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Personal Reflections from ePortfolio: AHRC New York City

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David Mendoza

My Biography: What I am Bringing to AHRC New York City

I believe that quality of life in a community is directly related to the level of care and involvement shown by the members of that community. My experience in community service is limited, but I want to change that. In order to be a productive, positive, and meaningful member of my community, I must change that.

My roots are here. I grew up in Queens. I graduated high school in Brooklyn. In my opinion, this can be detrimental toward developing a sense of service in a young person. Growing up in this city can impart introversion, inward-mindness, and indifference for others. At least that was the case for me. Call it my response to generally being surrounded by crime, filth, and poverty (of course, I know that New York isn't that way for all, thankfully). If this is the case though, it's understandable to reject your community, or at least to want to minimize your involvement in it. However, if you do this, and you develop a pattern for avoiding your immediate surroundings, then you wind up missing out on an important element of life.

Humans are pack animals. We thrive in groups. And, now I think we shouldn't neglect the fact that one of the groups we belong to is our community. The reason why I have become very group/team-oriented recently is because I am a veteran of the US Army. I was discharged after a successful and honorable enlistment in December 2011. I am ecstatic about being at Pace because I am eager to learn as much as I can at this university.

I am also eager to contribute to the university in and outside of the classroom. Like I said, I am fresh out of the military, and I am bringing a great deal of motivation and determination with me. Ultimately, that is how I would like to contribute here, especially in this class. My relationship with my partners will be defined by three things: purpose, direction, and motivation. Unless they get bored of that, in which case, the focus will be to have fun as much as possible as we work. Regardless, I will make it my job to maintain a high good energy level.

I am glad that this course is giving me an opportunity to engage my community in a positive way. This is my second time living in New York. I can tell this time around will be better.

My Photo



Wordle



My Mid-Term Reflections Journal on [Book] DisabilityLand and Project

I was more prepared to read "DisabilityLand" this week than I was before I started this class. Before, I had relatively little experience dealing with individuals with disability. I still have relatively little experience, but I am far beyond where I started.

I can confidently tell you that I would have read it from a very different perspective two months ago. Although the book gives real accounts of the experience in "DisabilityLand," I would not have been able to relate. I just left the US

Army three months ago. In that organization, your fitness is constantly being assessed. Prior to serving, you have to pass a battery of physical and mental tests. Once you complete this round of exams, there are more to follow. The saying in one of my units was, "You are always being assessed." I found this to be true. I know this is the case for many organizations outside of the military as well. But from experience, I can say that every task in the Army has a standard to be met, and it was always one's challenge to exceed the standard. Individuals who couldn't meet the standard were treated poorly. I never wanted to fall in that category. We were trained to dress the same, look the same, and fulfill the same expectations. Being different was hardly ever rewarded. After a few years, this became the norm. Then it went from the norm, to my way of life. It was even more intense as I was promoted up the ranks and stepped into the assessor's role. Once I reached the other side of that glass, I began to look at my subordinates with a critical eye. If they didn't perform, I wanted to get rid of them. I learned to look for weakness and correct it. If it couldn't be corrected, then it didn't belong in the Army. I don't think weak Soldiers should receive pay. They should be discharged and sent somewhere else. The reality is I never cared for where they went or what they did although I did wonder, "Who would want them?" But it wasn't my problem. This was my mentality when I started this class. There is a place for this way of thinking, but it is not in "DisabilityLand."

Honestly, even though this class has opened my mind to a civilian's perspective of looking at a person's shortcomings, I still can't relate to some of the stories I read in Alan Brightman's book. Actually, the story that I could relate to most was the brief piece on page 73. It's a sharp contrast to the other pieces in the book because it does not celebrate the differences of individuals with disability. It dealt with a baby who outlived her life expectancy by 22 years. The story ended in this way: "She was supposed to die at birth. She's survived for 22 years. Is that a success or a failure?" In essence, it is asking if it worth living in such a state. Obviously, her situation is extreme. She is completely dependent on others for everything. She lies completely still all day, and she is silent. Is her life worth living? Even if it is incorrect in the Christian sense to pose this question, it is a legitimate question.

The stories that I can't relate to, despite my experiences in this class, follow the general theme of "DisabilityLand." For example, the book presents an account of a photo exhibition of "the Disabled Experience" (p. 30-32). In it, the author meant to share the typical disabled experience with others through photos. Naturally, his exhibit was supposed to be accessible to all. However, he had neglected to provide sugar free drinks. Therefore, one of his guests with diabetes was excluded. I could not relate to this story. I can agree that not ordering sugar free drinks was an oversight. However, where do we draw the line? How impractical do you have to be in order to be inclusive? Anyone could have overlooked that detail. Yet the author was embarrassed by this predicament. In the end, he admits that these awkward and thoughtless mistakes cannot be avoided. So I ask, why be embarrassed by them?

Like I said, I imagine that if I had read this book in January, I would have found it even less credible. However, due to my experiences with my partner Ian and the others from AHRC, I have begun to learn how to look past disability and to see the person behind it. Ian is 14 years old. He likes girls but he doesn't know the first thing about them—

the same way I didn't when I was that age. He loves his robots and his monsters the same way I loved my X-men. Ian is not abnormal. He is normal, he just happens to have a disability. Before, I may have seen Ian only as someone who needed help—as cruel as it sounds—almost like a problem that needed solving. Yes, he does need help. I still agree with that. But I see Ian as Ian now. He is just Ian. The issue of needing help is separate. I would have never seen Ian in this way were it not for this class.

Early on in "DisabilityLand," a disabled individual makes a legitimate complaint: "The toughest thing about being disabled is that you're never perceived as just plain ordinary. Because you're disabled, the world always looks at you as someone special, as someone exceptional" (p. 27). According to this writer, the feeling that we give them when we look at them only as a group that needs help is tougher than the pain, the dependence, and the expense that comes with being disabled. Before, I was guilty of imparting this feeling. Honestly, I was looked away if I saw someone on a wheelchair. I didn't do so purposely, but instinctually. It was awkward for me to look at individuals with disability. I would immediately feel pity, and rather than have them see that pity on my face, I would look away. Now I think about how immature and insensitive that was.

Yet, I haven't quite come around the whole way. Part of me still harbors my old way of thought. In another account of "DisabilityLand," an author admits that individuals with disabilities are different from others but you can play it safe and consider them just like everyone else—that is: "Unless you really, truly meaningfully want to get to know a few people. And learn how terrifically different they really are" (p. 59). He modifies different with "terrifically." This is a notion I still can't accept. Despite my experiences with Ian and others, I still have not seen how disability can be considered terrific. I accept the fact that disability may impart some advantages to individuals in a few cases. For example, there was an advantage in the case of the young blind women in Ghana, who used their enhanced sense of smell to make impressive loaves of bread (p. 29). Blindness allowed these women to occupy a specific niche in the baking market. This is a great story. These women were disabled, but they could still bake better than most others. However, this is not the case for most individuals with disability. In my opinion, disability does not always translate into ability. Therefore, I have a problem with celebrating it. I don't agree with qualifying different with "terrifically."

Of course, I have only begun to work with individuals with disability. Therefore, I may be speaking out of ignorance. Regardless, I am making progress. Although I couldn't relate to some of the stories in "DisabilityLand," I could relate to most of them. I have only made a fraction of a step into "DisabilityLand." Even as I write this reflection essay, I am noticing a change in my diction. Instead of writing disabled individuals, I now prefer to say individuals with disability. Ian is Ian (end of sentence). He has a disability (new, separate sentence). This is totally new for me. Despite my experience in the military, I am keeping an open mind and I hope that my comfort zone will continue to expand.

My Final Reflections Journal on Impacts of Semester

I am so proud of the work that I have done in this class. I can honestly say that I gave the maximum effort. I set out to make an impact on my partner. I wanted to do my best to have some of myself rub off on him (of course, I consider that to be a good thing).

I chose my project to be a platform for a metamorphosis. I deliberately wanted to show Ian what to do to become a more complete man—regardless of disability. Our movie, “The Bridge,” displayed “Present Day Ian” and “Future Ian.” It’s a similar concept to that of “A Christmas Carol.” I figured that once Ian caught a glimpse of what “Future Ian” could be, the metamorphosis would be start on his own. That was the plan, and, it’s actually quite grandiose. I can’t say that I really expected it to happen. It might even be considered somewhat arrogant of me to believe that two hours a week with me for two and a half months could instigate such a significant change. But like I said, I gave it the maximum effort.

Unfortunately, I don’t see the signs of a metamorphosis taking place. After our transition to “Future Ian,” Ian’s facial hair was gone, he was displaying a handsome haircut, he was wearing a clean-cut suit, and his confidence was through the roof. There was a positive energy about Ian. But it only lasted for about two weeks. By today, the final day of our class, I noticed that “Present Day Ian” was back. His hair was disheveled. His clothes did not smell clean. His facial hair had returned. It was like nothing had happened. Ian has told me repeatedly throughout the semester that he has a bad memory. I can see that now. But, I’m not disappointed in him—not at all. My expectations were too high. From my experience, leading Soldiers in the military, I am used to much better results. However, that isn’t a fair comparison. I only spent 2 hours a week with Ian; it would take months of constant contact to achieve a metamorphosis in a Soldier. With that in mind, Ian actually did quite well. I am proud of him.

The person who spends enough time in Ian—that could instigate a change in him—is his mom. Ultimately, she is his biggest influence. If she doesn’t make an effort, then no change will occur. This is why I don’t see a change occurring soon. I know her and I like her. I am fond of Ian’s mom. But I wish Ian had a strong male influence at home to look up to. That is no one’s fault (I want to stress that I don’t mean to place blame on anyone). Again, my expectations are too high. It’s actually immature of me to compare Ian’s progress to my own when I’m twice his age! At 14, my clothes smelled too! I just caught myself treating Ian as a peer. That is not fair. Ian is in the beginning of adolescence. He can have long hair if he wants. It’s natural.

The beauty of my project is that Ian will always have access to it (as long as he doesn’t delete it). It’s a movie about him, filmed when he was 14. I wish I had had something like that. There is no better gift I could have given Ian. I’ll be honest: Ian now has a scene in which he romances a beautiful, 20-year old college female. You cannot put a price on that. Again, I’m so proud of Ian for having the courage to let me film him. And, I’m proud of myself for

having the sense to film him in that light. He can watch this film as much as he wants for as long as he wants. If I were he, I would watch it every day until I was 21 or so. Then, the metamorphosis would assuredly take place. I would love for his mom to watch it 100 times as well (maybe that's what the metamorphosis truly needs).

Has there been a change in me? I think that was achieved by mid-semester. That's when I saw individuals with disability in a different light. I addressed this in detail in my Mid-Term Reflection Journal. I no longer feel self-conscious around individuals with disability. They are people just like everyone else. They want to laugh. I also observed that they typically have positive qualities that others may not exhibit. Specifically, I love their loyalty. I feel like it's easier to establish a relationship with individuals with disability because they are just so effusively grateful when you make an effort to befriend them. This is a great quality.

I want to end with why I place such a high value on metamorphosis. I feel like I need to explain this because I don't want to be misinterpreted. I don't want a metamorphosis for Ian because he has a disability. I want metamorphosis for Ian because I think that's the goal of life: To be better. In my mind, this is true for everyone. It has nothing to do with disability. I feel like every individual can be better, and that's what we are here to do.

My Certificate of Recognition of Service

