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11/09/14

Neighbors in the Streets: Research Advocacy Project

Among many things, while planning and executing my Research Advocacy Project, I learned the immense value of patience and flexibility while working with a nonprofit organization. Initially, Vickie Belcher and I went to Transitions with our first idea, born out of our mutual passions for planning events and working with victims of domestic violence, and Transitions seemed receptive to helping us plan a program for their clients who have been victims of domestic violence and abuse. However, a couple weeks after initially proposing the idea, Kiesha Webb changed her mind about her earlier supportive statement, and told Vickie and I that there were too many legal hurdles and other obstacles to creating such a program for Transitions’ clients. Although Vickie and I understood Kiesha’s reluctance towards such a project, in that first moment, we both felt extremely confused and let down. We had invested a lot of our emotional energy in forming our initial idea, out of our mutual passions and interests, and we had both become incredibly attached to our idea. Looking back now, I realize that our level of attachment to our very first idea was a mistake on our part. After Kiesha first told us the bad news, it was clear that she was devoted to us as volunteers, and wanted to help us come up with an even better, new idea that would provide the largest service to Transitions. Kiesha was extremely adamant in wanting us to take over Transitions’ Winter Clothing Drive, which seemed unclear and intangible to Vickie and me. Due to our attachment to our previous project, we were averse to many new ideas, especially ideas that did not seem to be conducive to our creative outlet and desire to actually do something palpably impactful. However, after our initial hesitancy over taking on the Winter Drive Project, we both realized that what we were feeling was a desire to do something “glamorous,” when, in reality, Transitions needed us to do something more basic, short-term, and arguably more important. Kiesha began to explain the project more, which would entail helping Transitions publicize their winter clothing drive. Additionally, we would be responsible for working with Transitions to plan and coordinate a community event for volunteers to distribute the winter clothing to homeless individuals and to form relationships with these people, their “neighbors in the streets.” The more Kiesha explained her vision for the project, the more Vickie and I realized that it was entirely along the lines of what we initially hoped to accomplish as volunteers on the Transitions Outreach Team, and what we now hoped to bring to others after our experience volunteering with Transitions.

Although the Transitions Outreach Team was not entirely successful, Vickie and I were still able to gain specific skills from our volunteering with Transitions that led us to realize the impact of the Winter Drive Project. Through inreach at the Transitions Day Center, Vickie and I both got to form connections and relationships with many of the clients, who each had their personal stories and hardships. Both of our views of homelessness and its causes were directly impacted by this experience. Through forming personal relationships with individuals struggling with homelessness, a person can realize that an individual struggling with homelessness is much more similar to them than unknowably different, and that all of the stereotypes of the nature of homeless individuals and the causes of homelessness are immensely generalized and in no way accurately describe the majority of the individuals who do not have a permanent place to stay. I was lucky enough to have a volunteer experience at Transitions that directly opened my mind and changed my perspective; but, I soon realized that most of my peers, and even most of my community members, have not had such a personal experience with homelessness, and probably do not understand homelessness in the same, respective way that I have come to understand the issue. It was this realization that caused me to truly appreciate the value of the project that Kiesha proposed. Not only would Vickie and I help Transitions to get a project off the ground that Transitions had been struggling to find the resources to accomplish and help individuals in Columbia who will be struggling to stay warm on the streets this winter, but we would also have a chance to provide a volunteer experience to some of our fellow community members that would help to change their perspective on homelessness in our city. We hoped that this project would help to inspire our volunteers not only to change their perspectives, but also to help change their peers’ perspectives as well. We wanted both homeless individuals and the volunteers to feel more at home within their community, and to also feel more connected to their “neighbors in the streets.”

Our principal struggle in accomplishing this project was achieving a consistent level of communication with Transitions, which was difficult due to the fact that the staff all had so many other responsibilities and our event was initially not a high priority. When Kiesha first proposed the idea of helping to coordinate the winter drive, we were only vaguely aware of what Transitions wanted from us as volunteers. However, in the two weeks after, Kiesha explained that Transitions only needed a small amount of help from us in actually helping to get clothing donations, and they needed the most help in actually planning an event to culminate the winter drive and to distribute all of the clothes they would collect into the community. Kiesha assured that Transitions would be handling the logistics of the event, which meant securing a venue and a time, and actually coordinating how the distribution of clothing and volunteers to different locations around Columbia would work on the day of the event. When we first started planning the project, we helped to design two flyers: one to help advertise the winter drive and all of the items Transitions needed, and another to advertise the actual Neighbors in the Streets event. We began distributing the flyer advertising clothing donations, and I personally e-mailed over fifty religious organizations in Columbia asking for support. I received several positive responses, and even though most of the organizations could not pull a drive together in time for the Neighbors in the Streets event, there were about four organizations that agreed to collect clothes to give to Transitions by mid-January.

However, once we spread the word of the clothing drive, our progress became stagnant, as we felt as though we could not proceed with planning and spreading the word of the Neighbors in the Streets event until a date, time, and venue were secured. Kiesha Webb insisted that she was handling this aspect of the planning, but by the time that three weeks before the event rolled around, we had still not heard anything definitive about these logistics. On the Friday three weeks before the initial date that Kiesha proposed for the event, I called her to get an idea of her progress, and I learned that after the Nickelodeon Theatre initially fell through, she was attempting to secure Tapp’s for the event location. However, from personal experience event planning, I knew that three weeks would not be enough initial notice to reserve a place at any business that had a high demand for organizations that wanted to use its space. Therefore, I encouraged Kiesha to realistically abandon the effort to secure Tapp’s or any other organization as an event location at this short notice, and to instead hold the event at Transitions itself. When Kiesha agreed to this proposal, I truly believed that it was a decision that saved the project and resumed the progress Vickie and I were making in advertising and reaching out to volunteers. Vickie created an Eventbrite page, and we both worked together to invite various student and community organizations to participate, including Carolina Homelessness Outreach, Carolina Service Council, Scholars United, Epsilon Sigma Alpha, Pi Beta Phi, Chi Omega, and more. After only a couple of weeks of advertising the event to various groups, more than 35 volunteers had signed up for the event online. We were absolutely astounded by the response, as both Vickie and I had anticipated no more than 10 people signing up online, at the absolute most. The overwhelming response from interested volunteers convinced us that we had to plan an extremely great opportunity for volunteers to glean meaningful, impactful memories from this experience.

On the Wednesday before our event, Vickie and I went to Transitions to have a meeting with Kiesha and a few additional Transitions’ staff members to talk about our plan for the event’s initial program that would introduce volunteers to the importance of making connections with individuals who are homeless, Transition’s role in the community, and the “do’s and don’t’s” of outreach work. Before the event, Vickie and I worked together to come up with a rough schedule, which would include an introduction to the event, a Youtube video about the importance of always getting to know our “neighbors in the streets,” a talk by one of Transitions’ current clients about her experience with homelessness and the shelter, and a talk about the importance of outreach work by Kiesha. Originally we wanted to have the volunteers rotate through different stations, in order to maximize the impact of each station and make sure that the volunteers were getting a chance to truly digest all of the information. When we arrived at the meeting, we soon realized that we were not on the same page as Kiesha and the other representatives of Transitions. It seemed as though Kiesha did not have a firm grasp on just how many volunteers would be at the event, as she assumed that we would be doing the entire presentation in Transitions’ Novinger Room, which is designed to hold about 20 people. It also did not seem that Kiesha had a clear plan for how we would be transporting the volunteers and which volunteers would be assigned to which tasks. However, after we all talked together for an hour, we all felt more assured that we were on the same page. We discussed the length of the presentation and devised ways to consolidate it in order to make the most logistical sense and also capture the full attention of all the volunteers. John, one of the Transitions staff members that was helping to coordinate the logistics, felt as though we were being overly ambitious with our stations idea, which he believed would inevitably turn into a logistical nightmare. So, we ended up switching the idea of stations with a more concise, brief presentation that would keep the volunteers engaged, require the least amount of preparation, and would leave the most time for the volunteers to actually go out into the community and distribute clothes. In addition to agreeing on an improved schedule for the presentation, we also made sure that everyone involved in planning was on the same page for how the actual distribution of clothes would be working at the event. Kiesha explained that Transitions had a trailer filled with all of their donations from the drive, and we would spend a few minutes sorting through all of the donations and piling boxes full of clothes, toiletries, and water bottles into Transitions’ cargo van. After that, Kiesha would divide the volunteers between the two locations, give the volunteers directions to their locations, and drive the van to our two locations, Finlay Park and Clean of Heart. At each location, Kiesha would work with the volunteers to stock tables with the clothes and supplies, and give them further instructions on how many clothes and supplies to give to each person. After our meeting, Vickie and I left feeling much more satisfied and in control than we had at any other point planning the project, and we truly felt that we had done everything in our power to help Transitions plan a successful event. Although we knew that there were still a few gaps in understanding between the planners, we had never felt so on the same page as Kiesha, and we knew that we had vastly improved our communication just through this one, in-person meeting.

On the day of the event, all of our plans and visions went as smoothly as we could have expected. 37 volunteers showed up, signed wavers, and sat down for the presentation. Although we experienced technical difficulties and John had not fully set up all of the technology beforehand, we improvised our plan and watched our video in silence, and the rest of the presentation went just as we planned. Miss Joan, a Transitions resident, touched all of the volunteers by talking about her experiences with homelessness and abuse, and what is was like to live in a homeless shelter. After Kiesha spoke about Transitions and outreach, she split the volunteers into three groups to try to accomplish all of the preparation tasks at a more efficient pace. One group of volunteers helped to sort the donation items into the trailer, another group was tasked with loading the van, and another group went with Kiesha to take a tour of Transitions and get assigned to their distribution site. However, during the station work, it became clear that we did not have enough tasks for all of our volunteers to complete. Even with Kiesha spontaneously taking more of the volunteers on tours of Transitions, we had volunteers that were standing around and watching the groups work to pack the supplies and load the van, without any tasks to do themselves. Many of the volunteers seemed bored, and were uninvolved for much of the first part of the project. Additionally, we had some trouble coordinating with Kiesha and making sure that she was sending all of the volunteers to the two different locations. We did not expect the coordination to be as chaotic and hectic as it was, and we probably should have spent even more time at our meeting with Kiesha making sure that we were all absolutely on the same page about the plan for getting volunteers from Transitions to their distribution location. It also took an extremely long time for the volunteers to sort through all of the clothing and toiletry donations in the trailer, even though several of the volunteers took initiative and assumed leadership roles to help make the distribution process more organized and efficient. Once all of the sorting was done and we were able to shuttle all of the remaining volunteers and supplies to Finlay Park, as Kiesha realized early on in the process that volunteers quickly ran out of clothing at Clean of Heart and she had a difficult time communicating with these volunteers to stay updated on their progress, it was easy to see the success of our project. At Finlay Park, all of the volunteers had compiled the clothes and sorted them onto different tables, and individuals were able to grab a toiletry pack, a pair of socks, a water bottle, a pair of shoes, and a coat. The volunteers from Clean of Heart estimated that around 40 individuals stopped by to receive free winter clothing, and the volunteers from Transitions estimated that they had served approximately 60 individuals.

Besides the impact of the project in distributing clothes to individuals in need, it was clear that the volunteers were all very impacted by the project, and left with a different impression of homelessness in Columbia. One volunteer who worked at the Clean of Heart station recounted a story in which the Transitions staff member that was helping to organize their station and making sure no one was taking more clothes than the designated amount had to leave unexpectedly, and the volunteers were all worried about who would step up to take his place. One of the men who had just been served was watching this situation unfold, and immediately stepped up to the volunteer group and offered to help make sure that none of the individuals who came up for donations took more than the allotted amount. The volunteer described how taken aback she was to see this community member directly giving back, and helping the group even after he had already received his clothes. She was extremely inspired by how much that one moment changed her impression of homeless individuals, and she really appreciated the opportunity to interact with these people and get to know them as friends and neighbors, rather than the people that she had always quickly walked by on the street.

Overall, I was extremely pleased to hear positive feedback from almost every volunteer, despite the hectic nature of the event and the fact that many of the volunteers were standing around without anything to do for the first portion of the event. Besides distributing all of Transitions’ donations, the main goal of the event was to create connections within the community and to instill in volunteers a greater connection to their “neighbors on the streets.” The overwhelmingly positive feedback, along with the extremely high number of volunteers that shared personal stories from the experience and interacted with the people that came by to receive clothes, shows that we definitely achieved our goal of connecting the community to the issue of homelessness on a personal level. We tried to make our project as sustainable as possible to ensure that the next time Transitions runs the project, they will have plenty of resources to make the project even more impactful. We compiled a packet of our materials, including the flyers we made, information about the Eventbrite and other tools we used, contact information from all the volunteers, and general suggestions to improve the event, and sent this packet to Transitions. Additionally, we created a Survey that we sent to all the volunteers to assess their experience, and collect any critical feedback that could be helpful in improving the event.

Overall, we believe that there are several concrete steps that could be taken to improve the event. First, Transitions could run the event using fewer volunteers and capping the number of people that are allowed to sign up. This would ensure that every volunteer constantly would have a task, and that no one would be standing around. Additionally, there should be different shifts for volunteers to help divide all of the work, including a sorting shift that will help to get the donations sorted before the project takes place, and a break-down shift of volunteers that agree to stay after the project to help Transitions load the extra donations back into the trailer. We also believe that it would be beneficial to for Transitions to streamline its efforts and only distribute at one site rather than two. This would improve communication and make the set-up and break-down of the event much easier, which would give volunteers more time to possibly interact more with the residents of Transitions, or to even lengthen the presentation before the event. However, most importantly, this event could be improved by beginning the planning and logistical coordination at least one month in advance, which would give the planners much more time to coordinate their efforts, and possibly secure a better location. Additionally, it would allow for the culmination event and the winter drive to be advertised at the same time, which would encourage the people that donated clothes to the drive to actually come out to the event and see the direct impact of their generosity by helping to distribute the clothes to individuals in need.

Overall, our Research Advocacy Project connected with this course because it truly addressed community involvement, and helped to get members of the community personally engaged in the issue of homelessness, which inspired many of the participants to become active in advocacy events in the future. We helped to break down barriers of stereotypical views of homelessness, its causes, and even the nature of homeless individuals. We fostered connections between members of the community who are fortunate enough to be sheltered, and members of the community that are forced to live on the streets, which is a small step towards breaking down the processes of othering and dehumanization so often evident in people’s treatment of homeless individuals. I learned a lot about homelessness from Transitions, but actually doing this project helped me to realize just how difficult it can be to communicate with a nonprofit and to coordinate event planning. I learned the values of patience, perseverance, and strong communication skills, and I learned how to effectively advertise an event to interested members of the community. I also learned that I am much more effective in helping to plan community events than I ever thought possible, which is a much more rewarding feeling than I ever imagined. I have been extremely inspired by this course, and I know that the passions I have developed about protecting homeless individuals and helping to break down our societal stereotypes will not ever truly leave me. Even if I do not ever coordinate a large-scale project like this to address homelessness in Columbia or Jacksonville, I will continue to spend my time volunteering with Transitions and other organizations that address homelessness in Jacksonville. I hope I have the opportunity to continue helping Transitions plan more events like this, to keep the momentum that Vickie and I helped to generate going and to make these community-outreach events a norm in our city. No matter what, I will carry my passions for individuals who are homeless with me, and I want to continue to inspire others to change their perspectives through my continued service and action, in both Columbia and Jacksonville.