

Stars in the Sky: Race, Class, and Security in Randleman, North Carolina

RAMON DE JESUS '08



Allow me to reintroduce myself...

The drive down from Worcester, Massachusetts, was long and boring. Fourteen hours of trees and highway whizzed by my head as I drove down to Randleman, North Carolina, home of the Victory Junction Gang Camp (VJGC), where I was to spend my summer. As I pulled into what I thought would be the end of my drive, I was confronted by a dirt road and came to the realization that I had driven into a trailer park. Those hours spent toying with Mapquest were for absolutely nothing, and although livid, I quickly composed myself in order to pull the fastest U-turn I have ever performed. Too exhausted to explain what I was doing hundreds of miles away from home at 2:00 a.m., I found my way out of the trailer park before the couple drinking beers in front of my headlights could approach my car.

This long drive down, and the subsequent summer experience, had actually started during the summer of 2006 when I worked at Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp (HITWGC), the flagship camp of The Hole in the Wall Gang Camps, located in Ashford, Connecticut. I learned of the HITWGC the same way I had learned about Brandeis: through the Posse Foundation. Every spring, the Posse Foundation publishes an internship booklet for its scholars containing opportunities with partner organizations. Within this booklet I found the HITWGC, and after reading the description I was hooked. I had never attended summer camp during my own childhood, and thus I wanted nothing more than to work at this camp. After a long application process I was hired to the position of cabin counselor, and the fun began.

Taking a step back, however, one thing that stood out to me in that summer of 2006 was the reason behind the camp's partnership with the Posse Foundation. Although it is true that Posse participants were being offered positions because of our leadership abilities, it was also true, due to the demographics from which Posse draws its applicant pool, that we were being selected to increase the number of minority staff members. This does present us with a question to be answered: why is there such a shortage of minority applicants to work at summer camps? This question, which I believe to be one of both race and class, became my main query for my 2007 summer experience at the VJGC.

Refocusing on my journey, once I was back on a main road, I phoned the camp director, who safely guided me to the camp entrance. At this moment I noticed that even before you arrive at the VJGC gates, there is a security system in place to keep the "outside" world out of camp. Although this first level of the system is probably unintentional — I don't believe that there is a Mapquest conspiracy to keep you out of Victory Junction — I do believe that faulty directions will keep uninvited guests out of the camp. This is a security system that I would become very familiar with over the course of the summer, as it would continuously play a part in the day-to-day happenings at camp. Furthermore, its many facets would reveal themselves as the summer went on and would end up being referred to as the "bubble." After such a long drive, however, I was not willing to give this too much thought, as the only thing on my mind was crawling into bed.

Saving the detailed introductions for the following day, I was escorted to my cabin where I quickly fell asleep. That night, with only partial awareness of what was to come, I embarked on a journey that would be like none other before it. For the next two and a half months, I would be immersed in a place like none other in the world. Victory Junction became a place that would challenge my ideas of security while giving credence to some of my thoughts about the intersection of race and class.

Over the course of the summer I would grapple with the many interpretations of security that were present at camp while struggling to understand the race and class dynamics that were at play.

Unbeknownst to me, when I agreed to become a cabin counselor at the VJGC, I was also agreeing to live in an area of the U.S. that was very adamant about legal possession of firearms. To my surprise, many of my co-counselors, who are some of the most gentle and kindhearted people that I have ever met, had licenses to carry concealed weapons. One of my coworkers even had a safe-like structure in his house that was filled with an assortment of firearms. Although they were for hunting purposes and handguns were not included in the arsenal, they were firearms nonetheless. The idea of benevolent individuals who carried concealed weapons was very foreign to me, and served as a stark contrast to my upbringing. After all, I grew up in a place where only two kinds of people carried weapons: criminals and police officers, both of whom I grew up learning to distrust and

fear. Being in this new kind of environment in North Carolina would challenge my ideas of security so much that by the end of my experience my outlook on firearms, and the people who owned them, completely changed.

Over the course of the summer I would grapple with the many interpretations of security that were present at camp while struggling to understand the race and class dynamics that were at play. Enriched with stories from my childhood and accounts of the interactions that took place throughout the summer, what follows is a detailed description of my experience at Victory Junction.

From the outside looking in...

Located on 72 acres of private land in Randleman, North Carolina, the Victory Junction Gang Camp, a NASCAR-themed year-round camp, serves a unique population. As a member of The Hole in The Wall Gang Camps, Victory Junction provides a free-of-cost camp experience to children with a range of chronic illnesses. Although the HITWGC association was founded by Paul Newman, Victory Junction itself is the creation of Kyle and Pattie Petty, a tribute to their son Adam Petty, who passed away as a result of a fatal car accident on the race track. Operated solely on donations from corporations and individuals, the camp is able to meet the needs of children suffering from conditions such as sickle cell anemia, HIV/AIDS, cancer, and spina bifida, just to mention a few. This experience is an opportunity that very few places in the world offer; Victory Junction is one of the places where these children can have a safe camp experience.

Throughout the summer the camp runs week-long disease/condition-specific sessions. That is to say, each week, a different group of children will enter through the camp gates and participate in activities with children who are afflicted by the same illnesses. Although the majority of children participate in camp during the summer, camp is also active during the other seasons. Outside of the traditional summer camp experience, VJGC has family weekends during the fall, winter, and spring. During these weekends, up to 32 families will come to the campgrounds and participate in many of the activities that the camp offers during the summer.

In my previous paragraph, I used the phrase “traditional summer camp experience,” but as you could have already guessed, VJGC is anything but “traditional.” While it has much to do with the population being served – for example, there is a full-time medical staff comprised of doctors and nurses, all buildings are handicap-accessible, and there are handicap showers/stalls in every cabin – it also has to do with the physical look of the place.

For starters, at the entrance to the camp, there is a mansion-like black iron gate with a keypad in front; to enter, you either need to know the keypad code or call the camp to be let in. Once inside, you are greeted by a state-of-the-art welcome center donated by Wal-Mart; it’s big, fancy, and does not give off the “You are at a camp” vibe. For this reason, the atmosphere that is usually associated with a summer camp, of authentic nature and “the wild outdoors,” is in direct conflict with the visuals presented by the welcome center. Once you absorb the sheer size of this initial structure and come to grips with whether or not you are comfortable with the presence of Wal-Mart, a company that has been accused of poor treatment of employees and gentrification of small family-owned businesses, you are faced with the Temkin Tunnel. The Temkin Tunnel separates the welcome area of camp from the portion of camp where the children are. This tunnel, a donation of the Temkin racing family, is a massive structure that has neon lights inside of it; the lights are only active during the night and are never seen by the children, begging the question: why is it there?

Past the Temkin Tunnel is Cabin Row and as is plainly obvious by its name, it is the area of camp where the cabins are located. Not so obvious in the name, however, is that at the end of Cabin Row, where the “Red Unit”¹ cabins are, there is a cul-de-sac that gives the cabin area a suburban feel. Furthermore, following the theme found in the Temkin Tunnel, all the cabins have neon lights that surround the individual cabin names.² While the images that one is presented with upon first viewing the welcome center and cabin areas are definitely shocking, the activity area, also known as Victory Circle, is positively jaw-dropping and awe-inspiring.

Among the first things that a visitor notices when walking around Victory Circle is Adam's Race Shop, a giant building in the shape and colors of Adam Petty's racing number, 45. With my first viewing, I wondered why this building was shaped like a race car and upon entering Adam's Race Shop, that question was quickly answered. Inside of "45," the campers are greeted by racing simulators, four actual NASCAR vehicles, a television with a library of NASCAR films, and a tire-changing station. When I first saw this, I wanted to ask why all of this was necessary, but I didn't have time to question the giant race-car building because the second thing I noticed was an even bigger shock than the first.

Stepping out of Adam's Race Shop, one is confronted by the Jumbo-Tron, an oversized television screen facing the cabins that is left on all night and is sometimes used for movie screenings on the lawn.³ As I moved around Victory Circle, I was completely numb from the first sights and fell into a zombie-like state that did not allow me to react. Circling around, I took in the fully staffed infirmary, the dining hall that has cars suspended from the ceiling, and the gym that has a self-belaying rock wall, theater, bowling alley, and tree house. By the time I arrived at the pool, I was so awestruck that I took for granted the water park, which contains a lazy river, a pool with a basketball hoop, a hot tub, and giant motorcycle water slide. The amount that the first-time viewer takes in is simply too much.

For all the superfluous expenses that camp has afforded these children, the buildings are not the embodiment of camp. The truth of what is important to the campers was revealed on a nightly basis during "Cabin Chat," a nightly activity comprised of questions that all cabin members would take turns answering. These questions would range from playful: "if you had an empty pool and could fill it with anything in the world, what would you fill it with?"—to heartfelt: "who in the cabin made you smile today and what did they do to make you smile?" Most important of these questions, because it illuminated the essence of camp, was one posed at the end of every week. The night before the campers went home, the question asked was usually one that dealt with the campers' favorite moment at camp. Rarely responding with an answer that glorified the physical spaces found at camp, campers typically pointed out things like: "I enjoyed playing basketball with the counselor because I beat him" or "the time that I raced my cabin mate in a water chug."

If reduced to the "bare bones," one could argue that the VJGC is just like any other summer camp. It has a pool, cabins, a dining hall, and various other activity areas, all of which are standard in the genre of summer camps. The campers enter the gates, play, share laughs, and have fun just like at most other camps. The difference here, however, is that unlike a traditional summer camp experience, a counselor will be there to support his or her hemophilic camper through their "first stick."⁴ On countless occasions, a counselor will be there to cheer on his or her camper when he climbs the tower, all the while telling him that the cancer ravaging his body has not made him too weak to climb. These are bond-forming experiences that cannot be found at a traditional summer camp.

With the creation of the VJGC, the Petty racing family has created a place that not only has all the bells and whistles any kid would love, but also provides an atmosphere where children can have extremely meaningful interactions. While the physical spaces at camp play an important role in helping the staff engage the campers, the heart of the camp experience can be found in the interactions between the human beings on the camper side of the Temkin Tunnel.

It's the drugs, basketball, and the rap. There's more to us than that...

The sights and sounds that I experienced in Randleman, North Carolina, could not be further from the realities of my adolescent years growing up in the Bronx. As a child neither I nor any of my close friends ever participated in sleep-away camps like that of Victory Junction. In fact, this was something that if given the opportunity to partake in, many of us would dismiss as "something white people do"; our "street cred" at the age of 10 was already more important than participating in things that looked like "Bug Juice," a television show about a summer camp that featured a predominantly white staff and camper population. Our dismissal of camp as something meant for whites was not only substantiated by the majority of the participants on "Bug Juice" being white, but was also given credence by the fact that we had never been offered the opportunity to attend a sleep-away camp. Looking back now, it is very possible that a subliminal cultural message was being propagated to us, which made us believe that camp was something not meant for inner-city youth.

In her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, Beverly Tatum examines the development of racial identity, but more importantly provides us with David Wellman's stellar definition of racism. Though controversial, Wellman defines racism as a "system of advantage based on race" in which the dominant (white) class, knowingly or unknowingly, benefits from racism. Furthermore, this definition goes on to state that racism is a system of "cultural messages, institutional policies, and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals" (Wellman, pg. 7). So in essence, whites are given an advantage simply on the basis of their skin. While this is something that many believe to be common knowledge, it was interesting for me to dwell on these thoughts throughout the course of the summer. With the issue of race in mind, I began to wonder if these advantages spread into the realm of camp. In other words, are there factors in play that perpetuate the idea of camp as something meant for middle-class America?

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A very powerful example of what can be considered institutional racism was given to me straight from the VJGC director. One afternoon while speaking with Chris, he revealed to me some information pertaining to the difficulties of hiring black male staff members. Chris and I discussed the lifestyles that are made readily available to young men of color from low-income neighborhoods. We both acknowledged that the options seemed very slim; or as Talib Kweli puts it: "Brothers getting caught in the trap. For the cash it's the drugs, basketball, or the rap." As the conversation continued, certain hypothetical, but very real, situations came into discussion. For example, if a young man had created a lucrative lifestyle for himself by selling drugs, the appeal to work at a summer camp is simply not there. The staff population that was missing at the VJGC, young men who are poor and of color, are often in situations where they have to provide for their siblings, parents, and offspring. Coming to the conclusion that there was little incentive to work at Victory Junction if your income on the street was exponentially greater than that of a camp staff member, Chris and I agreed that this issue constituted a strong deterrent to the missing population. Essentially, many are placed in this situation because of their income levels, and although this is not the foremost reason for low percentages of minority applicants, it is certainly a cause to be considered.

No light at the end of tunnel, we're trapped in a bubble...

As I mentioned earlier, the system of security, which protected you both emotionally and physically, came to be known as the "Bubble." Throughout the summer one noticed very subtle components of the "bubble" which were put in place to keep you immersed in nothing more than camp. One example is the fact that the only television accessible to staff members is a good distance from Cabin Row, where counselors and campers are housed. During the day it was an average of 93 degrees; coincidentally this was the portion of the day when you had your time off. Simply put, it was way too hot to trek down to the staff lounge just to watch television. Combine this with the reality of working no less than 17 hours a day and you have a situation where all you want to do on your free time is rest. This summer, no one at camp really knew what was going on with Britney Spears, what the situation was in Iraq, or who was fighting over the Anna Nicole Smith estate; it simply took too much effort to keep up with these things. Thus, very few staff members were distracted by the happenings that took place outside of our "bubble."

While there were very subtle features of the "bubble," there were also very "in your face" facets of it. The most notable was the multi-level security system that you first notice at the entrance to camp. When you pull up to the main entrance of the camp you are faced with seven-foot-tall black gates that bear the letters VJ in gold. About seven feet in front of these gates is a keypad with a code that changes throughout the course of the summer.

In addition to the physical obstacles presented by the security fence, there are also multiple hidden video cameras on the outside of buildings that continuously monitor the happenings at camp. In conjunction with an employee familiarly called "Stan the Security Man," the camp has created a surveillance system that constantly watches over the camp family. As Stan makes his rounds, he keeps an eye open for camp-issued name tags, which serve the purpose of identification and thus grant permission to be on camp grounds. If you are found without a nametag and staff members fail to recognize you, chances are you do not belong on camp. At this point, you will be kindly escorted off the premises by Stan with a high probability of the Randleman sheriff's department waiting on the other side of the gates.

During the evening hours, the security detail at camp "beefs up" with armed sheriffs who circle the camp on Polaris ATVs (speeds up to 70 mph). From midnight until 6:00 a.m., all activity is restricted to Cabin Row, where the nametag system is strictly enforced. At night, however, if you are seen without a nametag, a phone call to the camp director is usually in order. If you happen to indeed be a staff member, you are usually admonished for not carrying your nametag. For those who are not staff members, trespassing charges are likely to be pressed.

This security system, which seems a bit much, is not without warrant. Due to the popularity of NASCAR and the obsessive nature of some fans, there have been incidents of trespassing on the campgrounds. Due to these incidents, security is taken very seriously, and although there is a relatively high level of precaution, it all helps to keep the children as safe as possible during camp sessions.

The last level of the security system, the sheriff, had an interesting effect on the camp. Part of the reason that other portions of camp were off limits was due to forms of entertainment being located there, such as computers and video games. From my previous summer at the HITWGC, I can honestly say that these are distractions that can keep you awake much longer than you should be and make interaction with other staff members less frequent during the evening hours. By making it so that you had to be on Cabin Row from midnight onwards, an evening "hang out" scene was created on Cabin Row. Without us knowing, we were in essence being forced to spend time with each other. The time that was spent on Cabin Row often transformed into talks about how to deal with certain behavioral issues, or how to communicate better with one camper who seemed a bit distant. It was as if these late-night sessions were used to give tips to each other on how to deal with certain situations.

The final manifestation of "the bubble" came in mandatory events scheduled during intersession, the days between sessions where there are no campers present. The first one of these events came right in the middle of the summer. We were all gathered at the end of the

session and told that we were not to leave camp on the day the children departed because we had training and were also going to be placed in new cabins with new co-counselors. In addition to remaining on camp grounds for departure day, we were also prohibited from leaving camp grounds the following day due to the presence of outside speakers who were going to come in and host various workshops. No one, to my knowledge, was particularly thrilled over having his or her precious “time off” taken away. Although we were all upset over this, we took it in stride and buckled down in preparation for training.

The following day we were brought into the theater and as we readied for guest speakers, it was announced that we would not have guest speakers and instead were going to Carrigan Farms, a beautiful water-filled rock quarry that promised fun and relaxation. Everyone rushed the camp director and gave him the biggest hug he had ever felt. That day, I am 100% sure that everyone in the staff made a connection with someone who they were unfamiliar with, and everyone left the waters of the quarry feeling as if they had just quadrupled their friendships at camp. Activities like this, in which we were obliged to stay together as a staff, forced us to interact with all of camp and establish bonds that would enrich the lives of anyone who stepped through the VJGC gates.

One could interpret the strict security measures as too intense and perhaps a bit tyrannical on the part of the camp administration, but the reality of the situation was nothing like that. In the end, the ones who benefited the most from the “bubble” were the kids. Yes, we were protected from the ugly things that were taking place outside of the gates, but by proxy, so were the children. Furthermore, because the staff spent so much time together, our communication skills greatly improved as the summer went on. I can recount many times when I did not need to use verbal communication to convey certain thoughts to my fellow staff members. The outside world was both a distraction from the work that we had to do and a distraction from the bonds that we were to form. Were it not for the creation of the “bubble,” the community at VJGC would have been a very different and less welcoming place.

In addition to what the bubble did for the community, I will speak for myself when saying that never have I felt safer than I did this summer at Victory Junction. I never had to worry about my physical safety, nor that of the children, a feeling that was very foreign to me while growing up in the Bronx. The constant circling of Stan the Security Man made me feel protected and helped me realize that nothing was going to enter those gates and be able to harm the campers or me. This feeling of complete security is something that many people long for and invest thousands of dollars in the form of alarms, bodyguards, and video cameras. Who knew that I wouldn’t have to spend a dime – all I had to do was drive down south.

The Growth

*“S to the A to the double M Y, Sammy hands! Sammy hands!
S to the A to the double M Y, Sammy hands! Sammy hands!”*

By the end of the summer, Sammy had his own cheer at camp. And in an environment where cheers are being done throughout the entire day, this was huge. His cheer, which was based on his inability to speak without his hands, swept through camp like a wildfire. At this very moment, you are probably wondering what I mean by “inability,” and yes, I assure you that we are both working with the same definition of inability; Sammy really could not refrain from using hand gestures while speaking. The most persistent of these gestures, thus earning the title “Sammy Hands,” involves Sammy shaping his hands like the ASL letter B, and pointing at individuals while speaking to them. While using the Sammy Hands, he would say things like, “I’m gonna need you...” followed by whatever he needed you to do. When asked about why he was unable to speak like a “normal human being,” he would bring out the Sammy Hands and explain that they were used when he needed to be assertive; I guess that he just always needed to be assertive.

In any case, we never came to a conclusion about whether or not this cheer was a good or bad thing. Was he being poked fun at by his peers who created it? Was it created for the pure enjoyment of the children? Or was it a little bit of both? Although I believe it was a little bit of both, none of these questions are important because no matter the motive, all of camp was doing the “Sammy hands.”

When I first met Sammy I thought to myself, “Thank God, I’m not alone.” This was due to Sammy being the only black person at camp, and although I myself am not African American, at the time I believed that he was the person who I would be able to relate to the most. This assumption, however, would prove to be a big mistake. I would find out very quickly that Sammy and I were from two completely different worlds. Not only this, but I often received the impression that Sammy didn’t see himself as black. He just saw himself as Sammy.

Because I was there to gather information on how to recruit a higher number of minority staff, I thought it made perfect sense to introduce the idea to the first person of color that I saw. My game plan involved seeking out the minority staff members, getting to know them, and interviewing the ones that I felt most comfortable with. I assumed that we would have shared experiences, thoughts on race, and similarities in our reasons for loving camp. Furthermore, I thought that these questions would be met

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with a welcoming attitude and a general enthusiasm to speak about the race dynamics at camp. To my surprise, however, my questions were met with confusion. For example, after getting to know Sammy through multiple casual conversations, I told him what my purpose at camp was. He nodded as if to say “I understand, that’s cool,” but looking back on the experience, he might have just been stretching his neck.

One day, believing that it was a good time to ask him some questions, I jumped right into an informal interview by asking him how he felt about being the only African American staff member at camp. To this question, Sammy responded with, “What do you mean?” I tried to rephrase the question in different terms, and when I finally got a response, it wasn’t what I expected. I expected Sammy to speak about how he thought he would serve as a positive role model for the kids during sickle cell session. I expected him to speak on how people assumed he was a good dancer and loved hip hop (neither of which were true. The boy couldn’t dance to save his life and I will spare you the details of the time we took him out to a club). To the contrary, Sammy informed me that no one treated him as if he were any different than they were, and he also told me that I was the first person to make a “big deal” about his race. Because of the lack of attention his race was given by the rest of the staff, he didn’t pay too much attention to the color of his skin and just saw himself as Sammy.

As I got to know Sammy even better, he revealed to me that he had grown up in a very affluent part of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, that his father was a business owner, that he had grown up going to camp all of his life, and that he didn’t have many friends of color back home. In one way, this affirmed what I had entered camp believing, which was that the reason for there being a deficit in staff of color was due more to culture than to ethnicity or race alone. This affirmation, however, still did not make up for the fact that Sammy had turned my world upside down. His stories of attending camp, having very few friends of color, and growing up in affluence were responses that I expected from the Caucasian staff members. Through these conversations I came to the difficult realization that I went into this experience with many assumptions, and although the Sammy Hands were one of the strangest phenomena I have ever encountered, he did teach me a valuable lesson. When you assume, you make an *ass* out of *u* and *me*.

Every tool is a weapon, if you’re holding it right...

It was a hot summer afternoon in 2001, and like many afternoons before it, my friends and I were sitting outside of Sam’s building enjoying time off from school. Games like “poke you in the eye” where one of us would randomly try to poke the other in the eye with our pointer finger, quickly became a dangerous, yet entertaining, staple of the summer. This afternoon, however, would be like none other before it. We had all experienced violence in our everyday lives. The previous week we had a huge block fight in the middle of the street due to someone threatening

to beat up my cousin, and every night we literally fell asleep to the sounds of gunfire. But none of us had ever experienced a shooting while we were all out in the open.

Although our attention should have been drawn to it – the man had circled the block at least three times before we heard the shots ring out – none of us had noticed the bicycle that continuously rounded our neighborhood. We were probably too concerned with the ongoing “poke you in the eye” and the safety of our vision to notice the bicycle that kept appearing on our street. When we heard the distinct sound of gunfire, however, we all ran into the building as fast as we could. Lungs burning, I ran up the stairs in Sam’s building, skipping two and three at a time, until I reached the top floor and could go no higher. For a while we just stood on the final landing repeating the same curse words over and over until we thought it was safe to go back out. By the time we had made our way down the stairs, the street was flooded with people, young and old, trying to figure out what had just happened. We would later find out that someone selling drugs in another dealer’s territory sparked this altercation. At the end of the day, one of our neighborhood drug dealers lay dead on the street.

Looking back on my childhood, in relation to events like the one I have just finished retelling, I realize that there was never a time when I associated firearms with security. I was raised in an environment where police, who were there to “serve and protect,” were mistrusted and feared; those who were there to provide security for us were not looked at in a positive light due to their documented abuses of power. Even when thinking of them as a means to secure your “spot” from another drug dealer, I always saw firearms as an instrument of offensive violence and not defensive security. This summer, however, my view of guns was tested and my notions of what they were meant for were pushed.

The first time that issues of weapons entered my mind this summer was one night after we had put all the kids to bed. Sitting in the common room, my volunteer for the week, a middle-aged insurance salesman, asked me how I ended up at camp. I went on to tell him about my experience working at The Hole in The Wall the previous summer and followed that story with details of how I had recently been the victim of a street crime in Guatemala. “When I was mugged, I saw it as a sign for me to come home,” I ended my story. He replied, “If you had a gun on you, that would’ve never happened. If anyone ever tried that on me and I was carrying my weapon, I would have no problem unloading on them to protect my friends and family.” This comment caught me so off guard that I did not respond. My hesitation then created a window that allowed him to continue commenting on how he would protect his loved ones at any cost and that he had purchased firearms for both of the women in his life, his wife and daughter. At first, all I heard was “guns, guns, guns – violence, violence, violence.” After I had let the comments sink in, however, I realized that what this man was talking about was not violence. It was a very simple affirmation of a belief that we both

shared; if someone threatens those that we love, we would do anything to secure our loved ones' safety.

That same night, after I had finished my conversation with my volunteer, I stepped outside to talk to my co-counselor Steven. I related the whole conversation back to him and as soon as I had finished my story, he responded by saying, "If only you could see Johnson's house." Steven told me that Daniel, a staff member thought of as the "golden boy" of camp, had a massive collection of firearms in his home. Steven told of a giant safe similar to the vaults that are held inside of banks, except that this safe was not filled with money; instead it contained many different firearms. While many of the guns were used for hunting purposes, they were firearms nonetheless and were as effective on a human being as they would be on a deer.

Balancing this apparent obsession with instruments of violence was the fact that Daniel was a "good Christian boy." He went home every weekend to spend time with his parents, never cursed, and sometimes led camp worship services the morning before the campers arrived; simply put, Daniel would never be described as a violent individual. Further solidifying Daniel's status as a kind individual was a story circulating around camp about a homeless man who was in the process of building his home on Daniel's family land – free of cost.

In Daniel's case, one could argue that even the most gentle of individuals are capable of violence. Many times, when dealing with cases of people being accused of violent actions, friends and family will often testify that the person was very kind to all whom he encountered. What is important to note here, however, is that these comments are always made after a horrible event has occurred. With no precedent of violence set by Daniel, wondering about a hypothetical violent act really serves no purpose. While I agree that everyone is capable of violence, there are certain factors that need to be given some thought. For example, given Daniel's family background, work with chronically ill children, and involvement in his faith, I highly doubt that this kind of hypothetical thinking in relation to possible acts of violence is appropriate.

Both of these interactions, the one with my volunteer, and the one with Steven where I was informed of the firearms in Daniel's safe, taught me valuable lessons. First of all, because weapons are often used as instruments of destruction, it does not mean that they cannot be used for safety. I never received the impression that my volunteer was someone who looked forward to using his gun; it was simply a means of insuring his security in certain situations. From my own experience, growing up in an urban high-violence neighborhood, I cannot recall knowing anyone who legally owned a firearm. In my opinion, illegal possession of firearms, which are often used to protect investments in drugs, are more likely to result in violence than legal possession of firearms. This is simply due to the nature of what is being protected, and illegal activities will surely bring about a higher concentration of violence than legal ones.

Now, do I believe that I need a weapon to protect myself? Not at this very moment, but out of this summer I gained the understanding of why someone could look to firearms as a means of security. If in fact I was in possession of a firearm that night in Guatemala, I have little doubt that I would have used it to defend Rachel, her friends, and myself. It is important to note, however, that although my views on firearms have changed, I am not advocating for widespread adoption of these instruments. I do worry about the unintended consequences of widespread gun ownership. Issues like accidental discharge, and otherwise harmless fistfights turning into fatal gunfights, the latter being a serious problem in my neighborhood, are both very problematic outcomes. In the end, any weapon is only as dangerous as its user and although guns have the power to take life, it is the finger on the trigger that grants it said power.

Though it seems like we just met, you're the one I won't forget...

At the VJGC we had a saying in relation to goodbyes. More often than not, on the last day of camp, many of our campers would let all their emotions out and cry in the arms of one another. This was especially common in the older campers who at the end of the session would come to the realization that they had "aged out" and were now too old to come back as a camper. When this happened, we would explain to them that even if they were not going to see each other for a long time to come, the experiences that they shared that week, and the lessons which they learned, would be a part of them forever. Because the memories of these experiences would remain deep within their hearts they could always look back on the summer, never having to say goodbye to their friends, and instead saying "see you later" to the experiences they would later recall.

As I drove out of the campgrounds the morning after the closing ceremony, the words that I had said to calm my campers week after week suddenly came to me. For two and a half months I participated in an experience that would forever change my perceptions of race, class, and security. Many of the friends that I made over the summer are people whom I will never forget due to their profound impact on me and who I will actively seek to keep in touch with. People like Sammy, who challenged my ideas of race and class by shedding light on his middle-class suburban upbringing, taught me that it is never safe to assume. I am indebted to individuals like Daniel, who made me realize that weapons are given their power by the people who use them; by themselves, they are just pieces of metal.

Furthermore, I came to the conclusion that due to the history of race relations in our country, certain populations have been allowed to move up the social and financial ladder faster than others. Because of this harsh reality, when compared to their white counterparts, many minority children have access to a much slimmer range of

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opportunities. One such opportunity that these children miss out on is access to a summer camp experience, a problem that can only be corrected via a significant culture shift. Throughout my experience, I explored how issues like subsidized housing, low income, and the appeal of street life have affected Latino and black populations in a way that has restricted access to opportunities that most of white America has access to. Until the aforementioned institutions are altered, these cycles will continue to perpetuate themselves.

As the gates closed behind me, I knew that I was not saying goodbye to the experiences or the people with whom I had spent the previous months. This summer, I learned a lot about myself and, through my many interactions with different individuals, my outlook on various issues were changed. Many of the experiences that taught me valuable life lessons this summer will continue to have an effect on my life. Because of this, I did not say goodbye to my summer. Instead I said "see you later" to the experiences that I carry with me every day.

Notes

1. The cabins are divided into four units: Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow. During each summer session the units are populated by children in the same age group and consist of two male cabins and two female cabins.
2. Keeping in line with the NASCAR theme, each cabin has been named after a NASCAR speedway.
3. The Jumbo-Tron is on 24 hours a day because if shut down, it takes a very long time to warm up.
4. This term is used to refer to the first time that a hemophiliac camper uses a syringe to self-infuse with factor.

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