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Exploratory Paper

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This past semester I took my first Honors Seminar called Exploring Community Engagement, taught by Ms. Jessica King. The class consisted of 15 honors students including myself, ranging from Freshman to Seniors and was taught in both a classroom in Swift Hall as well as at various locations throughout Cincinnati. Through coursework, which provided the foundation for the class, and experiential learning activities, which took my classmates and me outside of the classroom to actively learn about Cincinnati, Exploring Community Engagement confronted me with challenges faced by the Cincinnati community and taught me ways to become actively involved to alleviate hardships. The final component of the class involved completing a Community Outreach Project in which students applied what they learned in the class to actively engage in the Cincinnati Community.

During the first week of class, we focused on the idea of community. My own personal definition of community is a group of individuals who all have one or more things in common, and have a specific purpose. At the time, I thought this was the perfect definition of a community. My classmates' opinions challenged this seemingly perfect definition by, for example, pointing out that African Americans can be a community, but they do not necessarily have a common goal. In the days following the discussion, I came to the conclusion that community is a group of two or more individuals that are joined by a common history, identity, and/or interest. According to Peter Block, the author of *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, "community offers the premise of belonging and calls us to acknowledge our interdependence" (Block, 2009, 3). This broad definition of community made me realize what my definition of community from class was missing. Now, at the end of the course, I see that communities not only create a sense of belonging by differentiating people from others, but also create a sense of belonging through engaging in a community. Community engagement teaches us the value of helping others, knowledge about a community, and thinking about others instead of ourselves. The sense of belonging that community engagement creates for us leads us away from our comfort zones and into the "relatedness and willingness to provide hospitality and generosity" (Block, 2009, 3).

I truly learned the value of community engagement during my class' first true field experience traveling to Over-the-Rhine, now called OTR, and visiting Elementz, a center which serves as a safe haven for kids and young adults to practice art, music, and dancing. Upon arriving at Elementz, our tour guide, Abdullah, described how Elementz was founded by a group of individuals after the 2001 riots in Cincinnati which occurred because of the shooting of an African American named Timothy Thomas. These individuals accepted accountability for the youth in their community through their "willingness to care for the well-being of the whole," and commitment to their community through their "willingness to make a promise with no expectation of return" (Block, 2009, 79). My experience visiting Elementz and learning about the founders truly inspired me to become an active citizen which, according to Block, is "one who is willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole... someone who produces the future" (Block, 2009, 63). After our tour of Elementz, we were given the opportunity to explore OTR at night, about which I was initially closed-minded about and frightened to do. Growing up, I was always told that Over-the-Rhine was a dangerous, crime-filled area of the city and that nothing positive would come out of visiting or spending time there. This initial impression was a result of the influence of the community where I lived, as well as all the news reports describing murders, drug busts, and crimes in OTR. Seeing my classmates eagerly taking the chance to explore the community on their own, I decided to tag along with four of them. The more I traveled through the streets, the more comfortable I became. I discovered on my own the truth about OTR and the positive changes which are occurring there as a result of organizations like 3CDC. While walking through OTR, the class discussion about urban renewal versus gentrification came to mind. According to Palen, urban renewal is "rebuild[ing] cities' inner cores to encourage middle-class residency" (Palen, 2005, 237) while gentrification is the "regeneration of working-class neighborhood... [by] newcomers [that] are young professionals of higher income and status than existing residents" (Palen, 2005, 240). After discerning the difference between these two terms, many points were made about whether or not organizations like 3CDC were initiating gentrification or urban renewal in OTR. Currently, I am still uncertain about 3CDC's true intentions. In my opinion, only time will tell.

My experience in OTR did not end with Elementz. The class' next visit to the Drop Inn Center had a profound impact on my view of privilege. Seeing dozens of middle-aged, and older dirty-looking homeless men and women sitting in a room with almost lifeless looks on their faces really shocked and upset me. Up to this point I had never seen homeless people in person. The idea of social class, which "may be thought of as groupings in which people share not only similar occupations, incomes, and levels of education but also similar lifestyles," (Marger, 2004, 53) immediately sprang to my mind, and I though about the fact that these people were part of the lower-lower class. During one of the class discussions, one of my classmates brought to my attention the idea that social class often results in privilege, a term which I did not fully understand before I took Exploring Community Engagement. Privilege "exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they have done or failed to do" (Johnson, 2006, 22). I am blessed with so many privileges, such as being a white male, growing up in a friendly environment in which my family valued education, and having the ability to attend UC. I suppose I never really considered this before I visited to the Drop Inn Center. In my opinion, in order to fully understand how privileged I am, I must step into the shoes of someone else who has lived a harder life than myself. The only way I can do this is by refusing to take the path of least resistance, which, according to Johnson, is "the only [path] we see..." that isn't "clear until [you have] stepped onto a different one and felt the greater resistance rise up against it" (Johnson, 2006, 80-1). Before this class, I had always thought homelessness was a result of the choices and decisions people made, but the class discussions about social class and privilege as well as my experience at the Drop Inn Center made me realize it is a result of the privilege people are born with and the social classes of the other people around them. The current condition of the people in the Drop Inn Center is not necessarily their own fault, and through my visit there I learned that looking at people and the world from a single, narrow perspective is no way to go through life. Exploring the Cincinnati community helped me realize that this type of viewpoint will only lead to a lack of understanding and respect for the world around me.

The second-to-last field experience of the class involved traveling to Northside. Before this trip I had never been to Northside, so I really did not know what to expect. My sister, whose job requires her to spend time in Northside, told me that it was an area in Cincinnati with significant crime and tons of "ancient" buildings. Upon my arrival I saw all the old shops and buildings as well as the murals on the sides of buildings, and thought that it was a artist's paradise. I felt a sense of history in Northside and realized that my sister was wrong about the place. The main part of the class trip to Northside was a visit to WordPlay, an organization that creates a safe learning atmosphere for kids going to public grade school, middle school, and high school. It "takes kids... who are stuck in poverty and give[s] them a chance to get out" and improve their likelihood of making something of their lives through tutoring (Gladwell, 2008, 267). One of the regular volunteers at Wordplay named Elissa Yancey, a journalism professor at UC, explained to us that often times the size of public schools leads to some kids being "lost in the crowd" and, as a result, falling behind in their education. Growing up, I attended a private school named The Summit Country Day School. My class consisted of about 100 kids, and I received all the help that I needed for my ADHD. Elissa made me think about what my life would have been if I had gone to a huge public school. I probably would not have received adequate help for my ADHD and would not be where I am today. I may have essentially been "lost in the crowd" and never learned to work around my illness. This line of thought regarding helping people who are often forgot about led me to develop an idea for my Community Outreach Project.

After visiting Wordplay, I knew that I wanted my final project to have something to do with people who are "lost in the crowd" or essentially overlooked during the chaos of the holidays. On top of this, looking back on what I learned from the various class field experiences, I decided that the trips to OTR had the most profound impact on me. Before this class, I was closed-minded about OTR and the changes which were occurring there. I did not want to believe that it was not as dangerous as I had been led to believe for two main reasons. I had no interest in trusting Jessica's knowledge about OTR because I am skeptical about information which conflicts with what I was previously taught, and I was concerned about where the dangerous individuals who gave Over-the-Rhine such a bad reputation would go if the area was improving. The thought of criminals moving to a new area, such as the suburbs, scared me. With Jessica's help and my classmates' assistance, I ventured out on my own and discovered my own vision of OTR, not the vision which I was taught throughout my childhood. I believe I truly understand community engagement now, which is considered an "area of study that has been termed 'informal education,'" "beyond the boundaries of the classroom" (Longo, 2007, 120). As a result of this revelation, I wanted to educate the communities where I spent most of my time as a child about the changes occurring in OTR. I wanted them to gain knowledge, learn about all the different attractions of the area, and venture into OTR in order to discover for themselves why, according to one of my peers, Over-the-Rhine is now called OTR.

I successfully combined what I learned from both of my experiences in Northside and OTR into my Community Outreach Project by organizing a canned food drive for Our Daily Bread. Our Daily Break is a ministry of hospitality located in OTR that is dedicated to serving neighborhood residents and individuals who frequently visit the area. They assist these people by providing warm meals, social services, and places for guests to socialize in a safe, respectful environment. I chose this organization because it gives back to people, especially those who are homeless or going through difficult financial times, and who are often "lost in the crowd" during the holidays. In order to facilitate this drive, I chose to create an elaborate flyer for both the Amberley community where I grew up and the Delhi community where my grandparents live. I decided on these two locations for a few reasons. Both locations are easily accessible, many of the people there either know my family or grandparents, and both communities are areas where I was told about the dangers of OTR and, to stay away from the area. I also spent most of my life living in Amberley, which is an upper class area, and visited Delhi, a middle class area, numerous times each year and therefore know these two areas well. The flyers I created for both communities contain five things people needed to know in order to take part in my canned food drive: the purpose of the drive, information about Our Daily Bread, the person organizing the canned food drive, the reason for organizing it, and how to get involved. Along with of these flyers I created an information sheet about OTR and 3CDC. The sheet contains information about notable architecture, attractions, restaurants, and shops in OTR to draw people to the area, as well as some basic facts about 3CDC, the work they have done so far in OTR, and how they are partly responsible for OTR's renewal.

I carried out my project on November 23rd, 24th, and 25th. Around noon on Saturday the 23rd, I traveled to my grandparent's house in Delhi and, for a few hours and walked door-to-door presenting people with my flyers and asking them if they had any canned goods they could donate to my cause. Most households accepted both of my flyers, reading the one about OTR before getting me two or more canned goods. After giving me the cans, I was sent on my way with either a "God bless you" or some remark of that nature. These words made me feel good and as though my efforts were making a different. Overall I collected more than one hundred and twenty cans, which ranged from soup to canned cranberries. Around the same time the next day I left my house in my mother's Mini Cooper (since it was extremely cold and the houses in Amberley are very far apart,) and drove to homes for a few hours. Many of the houses in Amberley gave me four or more canned goods but neglected to listen to what I had to say about OTR. Instead, they just took the flyers, handed me canned goods, and sent me on my way. The only real exception to this was one of my friend's mother, Mrs. Frank, who invited me into her home to talk. While we chatted, she brought up an interesting point about community strength. While similarities are important to community development, diversity is what gives them strength and keeps them strong. The diversity allows different ideas to form and different ways of solving problems to be developed. The various cultural and ethnic backgrounds which diversity presents make it essential to community growth and sustainability. Although Amberley is an isolated community, it is strong and effective in providing a sense of belonging and leadership for the people that live there. This new idea about community really struck a chord with how I define community.

 Overall, I collected over one hundred and twenty canned goods in Delhi and Amberley and felt a sense of accomplishment. The next day, my mother drove me to Our Daily Bread in OTR, and I dropped off the canned goods. While unloading the goods, three of the people who worked at Our Daily Bread (shown to the right) explained to me that the organization not only feeds people's hunger, but also their spirit and mind. They give people who have hit a dead end the encouragement and knowledge they need to get back up and make something of their lives.

Overall, I am satisfied with the success of my Community Outreach Project. By asking for canned goods in person, I believe that I reminded people, especially during the holidays when they are busy buying presents and organizing social events for family and friends, to think outside of their own small communities and assist others who live in the Greater Cincinnati area. By organizing and distributing information to the Delhi and Amberley communities, I learned to engage people outside of OTR to think about and engage themselves in OTR. By raising awareness and educating people in Cincinnati about the needs of less fortunate individuals, I have done my small part in uniting the broader community to engage themselves in helping the OTR community and its residents.

The main goal I had for Exploring Community Engagement was to learn how to actually become an active member in the Cincinnati community. My progress in becoming an active member of the Cincinnati community can be explained using the Active Citizen Continuum. Before arriving at the first Exploring Community Engagement class, I would say that I was a "volunteer" who was eager to get involved in the Cincinnati community, but was not as informed about the ways to go about it or the issues surrounding the community. Through our readings and discussions, I have slowly developed awareness of the key social issues in Cincinnati and have begun the journey to becoming a conscientious citizen. The various trips and explorations to the Clifton area outside of the UC campus, OTR, Price Hill, and Northside have really given me the opportunity to understand some of the issues which exist in Cincinnati. From exploring the run-down environment of Clifton to discovering the urban renewal or gentrification of OTR, Jessica, our Exploring Community Engagement teacher, has allowed me to witness our environment from my own perspective, and as a result, given me the opportunity to grow in my own understanding of the Cincinnati community. I think that "community [has] become a priority in [the] values and life choices" (Active Citizen Continuum) which I have and make as a result of Exploring community Engagement. This aspect of the class has been instrumental in my development from a conscientious citizen to an active citizen. Therefore, I believe that I have accomplished my goal for Exploring Community Engagement.

For the class' last field experience, we attended a meet-up in Walnut Hills in order to speak to people about the Walnut Hills community and current problems and progress there. Upon my arrival, I met an African American male dressed in a red sweater. This man had by far the biggest impact on me of all the people I talked to, and he helped me realize how I will continue to use what I learned in Exploring Community Engagement throughout the rest of my life. As soon as I approached him he told me that he was not from Walnut Hills, and that he actually lived in Chicago. He then began to describe how community is formed only by people who have a strong connection. A community is sustained through diversity and progress, but not necessarily by focusing on achieving one or more goals. Engagement in helping or giving back to others is not necessary for a community because a community has everything to do with who is in it. The similarities as well as differences between people offer many new ideas and perspectives. The man went on to tell me that I should not try to save the world, but rather look out for myself, get an education, and become successful in my life. Realistically, there is no way to help everyone because not everyone wants help. There are many people who need help, yet many neither want nor will accept assistance in getting back on their feet. The man's final words to me were that along my journey in life, I should help out a few people, but only those who want it. I think the reason that this man affected me so much is because his words were from a realistic, rather than idealistic, perspective. He saw the world as it is rather than the way people want it to be.

I want to continue engaging myself in not only the Cincinnati community, but also the global community as well. Realistically, with college, academics, and extracurricular activities, my ability to engage myself in communities will be limited. I will do my best to make community, its development, and its success a significant part in my life by helping those who truly need and want my assistance. I plan on making the canned food drive a yearly tradition with the help of my parents and sister. I will also continue to volunteer at Ronald McDonald House with my family every month as well as take part in various other service-oriented opportunities that are available at UC. I have recently filled out an application for the Honors Experience called Making Wishes Come True. I hope that I can make an impact in the lives of kids who are struggling with life-threatening illnesses by helping them to live as carefree kids for a few days. I want to make them feel at home by volunteering with Give Kids the World so that they have some great memories of just being a kid and forgetting about what they are going through medically.

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