legal work in Pretoria, I didn't know where to start.



Standing in front of the clinic sign for the office at 1081 Pretorius Street.

After the interview, I decided to simply write down everything that I knew - I prepared a report summarizing the presented information, articulating Carl's options for legal restitution, examining relevant statutes, and outlining potential legal arguments and related case law. Lerato and I then contacted the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression Unit at the University of Pretoria's Center for Human Rights. I conducted further interviews with Carl, prepared more reports, sent more emails, placed more phone calls, and ultimately secured a lawyer who agreed to provide Carl with support during the investigative process.

Through the course of this work, I learned a lot about legal operations in South Africa, and about how to create spaces that offer support and safety to survivors of trauma. This was an emotional process for me; to assist someone in finding justice in a material way is both daunting and empowering. I was extremely glad for Lerato's support as I did research, made phone calls, and held meetings. The work felt precious to me; every case I researched was the story of a person's quest for justice. To be actively assisting in one such story, I felt centered, even when that meant spending three hours trying to decipher

one confusing turn of phrase in an obscure subsection of South African criminal law.

* * *

Lerato and his partner Thabo have been together for a number of years. On our way back from a government meeting in Johannesburg, Lerato told me about their relationship. The two of them met on Facebook; Lerato hadn't expected to fall in love, but it happened, and now the two of them share an apartment and plan to marry sometime in the future.

Lerato is ambitious. He is ready to change the world. He studied at the University of Pretoria, where he headed the LGBTI students' group, and at our first meeting he revealed that he wants to be a politician someday - perhaps the first gay president of South Africa. He views his personal ambitions as a means to an end. His goal isn't personal celebrity; rather, Lerato has a vision of a South Africa and of a world that is inclusive of queerness, that celebrates queerness, and that creates better lives for its queer and otherwise disenfranchised residents.

Lerato and I traveled to join one of our colleagues, Thabiso Mogapi Oa Tsotetsi of Action for Social Justice International, and support him in some of his direct advocacy work on cases of LGBTI hate crimes in two cities. Thabiso's selflessness is the fire in his belly, and it is the source of his fearlessness: he gives so much of himself to protect other queer people. He funds the organization he founded out of his own pocket.

There were two cases on which our work in Potchefstroom and Kroonstad was primarily centered. The first, in Potchefstroom, was the case of a then-17-year-old lesbian student who had been raped, stabbed, and left for dead in a field by a man who lives two houses down from her family's. She survived, but lost the use of her right arm;

we met with her family, and her father showed us the school journals in which she attempted to write notes in class but could not because of her injuries. Despite the fact that we had pictures of her attacker, as well as his name, address, and contact information, the police had not arrested him. She had to walk past the house of her attacker every day on her way to school.

The day after we met with her family, we visited the local police station to ask why they had not investigated this case. We marched into the center of the building and Thabiso began knocking on doors, demanding to see the station commander. It took half an hour of our disruption before the commander finally agreed to sit down with us.

I still have the recording of that conversation on my phone. In our conversations with the station commander Thabiso was passionate, critical, and angry, while Lerato was calm, measured, and supportive. I listened as Thabiso and Lerato painstakingly extracted information from the commander. The perpetrator's cousin was on a police force in the area, which complicated things. The investigating officer had been on leave recently, which complicated things. At one point, the commander sat back, confident he had handled all the questions with which we had armed ourselves. Thabiso leaned forward, and gracefully mentioned several news stations with which he'd been speaking. Politely, with subtlety, and almost magically, Thabiso informed the commander that should progress continue to be stalled, the community of activists that were watching the case would take a much more public interest in it. The commander promptly sat forward again. By the close of the conversation, we had received a commitment from the commander that the case would be pursued with renewed vigor. He seemed eager to shake our hands as we stood to leave.

The second case that we focused on was the case of the gang rape and murder of a lesbian woman named Nonke Smous. We met in the living room of Nonke's aunt, with a number of brilliant LGBTI activists. The group talked at length about the lack of progress in Nonke's case, and expressed fear about the simple fact that, for the most part, the perpetrators of these acts were walking free. There was still ash in the grass a short walk from the house, where Nonke's body had been burned by these men. There was a portrait of Nonke propped up in the corner of the house, and it would have been impossible to recognize her from the photographs of her burnt, tortured body that had been shared with me by community members.

We talked for a while about what had happened, and what the police had done (or not done) thus far. It was haunting to be talking about such matters so near a portrait of the murdered woman. The sadness that twisted through the room felt not quite like resignation, but also not quite like hope. Eventually, it became increasingly dark outside, and after a thorough review of our strategy for interfacing with police officers the following day, we ended the meeting.

If there's one thing a stressed-out queer knows how to do, it's party. After a quick stop at the town liquor store, Thabiso, Lerato and I messaged all the folks we'd met with that day and invited them to come drink with us at the guesthouse we were staying in. We processed our feelings in community with one another and with a lot of wine, and other LGBTI people we hadn't known stopped by, too. Queerness means seizing opportunities for justice and existence where they don't exist, but it also means seizing opportunities for community and celebration whenever possible. It means allowing ourselves to heal and to build new families and forge new connections. Queer folk the world over put their lives on the

The work felt precious to me; every case I researched was the story of a person's quest for justice. To be actively assisting in one such story, I felt centered, even when that meant spending three hours trying to decipher one confusing turn of phrase in an obscure subsection of South African criminal law.

line for others while finding ways to live for themselves, too. This, I feel, is crucial to building the sustainability of our fight for liberation.

The following day, Thabiso, Lerato and I visited an antagonistic courtroom and several more police stations, where we had tough conversations with uncooperative people. Some of those with whom we spoke

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Queerness means seizing opportunities for justice and existence where they don't exist, but it also means seizing opportunities for community and celebration whenever possible. It means allowing ourselves to heal and to build new families and forge new connections. Queer folk the world over put their lives on the line for others while finding ways to live for themselves, too.

were completely unfamiliar with the "LGBTI" acronym, and when they realized the acronym was connected to homosexuality, we were promptly asked to leave. Thabiso has been doing this work for a fair amount of time, and he had offered Lerato and me tips on steeling our nerves and emotions. Nonetheless, it was so hard to hear that the three men who had been arrested for Nonke's murder had been released because a forensic lab had allegedly lost the DNA samples taken from Nonke's body. Nonke's family is still awaiting justice now.

A few days after my return to the U.S., Thabiso sent me a news story announcing the successful conviction of a South African man for strangling a 16-year-old gay boy with a shoelace after he came out at school. Thabiso had worked hard on that case, and this victory was deeply significant.

* * *

Back on my first day, during the drive from Oliver Reginald Tambo Airport to Pretoria, Johan and Charlie had told me that Stanza Bopape Street, right near where I would be staying, had been known as Church Street up until recently. They expressed some displeasure at the "loss" of Afrikaans history that the name change represented.

Church Street had been so named because there was a church on the square to which the road runs. Stanza Bopape was an anti-apartheid activist whom the apartheid state had brutally tortured and murdered at 27 years old. In learning this history, I was reminded of arguments that white conservatives in the United States are making with regard to the Civil War monuments that litter the South.

It is difficult to articulate the extent to which the systematic privileging of whiteness impacted my experience. White people in South Africa have far greater access to LGBTI-related resources than black people.¹ My position as a white American is not one that affords me the ability to make meaningful critiques of this circumstance, and my goal in addressing the racial hierarchies I observed is not to offer a comprehensive theory of restitution or resolution; rather, it is important to contemplate the relationship between queerness and Westernization, colonialization, and whiteness. Furthermore, in offering these thoughts, I do not wish to conflate socio-racial whiteness with Afrikaans ethnic identity; the distinction between the two identities is not meaningless.

Dawie Nel has been the director of OUT LGBT Well-Being since 2002, which means that he has been its director for 15 of the organization's 21 years. He occupies a position of singular authority: Dawie reports to the board of directors of the organization, but the board of directors tends to be largely hands-off, convening irregularly. Dawie, like Johan, is white.

One evening, Dawie called me into his office and asked me to explain the DACA program. He didn't fully understand the program, but was of the opinion that DACA recipients should be deported, and he asked me to explain the thought behind its creation. I did my best, and Dawie announced that while he dislikes Trump for reasons he did not name, he didn't understand the opposition to Trump's immigration policies, or to his insistence that a wall be built on the U.S./ Mexico border.

"Don't you think," he asked, arms crossed, leaning back in his chair – "don't you think that the left has become rather fascist? All of these activists... all of this 'political correctness'... people need to be free to say what they want."

A part of me is always caught off-guard when I hear that opinion from the mouths of gay white men. I remember the power of the word "f*ggot," and I remember how I feel when that word is used against me. I remember the societal and structural violences enacted against queer bodies by people who think that word's use is defensible. It is the dehumanization of gay men, accomplished with language like "f*ggot," that allowed the U.S. government to ignore the HIV/AIDS epidemic.² I understand "political correctness" to be a process of recognizing, valuing, and supporting each other's humanity, and thus its meaning is both complex and evolving. It is not some hard-and-fast or enforceable set of rules; rather, it is a call towards inclusive language. I was perplexed by the fact that Dawie did not share my perspective.

In responding, I tried to clearly and respectfully articulate the ways in which I disagreed with his assigning the idea of "political correctness" to fascism. I did my best to defend my perspective to the director of the organization that was employing me, but it was a strange moment. Dawie bid me good evening and we each left the office.

Afterwards, I got a meal with MacMillan, who had overheard the entire exchange. We discussed the nature of allyship that evening, and talked about the role whiteness may play in its own deconstruction: it isn't a role of leadership, but instead a vigilance in preventing the normalization of racist attitudes in white spaces, and the deconstruction of white spaces themselves. Privilege, we decided, means more than access to resources – it means the ability to challenge oppressive systems without risking that access.

I had the opportunity to speak with Pierre Brouard, the Deputy Director of the University of Pretoria's Centre for Sexualities, AIDS and Gender one day while Lerato and I had other meetings at the university. Pierre and I had an amazing conversation; we spoke at length about a variety of theoretical perspectives. I was perplexed by Pierre's expressed aversion to being thought of as "white." He espoused a desire for society not to construct itself with labels affiliated with gender or sexuality, and most importantly, to construct itself without race categories. He recognized that this was a current impossibility, as inequalities between labeled identity groups exist, but the future he works towards is one that does not organize identity along racial lines. Instinctually, this gave me pause – what motivations might a white person have for no longer wanting to be recognized as white, in the wake of whiteness's history of violent colonialism?

In reconsidering our conversation, however, I recognize that Pierre's perspective was far more complex than I allowed. In my conversation about Trump with Dawie, it felt as though Dawie was allowing his whiteness to more thoroughly inform his perspective than his queerness. Pierre was calling on white people to end our tendency to allow our whiteness to supplant and overrule every other aspect of our identities, and to instead allow ourselves the understanding that our

liberation is tied up in the liberation of all peoples.

* * *

In 2014, South Africa developed a government structure intended to help prevent LGBTI hate crimes and develop a supportive response. The National Task Team (NTT) convenes to provide guidance to and supervision of Provincial Task Teams (PTT) and their post-harm counterparts, the Rapid Response Teams (RRT). Nonprofits, medical representatives, and advocacy groups sit on the teams alongside the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DoJ&CD), the South African Police Service (SAPS), and other government bodies.

I certainly was not expecting to sit on a PTT, let alone alongside the Deputy Minister of the DoJ&CD on the NTT. When Lerato first informed me that we'd be making the trip to Johannesburg for a government meeting, I expected to sit behind Lerato, taking notes and observing the conversation.

The drive was long, but pleasant – we'd been joined by our dear colleague Denise

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Zambezi, of Access Chapter Two, another LGBTI advocacy organization that works closely with OUT. Lerato laughed at the constant questions I was posing to him – I'd done my research, and was familiar with the individuals who'd be present for the meeting of the PTT, but the documents I'd found describing the mandate of the task team had been vague. I'd just completed a project reviewing the organization's founding



Working on a legal research project which quantitatively analyzed the ability of the South African Equality Court system to secure justice for LGBTI persons.

My heart leapt to my throat, in confusion and surprise. I did my best to smile and introduce myself before taking my place at the table beside Lerato. I hadn't prepared for this – as an American undergraduate intern, what on earth did I have to contribute to such a critically important discussion? What right did I have to take that seat, one which had been fought for by black African activists?

texts, as they'd come up for review, and already I felt that my offering of feedback on documents of such great importance was too significant a responsibility.

I was petrified as we parked, exited, and walked to the DoJ&CD building, where the PTT meeting was to be held. It was a vast, tall edifice, across the street from another imposing government building, and the prospect of sitting behind Lerato to take notes was intimidating enough – what right did I have to access the space?

Lerato signed both of us in with the security guard, and I felt a first twinge of realization that something was not as I expected when he wrote "OUT Representative" beside my name, rather than "OUT Intern." We entered the conference room, and I looked around with a note of panic – there wasn't any seating besides the chairs laid out around

the vast square table. I recognized the faces of a number of critically important LGBTI activists and organization directors from my web searches in preparation for the day. *Oh well*, I thought to myself, *I'll just pull a chair back*.

Lerato and I approached the table, and I moved to drag a chair away. Then, Lerato announced to the room:

"Hi all, apologies for our delay in traffic. Please welcome Paul Sindberg to the task team as my co-representative from OUT."

My heart leapt to my throat, in confusion and surprise. I did my best to smile and introduce myself before taking my place at the table beside Lerato. I hadn't prepared for this – as an American undergraduate intern, what on earth did I have to contribute to such a critically important discussion? What right did I have to take that seat, one which had been fought for by black African activists?

I took notes furiously during the meeting but remained largely silent, panicking every time Lerato asked for my input. In no way was I prepared for the responsibility of contributing to a discussion on the provincial-wide strategy for preventing hate crimes.

After the four-hour session, I was overjoyed to meet several of the icons of the South African queer liberation movement. Dr. Mveleli Gqwede, popularly known as "Dr. Love" and a controversial public figure in the gay rights movement, gave me a hug and welcomed me enthusiastically to the space; given that I had known about Dr. Love for months prior to my summer in South Africa, this was a surreal experience.

On the way back to Pretoria, Lerato explained his motivation for introducing me the way he had, and for having me take a seat beside him on the committee.

"Look," he said. "I know this was a lot. But I have nobody else at OUT who can attend, and they give me two seats."

"And Paul," he continued. "You are an American. Perhaps your presence will teach them that other people are watching."

Over the course of the summer I would also sit on the NTT, an NTT working group to allocate the 12-million-rand biannual budget, and a PTT working group to develop a yearlong program strategy. My strategy became simple: do a ton of research in advance, take notes on every aspect of the conversation, and only speak when asked to do so. Whenever a volunteer was needed to take notes or support the group in a non-contributory fashion, I would volunteer; I quickly learned that I needed to memorize the spelling of every participant's name, as well as the names of every major region and town in Gauteng province. I made flashcards, but I still made mistakes on a few occasions taking notes on a board in front of the group. Mercifully, everyone was friendly, understanding, and more than willing to laugh with me as I attempted to correct myself.

This was a deeply educational experience, as I observed the ways in which these institutions work to support LGBTI persons. This space constitutes an institutional attempt to create opportunity for LGBTI persons, and contrasts with Thabiso's extra-institutional forging of queer opportunity. It was complicated – certainly, there is power in these task team structures, but at the same time, it was jarring to hear from SAPS about its progress towards successfully investigating LGBTI hate crimes while seeing in person its failure to do so.

It was also jarring to notice the disparities of experience between the people who sat on the task teams and their constituents. The working group to allocate the NTT's budget opened with a catered brunch, met

in a conference room festooned with crystal chandeliers, and retired to a buffet dinner after the meeting – while Thabiso was living with family and had sold many of his assets to finance his mission. How can institutions hold themselves accountable to the communities they serve? Is it appropriate for such an institution to be composed of individuals from a different socioeconomic background than its constituents? These are questions I think I must continue to consider far into the future.

* * *

“I’m just sick and tired of that specific kind of foreigner,” said Dylan, his glittery eyeshadow catching the flame of his lighter as he lit a cigarette. “...you know, those who wanna come in and call us all racists. Like their relationship to Africa is the same as mine.”

Seth gave me a sidelong glance. In many respects, I certainly was that specific kind of foreigner. I was sitting on a couch with Seth – my friend – and two of his friends, Kyle and Dylan. Kyle is a producer and Dylan is a musician, both of whom are very active in the queer art scene in Johannesburg. We’d just come from a concert at which Dylan had performed with another friend of his and the queer U.S. rapper Mykki Blanco.

“I think,” I said, “that so many Americans don’t want to recognize that we’re, like, totally racists, too. Like, Americans use places like South Africa to sort of, absolve ourselves of our responsibility to deal with the colonialism and racism in our own country. Like, we do it to position ourselves as less racist than others, and so like we can act superior to them. Which is colonialist, too, right?”

Kyle laughed, and Dylan smiled. Dylan and Kyle have two huge grey savannah cats – one stalked over to me and hopped up on the couch as Seth flipped on the TV.

The concert had been spectacular. Seth and I had moshed with Mykki Blanco, and we knew the cameras had caught us – perhaps we’d make it into Mykki Blanco’s documentary on queer life in South Africa. Kyle had organized the concert, and Dylan’s performance had also been spectacular. He’d hand-embroidered the skirt he wore. I was quite intimidated by them both.

Before I arrived in South Africa, Seth, Dylan, and Kyle had organized an event they called “Queer in Public.” A number of beautiful, brave, and brilliant queer artists and activists dressed up in their most outrageous, club-kid inspired looks, and conducted a photoshoot throughout Johannesburg. It was an event about claiming space for queer bodies, celebrating them, and designating queer art as beautiful.

Just like those godforsaken chickens that darted between my legs at every possible opportunity, queerness mandates that we, too, make our own opportunities, and that we do so bravely. We must do this in our activism, we must do this to find love, and we must do this to build community. One of the most powerful things that my queer siblings in South Africa taught me this summer was that we can seize these opportunities in celebration, too. “Queer in Public” and the Mykki Blanco concert are examples of this, as is the party we threw in Kroonstad. Queer folk can strut into the club in high heels, mascara, and too much glitter, and find restoration and healing in our bravery.

I want to work towards a future that is inclusive, equal, and supportive. I have a lot to learn about that future, and a lot to learn about how to get there, but this summer demonstrated for me the fact that this future is queer and it is already being actualized by queer people. I will move forward in my mission to bravely seize even the most remote of opportunities, confident in the knowledge that I am not alone in this effort.

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I grabbed my glass of water off the coffee table and drank while Seth clicked on a music video by FAKA, another queer band from Johannesburg. The cat jumped onto my lap, which totally surprised me, and I dropped the glass, promptly spilling water all over the floor. Everyone laughed, and my mind flashed to my third day on the job, when I was also spilling things. Yes, I’m learning, and growing, and becoming a more fully realized person, but I will always be as klutzy as a drunken gazelle. Oh well, I thought to myself. At least I’d known that the pap we’d eaten for dinner that night was best consumed by hand.

Notes

1. Lind, Amy. *Development, Sexual Rights and Global Governance*. N.p.: Routledge, 2010. Print.
2. Sontag, Susan. *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. N.p.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989. Print.

Envisioning the World as it Should Be: Jewish Community Organizing Across Identities in Chicago

Leah Susman '18



"You should really read this article... I'll send it to you," Avra said. We were talking about the role gender plays in community organizing. In my time with the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA), I had started to delve into my suspicion that women's labor is often invisible, especially their contributions to community organizing. The article that Avra suggested I read not only confirmed my theory but offered a new way of looking at organizing – one that eventually led me to rethink my ideas on the role of identity in the field.

I wasn't surprised that identity politics came up in my work doing community organizing with JCUA. But the role my own identity played this past summer, while I was working on a campaign to improve police accountability and the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color in Chicago, felt more complicated than ever. I had always professed Jews' responsibility to help liberate oppressed peoples; we are all too familiar with being persecuted on the basis of our identity. On the other hand, as a white person with a heck of a lot of privilege, I know that representing my identity as also part of a persecuted group was going to be a challenge.

* * *

Rewind to my first day with JCUA: Monday, June 5th. My supervisor wanted me to go to Midwest Academy's community organizing training – really, a dream of mine. Midwest Academy's summer program trains a cohort of community organizing interns from a number of different placements across Chicago. Last year, I got to meet Heather Booth, the founder of Midwest Academy, at J Street U's Summer Leadership Institute. I was wide-eyed in that session with Booth: a prophet in the world of community organizing, who had herself learned from the esteemed Saul Alinsky, then broke off from his teachings and creating her own structure for community organizing – one that relied on women, instead of only men, as change-makers. SWOON.

* * *

I first started to get involved with community organizing when I joined J Street U, the student movement working to end the occupation of the West Bank and bring about a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine. As soon as I set foot on Brandeis' campus, I knew J Street U was my political home. As I got more and more involved in J Street U, I realized there were a number of reasons I was there. The students were probably the sharpest group I had ever met. They thought so deeply and intentionally about how to take action and agitate to move the American Jewish establishment toward acting against the occupation of the West Bank, in ways I had never even considered. Though I was somewhat intimidated, I was also enticed by the sense of power and agency these students had. And damn, were they passionate about this. As college progressed, the students in J Street U became my community.

The deep sense of responsibility for the oppression of Palestinians at the hands of the Jewish state that drove me to join J Street U had begun before I came to Brandeis. I had spent the summer before my first year of college working at an integrated Arab-Jewish day school. About a week after I arrived in Jerusalem, the three yeshiva boys who were kidnapped by Hamas were found dead. And so ensued the 2014 Gaza War. Bomb shelter drills.... Actual hiding in bomb shelters as missiles were detected.... Sometimes my Arab campers didn't come to class because



Photo: Emma Drongowski

Leading a phone bank to sustain and build JCUA's base and membership.

there were Israeli Defense Forces soldiers standing by their bus stop, viewing them as a safety risk. Later in the summer, my Arab campers would come to class and with sweaty palms and red cheeks, report on their families in Gaza, hiding from rockets without access to bomb shelters. One day we learned that a student, Karim, lost a cousin in Gaza. Looking back at a journal entry from that summer, I am reminded of how deeply the Gaza War of 2014 affected me.

July 13, 2014 6:37 AM

How can the rest of the world be so normal at a time like this? I texted my mom last night that I felt immobilized. I was up past 1 am, and I couldn't stop crying about the situation here. I am very safe, but I am scared. I am scared of what my people are doing to innocent people. My mom tells me that

Gazan people are not going into shelters and Israel is retaliating. If Israel doesn't, then other tragedies may happen. The country is constantly threatened. Hamas does not want two states – they want to wipe out Israel... This, I understand. I also understand that the people of Gaza are being told they will be martyrs if they use themselves as human shields. But still, how is it right for Israel to kill so many innocent civilians? I feel as though this is becoming a humanitarian issue just as much as it is a political issue. I am working at a coexistence camp this summer, but right now, coexistence seems impossible. It seems as though Hamas is lighting a match and throwing it at Israel while Israel is throwing a blowtorch at Gaza. Israel can protect the Hamas fire from spreading because they can put out the match. The only defense Gaza has is its people, human shields. But if there

are human shields there, then why is Israel deliberately continuing the operation and subsequently killing these people? Last night, while I was soundly sleeping in my apartment in Jerusalem, there was the most destruction to Gaza and its people since the beginning of the Six Day War. I'm told Hamas is a terrorist organization, but the only place receiving terror right now is Gaza, and it's from the IDF. I want to support Israel. I want to understand their reasoning. But I can't comprehend it. Last night was the first time I felt ashamed to be a Jew. Maybe I am totally misinformed... I hope so.

That summer was when I learned that Israel was not the "light unto the nations" I was raised believing it was. Considering Jews' history of oppression and persecution on the basis of their identity, I had always expected that Israel would represent the best version of democracy and equality. But my ideas could not be any further from the truth.

That summer was the first time I felt ashamed of the Jewish people because of the oppression the Jewish state brought to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. My pain and sense of betrayal became a hot and fiery anger that launched me toward never looking away from this terrible conflict. It became clear to me that Jews have to take action to oppose the oppressiveness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict not only for Palestinians but for Israelis as well. The realities of the conflict led me to focus on working to make the Jewish people the best that we could be.

My sense of disillusionment around Israel's oppression of Palestinian people awoke in me a larger awareness of marginalized people's struggles, and especially of where traditional American Jewish leadership stood on them. As I became more and more critical of my community's politics on Israel, I also started to notice the gaps between American Jewish leadership's values and actions when it came to racial justice.

In August 2017, the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), the organization that “define[s] and advance[s] the values, interests and priorities of the organized Jewish community of Greater Boston...”, released a statement withholding their support from the Movement for Black Lives (MBL) due to the assertion in MBL’s platform that Israel is perpetrating a genocide against Palestinians. MBL’s language stung. Making this claim with the language of genocide cannot help but negatively provoke and upset Jews and the Jewish state by reminding us of our collective trauma during the Holocaust. And references to Israel as the face of global imperialism are usually laced with anti-Semitic tropes. But I was still embarrassed. I stood with Black lives (is that even a question?), and I couldn’t look away from supporting the strongest civil rights movement of my time. I resented the Boston JCRC for forcing Boston Jews to choose between our commitment to racial justice in America and our Jewish commitments. My #BlackLivesMatter tweets and attendance at Black Lives Matter rallies in Boston weren’t enough. Where were the white Jews taking action for racial justice? What about Jews of color? Where were the Jews putting into action the values of loving the stranger and releasing from their oppression the present-day slaves of Egypt? Why did I feel so alone?

Time and again I felt attacked by the ways that American Jewish communal institutions, who claimed to represent me and the rest of my community, took control of deciding what it means to be Jewish politically. I had enough of these institutions’ silencing determination of Jewish values for my generation and for me. Just like American Jewish institutions’ choice to be complicit in the occupation of the West Bank and the oppression of Palestinians, they also became complicit in the over-policing of Black bodies, some of whom were Jewish themselves. I was angry. It was time for me to take the same energy

and determination I had been directing toward the American Jewish community’s contribution to the occupation and apply it to the American Jewish community’s complicity in police brutality and the oppression of Black folks in the US. This is what brought me to work with the JCUA.

* * *

It’s my final day at the Midwest Academy organizer training, and I scan over the strategy chart my supervisor has provided me. So I’m to develop 6-8 leaders this summer...not sure that’s going to happen. “25 new members, 50 membership renewals, 1-2 info sessions.” Eight weeks. No pressure. Apparently my supervisor wanted to set the goals so I could “shoot for the moon and land amongst the stars,” one might say – though personally, I’d rather just shoot for the stars and reach them. Come on – who wants to reach half the goals they set out for themselves? If you ask me, that’s a sure way to make someone feel like a failure.

My #BlackLivesMatter tweets and attendance at Black Lives Matter rallies in Boston weren’t enough. Where were the white Jews taking action for racial justice? What about Jews of color? Where were the Jews putting into action the values of loving the stranger and releasing from their oppression the present-day slaves of Egypt? Why did I feel so alone?



Photo: Hannah Arwe

Coordinating the canvassing of a train station to bring Chicago residents to call on their aldermen to pass an ordinance that embraces an ethical police contract.

However...I really can't wait to roll up my sleeves and get to work. Coming from spending a semester studying abroad can make you feel like all you're doing is taking from the world and not doing anything for anyone else around you. JCUA, "the Jewish voice for social justice in Chicago," is about to unleash its racial justice campaign, and I am giddy with joy to be able to finally put my values into action. JCUA's police accountability campaign is largely concerned with bringing about a new police contract that holds police officers accountable. After having organized around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with J Street U, I am really looking forward to doing organizing on a local level.

JCUA is working with the Coalition for Police Contract Accountability (CPCA) to secure changes in the Chicago police union contract negotiations. Currently, their contracts make it too hard to identify police misconduct and too easy for officers to lie about misconduct, and require officials to destroy evidence, making police brutality too hard to investigate. It was in the context of these

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... I'm tired from the hours I've been working but also exhausted by the questions I've been asking myself.

troubling contract clauses that the police officer who murdered Laquan McDonald had avoided any responsibility or punishment.

On October 20, 2014, Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke shot Laquan McDonald, a Black teenager struggling with mental illness. While those who are arrested for homicide are usually immediately questioned, under his union contract, Officer Van Dyke was given 24 hours to come up with a story about the death of Laquan McDonald. A year later, once the evidence came out that Van Dyke shot McDonald 16 times, he was given yet another opportunity to change his story – all in accord with the police union contract. The story of Laquan McDonald and numerous other Black Chicagoans being abused or worse by police officers has made it clear that the Chicago Police Department needs to be held responsible for the unequal and brutal treatment of Black people when it comes to police brutality.

In working with the Coalition for Police Contract Accountability, JCUA is trying to get Chicago aldermen to refuse a new contract that does not incorporate 14 changes they have recommended. In working to support these coalitions, I'm aiming to work with six to eight JCUA members toward taking active leadership in the organization. I am specifically focusing my energy on developing these leaders who live in the three wards in which JCUA has committed to building support. The goal is for the residents in those three wards to put pressure on their aldermen to refuse any police union contract that does not include CPCA's recommendations.

* * *

Is this what being a good ally feels like? I'm going on hour 59 of work this week, and if I had the energy to combust I probably would, but since I do not, I will probably just crawl into bed as soon as I get home. Maybe I'm

starting to really live out the community organizer persona – overworked and underpaid. I'm tired from the hours I've been working but also exhausted by the questions I've been asking myself.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the roles race and gender play in organizing. This past weekend, I helped facilitate a training that Midwest Academy ran at the United State of Women's Galvanize Summit in Chicago. Sponsored by the Obama and Biden Foundations, the conference aimed to activate the seeds planted at the Women's March.

There were several tracks this weekend, one of which was a community-organizing track that Midwest Academy led. Each of the Midwest Academy interns were there to help facilitate the training, which basically entailed passing out papers, answering questions, and checking in on each group to make sure they were understanding the exercises properly.

I lifted up the black plastic lever, and hot liquid splashed out into my paper cup. As I was adjusting the lid on my coffee cup, I saw Kweli standing next to me, sliding her coffee into one of those brown paper sleeves. "Hey Leah, Judy and I decided to make you the lead facilitator this weekend, which really just entails you making sure that things are running smoothly with the other facilitators, that they're passing out all the materials and checking in with the tables that need help. Sound good?"

I was so flattered – until I became the superior to the other interns who are usually my peers. I felt even more uncomfortable as one of the only white interns in the cohort, managing the other interns who were mostly people of color.

"Hey Keesha, how 'bout you check in with that table over there, I know they had some trouble understanding the last concept."

“Jamie, I think we need more hands on those two tables.”

By the end of the third session, some of the interns were sitting at the back table, their faces illuminated by the blue lights coming from their phone screens, their pointer fingers scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. “I just wanna go to bed,” Keesha announced, slumping into her hand resting on the table. Jamie leaned back into their chair and put their right hand over their eyes. “You’re so funny, Keesha,” they said, shaking their head between laughs.

We still had another session left, but I decided it would be better if I just didn’t say anything to Jamie, Keesha, and the other interns who wanted to be done for the day. It didn’t feel right to be on their cases, for two reasons. The first one was that we’re normally equals, and since it’s not really my place to ask them to pull their weight most days, it felt uncomfortable to create that dynamic today, at least for the sake of our relationships during the rest of the time we’re training together. The second reason, but the louder one in my ears, was that maybe the other interns with less structural privilege than I have thought that I had no role doing social justice work as a white woman from the Northshore suburbs.

Earlier in the day, Jamie had been talking about reparations. It felt pretty backwards for me to be the “supervisor” of people of color, asking them to complete more work and labor. I decided to just carry out their roles myself. Although I was doing about three times the work I should have been doing, I’d rather be overworked than handle this strange power dynamic.

* * *

I need to better figure out how to navigate power dynamics when it comes to race and community organizing. I know this is not the last time I will be working with



Photo: Leah Susman

United State of Women: Galvanize Chicago Summit. Through Midwest Academy, Leah facilitated this community organizing training for 100 women.

people of color, and this may not be the last time I will be a supervisor of people of color. Race-based power dynamics are also at the forefront of JCUA’s thinking. In my time here, I’ve learned that when JCUA is working on a campaign related to lifting up communities of color, they will not run their own campaign, but instead will work with a coalition of groups for and led by people of color. That’s what we’re doing with the police accountability campaign, and it feels important to me that we leave the goals of our campaigns in the hands of those who are most affected by them.

Working in a coalition is not something I have experienced in the past, but the coalition model that JCUA has adopted means that they accept a kind of supervision by people of color. Having built my organizing resume through my work with J Street U, we have always led our own campaigns, working to end the occupation and bring about a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine. Though J Street U is comprised mainly of American Jewish students, determining Israel’s future and influencing the way they treat Palestinians feels as much of a Jewish issue as it is an

Israeli issue. In working with J Street U, I’ve been able to strategize around influencing the American Jewish community and American politics, and take the lead on our campaigns. Working in a coalition and having less agency and ownership over a campaign is definitely something to get used to. It’s not that I think white people are the right ones to lead a campaign that affects mainly people of color. Maybe I prefer to be with a community organizing group that is not answerable to anyone but ourselves, because of the sense of agency I have over making the transition from the world as it is to the world as it should be.

Navigating these types of identity politics definitely posed a challenge for the rest of the organizing team at JCUA too. We were presented with a really incredible opportunity to galvanize Chicago this summer. On June 30th, the unethical police union contracts were up, and our senior organizer had been planning how to launch the Chicago Jewish base for months, in preparation for some type of action aimed to turn out lots of people and raise the public profile of the moral dilemma posed by Chicago’s police union contract.

But what is it about actualizing my ideas and values that is so important to me? Do I want to work on issues that do not directly affect me? Can I work effectively on those issues?

What ended up happening is that the organizations that we were working with had some employment changes and some of their organizers were on vacation, so the plan to galvanize Chicago around police accountability fell through.

JCUA did not take over the organization of a march or other large event. Had we done this, we would have sent the message that people of color needed white people to liberate them from their oppression, rather than the idea that they have the power to liberate themselves. For that reason, the event would have been completely different, had it been perceived as a mainly white organization taking action on an issue that is not our own. Instead, the day of action took the shape of a press conference and canvassing. While both the press conference and canvassing were successful, they did not get nearly as much press, awareness, and attention as a mass action would have. But, maybe this is JCUA's unique contribution to the fight for racial justice and against police brutality – to make sure our own community is doing all that we can.

On a more personal note, a big part of what I love about community organizing is the ability to actualize my ideas and my values – to strategize. However, our role is not to lead the fight in overturning police brutality, but instead to carry out what those who are targeted by police brutality

ask of us. Something I struggle with is that I am not sure if working on campaigns that I cannot take strategic ownership of is the right move for me in the future. Part of what draws me to community organizing is the sense of empowerment I feel from being able to come up with solutions to problems. At times, bringing the Jewish community toward taking action does not feel like it is enough, if that is not what solves the problem. But feeling stifled by my structural position makes it hard for me to feel agency over the work.

But what is it about actualizing my ideas and values that is so important to me? Do I want to work on issues that do not directly affect me? Can I work effectively on those issues? Are my abilities better used on issues that do directly affect me?

I guess these are pretty much all questions about my self-interest, which in community organizing means my motivations for taking action. I think that my self-interest has shape-shifted over the years. Parts of it from when I was 18 are still present, and other parts, not so much. And I've developed new self-interests. When I left Jerusalem in the summer of 2014, my self-interest was based on my sense of guilt and responsibility for Jews' perpetration of oppression and occupation of Palestinians, and other Jews' silence about it. Out of all the human rights-based issues in the world, I chose to work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because of the feelings I harbored about Jews' place in it.

* * *

Trump's election made me feel smaller and more powerless than I ever had. In the effort to regain that sense of lost power, I took action with J Street U. It may have not been the exact place I wanted to regain myself, but it was the place I knew how to build power, and the place where I knew that I could.

Ella, another student organizer, from Wesleyan, and I were hunting for the way to best galvanize the anger around Trump in the American Jewish community. On top of being a rapist, racist, and xenophobe, he also was the first president in decades to drop the two-state solution from his foreign policy platform. After weeks upon months of one-on-one organizing conversations and meetings, Ella and I finally got J Street U moving on launching a march at our national conference in February.

When more than 1,000 students marched to the White House, I felt strong again. J Street U is my team in forgetting the world as it is and creating the world as it should be.

The J Street U national board led the march, and many of them made speeches once we got to the White House. It was the same national board that did virtually no work to make the march happen, but Ella and I were too proud of the image of more than 1,000 angry students demanding a two-state solution and an end to the occupation for us to comment on it at the time.

* * *

This past summer, I was happy to work with Avra, who had joined the staff as a community organizer about a month and half before I began. Avra had short, cropped hair and wore glasses. She was much better at navigating the "radical Jewish feminist" vibe in the workplace than I was – slacks and natural armpits compared to my colorful dress and shaved armpits. Avra came into JCUA at just the right time – right as the police accountability work started to hit the ground. Our community organizer, Danny, who had been around since the beginning of JCUA's organizing work, would leave just a few months after she started – just the right amount of time to show her the ropes.

I loved Avra's ideas. She wanted to build JCUA into a social justice home for Jewish Chicagoans – this type of community thrives in cities like New York and Boston but not yet in Chicago, and Avra was going to make it happen. She and I talked a lot about gender roles and the idea of “public and private” organizing – in which private relationships (code for “relationships where we talk about our feelings”) – are considered feminine and unprofessional.

In the community organizing that I had been involved with, the idea of public vs. private has played a large role in my organizing experience. Brian, the organizer who has developed me more than any other person in the organization, knows me on a very public or “professional” level. In our conversations, we try to stay away from everything private – anything that may distract from what we are trying to achieve. But I have found that this type of divide between public and private has made it challenging for Brian and me to understand each other as full people. It is likely part of the reason that Brian doesn't fully recognize the extent of the work that I put into our organizing. And it is also likely part of why I am unaware of where his struggles with organizing lie. Overall, it feels as though our organization is consumed by a culture where we only know half of each person we work with – the public or “professional” half.

* * *

“You should really read this article... I'll send it to you,” Avra advised. The article ended up changing entirely the way I think about relationships in community organizing. Titled “Community Organizing or Organizing Community?” by Randy Stoecker and Susan Stall (1996), it helped me understand why community organizing as I knew it, which I associated with Saul Alinsky's methods, does not prioritize

community and personal relationships. In his book *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky notes that community organizing is not a job for family or marital types, essentially asserting that it is not possible to be both a community organizer and also attend to a family. He refers to this balance in claiming, that “the tension, the hours, the home situation, and the opportunities, do not argue for fidelity.” From this, it is clear that Alinsky does not support putting women at the center of organizing, since women were generally responsible for raising children and being homemakers when *Rules for Radicals* was published in 1971. Further, Alinsky's model is one that focuses more on public sphere strategizing than on private sphere relationships to achieve change.

It has become clear to me that this decades-old tradition has affected my relationship to community organizing altogether. Stoecker and Stall's 1996 article helped me see the flipside of the practices to which I had been accustomed: “[U]nlike the Alinsky model, women-centered organizing involvement does not emanate from self-interest but from an ethic of care maintained by relationships....” Alinsky-style organizing places value on relationships in the context of how those relationships are strategic and can help us win public fights – how relationships can help us achieve our self-interest.

Understanding the roots behind the emphasis that femininity, synonymous with weakness, placed on personal relationships and feelings in community organizing has helped me better understand why my leadership is overlooked at times. And understanding what Stoecker and Stall define as women-centered organizing has helped me reassess the role that full and personal relationships play in community organizing as I plan to practice it.

* * *

It feels as though our organization is consumed by a culture where we only know half of each person we work with – the public or “professional” half.

My journey in community organizing within the American Jewish community has been consistently shaped by questioning aspects of my identity: race, gender, religion, and politics. I have continued to reflect on my place as an agent of change in challenging race and gender-based power structures, in order to recreate a Jewish community that I want to be a part of. The world as it should be will only come through organizing a Jewish community that acts for justice and against oppression.



Photo: Emma Drongowski

Leah at a rally to make Chicago a sanctuary city, with fellow Midwest Academy summer internship cohort member, Raunel.



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