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Education 209

Culture Shock

Before college I had never experienced any sort of culture shock. I had lived in the same town my whole life, and I had never been out of the country. My town was fairly middle to upper class, and for the majority white. My graduation class had two African Americans and several Asians. When I applied to Gettysburg I signed up for the freshman seminar “Homelessness In America” hoping that I would get to experience new and uncomfortable situations. Over fall reading days my class and I went to Washington D.C where we stayed in a hostel. The trip was based at N-Street Village at Luther Place, which was a woman’s shelter. We stayed on the floor below the shelter.

Waiting for the bus to come pick us up, I was so nervous and anxious at the same time. I didn’t know what to expect from working with homeless people. After taking the class I was knew about the wrongness of stereotypes of the homeless, however at this moment all I knew was that I had always seen homeless people on the streets of New York asking for change and coming up to my family. Now I had never been in a city without my parents before and I didn’t know how much the next 4 days were going to impact my life. This was my mixed emotions stage of uprooting. I was excited and nervous at the same time. I didn’t know if the homeless would be nice or be jealous of me and think that we were using them as a project when this was their real life. When we pulled up to our hostel there was cellophane as windows and there were people smoking outside. I immediately knew that this was going to be different from anything I had ever experienced before. When we walked into our hostel it was one large room with 15 metal bunk beds covered in a foam pad that had holes everywhere. We only had about 5 minutes to settle in and then we had to walk across the street to the E-town woman and children’s shelter. Here I got to interact with single mother families and see what a shelter looks like. This was when I realized how lucky I was in my life, and how many people were less fortunate than I was. I began to loosen up after a while and realized how these woman and children were just like the residents from my town. They were telling jokes and asking us about our college experiences and if we went out to fraternities and what classes we were taking. It didn’t matter where they lived or how much money they had, they were some of the nicest people I had ever met. They didn’t seem upset that we were there asking them questions, and they were engaging in our conversations. They were ecstatic that we were keeping them company and had taken the time to come to stay with them. They had less and enjoyed life way more than so many students at Gettysburg College and that I had known in my life. Despite the events that had worn them in their lives they were still able to see the good in people. That night while lying in my bed I knew that I was about to go through a life changing experience.

The next morning we woke up and my whole class and I made the trek across the city to DC Central Kitchen. I would say that this was my Excitement and fear in the adventure of the journey. I was so excited to work in a soup kitchen, but I had no idea what the people would be like, or how they would react to my fellow classmates and me. The fear came from the unknown as I think it is human nature when in new situations. I didn’t know what to expect while walking to the soup kitchen and what I was going to see on the streets. Walking the streets of DC was also very eye opening and I could feel myself being submerged in a culture shock. There were hundreds of men and woman lying on park benches with bags and of trash and belongings. Their clothes were ripped and most of them were sleeping covered in bags for warmth. This was overwhelming at first for me to handle and I wanted to look at them, even though I knew this would be impolite. A lot of the stereotypes that I had thought of such as the “the bag ladies,” and really dirty people on benches were present right before my eyes. My body felt tense, but then I knew that there was no reason for me to be afraid. The woman I had met the other day the night before were so nice and there was no reason for me to judge other people on their lifestyle. Just because they were different from me and I could never imagine sleeping on a park bench, these people had not chosen to be living like this. I was so blessed to have a family and a house over my head. I was even luckier to get to go to such a prestigious college as Gettysburg College.

When we arrived at DC Central Kitchen, we began work in the kitchen with all of the chefs. These weren’t ordinary chefs though; they were people who had overcome addiction and homelessness and were now giving back to those who were in similar situations to who they used to be. They all took such pride in their work and they put so much thought and time into making meals for the homeless. After 4 days of working with them I realized that I could see myself giving back to lower class communities just like this. I would like to give back my time and help to make a difference in the lives of others less fortunate. Although my impact on their lives might be small, and I will most likely not change the hegemonic hierarchical class structures in society, I would like to take the time out of my life to do something for others. These people had inspired me to enjoy the small things in life and to not be afraid of difference, or let stereotypes control my thoughts and emotions. I had doubted the experience at first, and honestly I went into the situation with a negative outlook. I think it is important for all people to go through a form of culture shock in their lifetime. My culture shock definitely changed my life and the way I view others. This would be my assimilation and acculturation stage of uprooting in the sense that I incorporated what I learned, saw and experienced on my DC trip into my life. I learned a second way of thinking and doing. I returned to Gettysburg with a new outlook on life and I appreciate how lucky I am to have the life I do. I also started to volunteer at the soup kitchen in Gettysburg as a way of keeping in touch and connected with the homeless community. I didn’t want to lose the emotions and beliefs that I had gained from DC.

Culture shock knowledge is very relevant to teachers because it is their job to make their students feel comfortable and safe in the classroom environment in order for them to succeed. By succeed I mean grow as a person and make personal and educational growth and improvement from the beginning of the year to the end. I would try to incorporate the new student in the classroom and get them acquainted with the students and the classroom rules. Also, I would let them express their culture and where they came from so the students could be more comfortable with the new student. It is important for teachers to address all cultures and break the hegemonic barrier that often exists in most school systems and classrooms. Just because a child’s culture might not be the minority it is important for the other children in the class to understand where they are coming from. That way the new children and the children that are already in the classroom will be able to assimilate and acculturate to each other. I could create a lesson where we look at important figures of literature from each culture and have the class compare and contrast the pieces of literature. Also, I could have the children write poems about how they were feeling when they came into the new classroom and what they are looking forward to while being in a new scenery. I would have the students that are already in the classroom write their poems about what they were feeling when the new student or students came into the class. Also, I didn’t experience a language barrier, but that would be important in my classroom. I know how hard it would be to be in a culture shock with a language barrier. I would make sure that my student was able to understand my lessons and the other children who were talking around them. Maybe I could have a question and answer session where the new students ask question to the current students and visa versa. This would allow the students to bond and help in the Assimilation and Acculturation process as well as being enjoyable. However, I would not want the new students to lose their culture at all so I would let them know that although the classroom would be based in English that I would be willing to work with them separately if they were feeling behind. Also, I might try to group the new students with some of the more advanced children in the classroom. This way I would be encouraging the more gifted students to help the new students.

My experience in DC is one that I will keep with me forever. I know that the people I met and the situations I was put into positively affected me.