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Personal Reflections from ePortfolio: AHRC New York City

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Drew M. Mihalik

All About Drew...

Hi! My name is Drew M. Mihalik. I am a senior at Pace University majoring in Marketing with a concentration in Advertising and Promotions. I grew up in Bethlehem, Pa and went to college at Bloomsburg University before transferring to pace in the Fall of 2010. At Pace I'm a member of the Ad Club, Ad Team, and play intramural sports here as well. I have had experience with community service for the mentally disabled through working with the Special Olympic while in high school.

My Mid-Term Reflection Journal

Now as we approach the halfway point of Web Design for Non-Profit Organizations I have found the course so far to be rewarding, challenging, and thought provoking. The course has allowed me to view the world in a different in a way and changed the way I look at people with disabilities.

Before I entered this class my only other experience with people with disabilities was being a volunteer at Special Olympics. However, I wouldn't consider myself by any means to be an expert dealing with people with disabilities, so when I learned the course outline of this class I was both worried and excited for the challenge ahead. I liked the way we eased into the course by first discussing how people with disabilities are thought of in today's world. We then focused on how people with disabilities are negatively portrayed in pop culture and went over specific examples like the movie *Tropic Thunder* and *Rain Man*.

Once we discussed that the course would work directly with AHRC we then learned what the organization was all about from the where they came from to what their purpose was. Finally, we learned that we would have the chance to work directly with high school students in the program who were high-functioning and looking to continue either onto a college education or the work force. For me that person was Devon Kennedy, an 18 year old boy from Upper Manhattan. The first time I met Devon it was a new experience for us both, I'd say. He was very shy and

didn't make very much eye contact. I was a bit hesitant on how to talk to him and whether or not he was out-going enough to tell me a lot about him the first time we met. That class we were given a nice ice breaker and slowly Devon opened up to me about who he was and what his interests were.

Since then Devon and I have continued to work on his Person Centered Plan. I have learned things that he does well in school and things that he wish he could do better. I have taken Devon on tours of Pace to show him what the university is all about. He said he likes the gym the most because he loves to play sports such as basketball. Most importantly I took him to the Office of Undergraduate Admissions to see what path he would have to take to become a student at Pace. We got contact information for a counselor that deals directly with the admission of people with disabilities, which we later found out runs through the school's OASIS program. While Devon and I focused on an education, we also looked into the possibility of him joining the work force after his high school graduation in 3 years. Devon then opened up to me about the possibility of working in Pace's café. He said he would like to be around food all day and serve the students of the university.

After only little over a month of knowing Devon he has taught me a lot. I have learned patience, determination, and that even though all of us are different in some way we still all have dreams and aspirations. He has opened my world to my somewhat skewed perspectives on the capabilities of people with disabilities. Devon is anyone like you or me. He wants the same things as all of us, even though he was born with a disability. His complete outlook on life is contagious and I can say I have grown as a person from knowing Devon Kennedy.

Throughout this entire course a requirement we had was to read the book *DisabilityLand* by Alan Brightman. In the book Brightman explains to the reader how he is very experienced with people with disabilities considering his son has cerebral palsy and he has worked for Yahoo! and Apple directly developing tools to aid the disabled. His insights were interesting to me because I got to see how even major companies like Apple may have overlooked the accessibility of their technologies to the disabled. His outlook on everything made sure it was built for everyone, not just the nondisabled.

The concept of his "DisabilityLand" was more of a mental state of mind than anything. He considered it to be the place when people react a certain way to the disabled, but since he understands who they are and how they feel, he doesn't notice what everyone else sees. I thought the concept of "DisabilityLand" was a very intelligent way to go about talking ignorance contrasted to being educated on the matter.

There was a loose format to the book which consisted of his life stories, quotes relating ignorance and being disabled, questions about society, pictures from the National Institute of Art and Disabilities, and examples of disabilities in everyday life. Even though I found the book interesting and insightful, I thought the overall tone of the

book was very depressing and made the reader feel like they didn't know about as much as he did. As I said before though I did enjoy the look into the companies he worked for, particularly Apple. The one quote from the book (which was my favorite part) from the conversation he had with the CEO of Apple about "fail huge" I think epitomized why Apple is regarded as one of the most innovative and people-oriented companies in the world. The one question I had wondered was if this CEO was Steve Jobs, and whether these kinds of quotes can give us some insight in to why he was so successful.

DisabilityLand was eye-opening, interesting, and relevant to myself. I think after reading this book I have a greater understanding of how to interact and act towards people with disabilities. I can take the lessons I learned from this book and use it directly with my interactions with Devon. DisabilityLand and this course correlate beautifully with each other and are a big reason as to why I'm looking forward to the second half of this semester.

My Final Reflection Journal

My semester with AHRC has finally come to an end. This experience has enriched my life in ways I didn't think were possible. Spending this semester with Devon Kennedy, getting to know him and helping him plan for his future makes me feel like I've really made difference in his life and mine.

Entering this class the only previous experience I've had with people with mental disabilities would be my volunteer work with Special Olympics, so when this class I was still a little unsure of what to expect. After meeting Devon and once he got comfortable with opening up to me, I actually learned a lot about him and the type of person he is. Devon is a very shy, yet a very complex individual. My job was to get to know him well enough to make a person centered plan for him so that he had some idea of what he wanted to do after graduation. While putting together a PowerPoint I also made sure to do activities with him such as taking him on tours of all Pace University has to offer and even played some basketball. Ultimately, our goal was to have several options laid out for his future and present it in front of the entire AHRC class at the end of the semester.

We settled on two options that we thought fit best with Devon's future. First, we decided that education was very important to continue on, specifically computer science at Pace University. When applying to Pace I decided that going through the OASIS program would be the best option for Devon because this program makes apply and attending college easier for people in Devon's situation. In the PowerPoint we put all the information to apply on the slides including the requirements and Diane Zager, the woman in charge of the admissions for the OASIS program. Our second option was working for Chartwells in café 101. When I took Devon on a tour of Pace, the cafeteria really

resonated with him and he expressed an interest in serving lunch to the students here every day. In the PowerPoint we laid out how to go about applying to Chartwells.

This project affected more people than just me. During the final presentations Devon's mom attended to see what Devon and I have been working on for the past few months. Once done with our presentation Devon's mom came up to me she expressed her gratitude for working with Devon this semester. After she thanked me for helping Devon she then gave me more insight on the disabled community and what it's like working with people like Devon on a daily basis. I was amazing to see the progress of this whole project from early September to not knowing who I was going to be paired up with, and then ending today where I can present a plan for Devon's mom on what I think would be some great options for Devon after graduation.

The things I will remember most about this semester will be the classmates I met, the supervisors that help me in this process, Devon, and most important the change in myself from September to today. This class was full of very motivated and excited individuals who made this whole semester with AHRC even more enjoyable. When there were fun days, there were also difficult days, but with the help of Devon's supervisors they made everything easier and help both Devon and myself when we would be having a difficult time communicating and deciding which direction to take our presentation. Devon specifically will be someone I will always remember because he opened me up to a whole new world and way to interact with people like him that I have never interacted with to this extent. Lastly, when I look back at this class in the future I will remember how nervous and, to a certain extent, naïve I was to this community. However, now I feel much more comfortable when around this community and feel like I have experience and something we can both talk about and relate to.