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## Becoming a Part of Your Community: The personal account of a student's journey discovering the impact of service learning on both community and personal development at the university level

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New city, new people, so much to learn. How else can I look at the beginning of my college journey? The first year flashes by. Returning to VCU for sophomore year, campus seemingly dominates the city of Richmond. I'm overcome with a sense of familiarity in my physical surroundings, yet unbeknownst to me the self-discovery in which I am about to embark will reveal how little I know about myself and my community. I was simply lost. Lost in my stress to do well in my classes, lost trying to establish those everlasting friendships that supposedly blossom in your college years, and lost in figuring out who I really was. Maybe the most bizarre part of thinking about who I was a few years ago is the fact that I don't remember her. So much of my identity was intertwined with the way I saw Richmond at that moment. That moment I recall being fully engulfed in an environment I could only absorb at face value. At that time, I only knew Richmond as VCU, *rocking the black and gold everywhere*, totally blind to anything that wasn't directly related to the VCU brand. I was an outsider to the Richmond community, but had the resources and support of VCU to cushion me from experiencing, and even observing, the challenges that my Richmond neighbors had to address daily. I wrestled constantly with the questions surrounding belonging and what was categorized as a community or rather, my community.

There is still a looming feeling that the first year of my college experience was somehow wasted as a pure adjustment period. I wander around learning how to live on my own without the guidance of my parents or teachers and coaches telling me what to do and when to be there. The desperation of my search for identity commences as classes kick off on a humid August week in the fall of 2017. Sophomore year. My next class starts at 11 A.M. The all too familiar five-floored square building known as Harris Hall looms in the distance; I glance at my phone to ensure I was heading towards the correct classroom. Harris Hall is undoubtedly one of the most

commonly used buildings to undergraduate VCU students, it houses one of the most frequently used 100+ person lecture halls and the financial aid office on the ground floor. After trekking two flights of stairs, I am suddenly in a dim-lit corner, greeted by the musty smell of this recently uninhabited university building.

UNIV 200. More formally known as Inquiry & Craft of Argument. Here we go. Everyone dreads this class, or so I've heard. It is a university required, writing based course where the general rumors revolve around the notion that the course basically devotes a semester doing busy work ultimately outlining how to write a 10-15 page paper. In fact, we did end up learning how to properly construct a CER (claim, evidence, reasoning) paper that, in retrospect, was not as brutal as my sophomore self anticipated. If there was one person that could change my outlook on the process of this assignment, or class as a whole for that matter, it was my awe-inspiring, brilliant professor, Lindsay. She developed her course in a way that easily divided the paper into smaller more manageable parts to gradually form our papers over the course of the semester, rather than throw us the daunting task of writing a 15 page paper before the final day of class. I wish I knew then what I know now about professors' purpose behind the way they develop their courses. I give that paper a lot of credit for the way it helped me better understand how to develop a "by the books" style of writing. That paper is a critical part of the UNIV 200 course that I could only really understand after I continued to work with that exact professor the following Fall semester. Now here is where this process becomes more difficult for me. It is so ingrained in my mind that every paper needs a seamless beginning, middle, and end to ultimately guide its readers into feeling some sort of resolution. That feeling of completing a paper knowing that there are no more unknowns and every unanswered question throughout the paper is now tied up in a nice bow and delivered on a platter for the reader. Structure and rules, that's how I

learned how to write a successful paper. I've struggled with those rules during the entire year and a half that I've been working on the piece you are reading now. The more I revisited my thoughts and experiences for what I wanted to include here, the more I had to break those standards that were so deeply ingrained in my mind for what a paper should be. I started to realize that this narrative could not be told in that perfectly chronological standard in which I was so familiar. It feels like every moment had a purpose in this journey with an out of sequence connection to another important point in time.

Needless to say, I did not go into this course with a positive and open mind. General consensus: this is going to be brutal. My nerd-like qualities force me to sit close to the board and dead center in the classroom. More students file in after me. No one I recognize--I thought for sure I would have some sort of familiar face in this class. Not that I knew many people on campus anyway, but I tend to set myself up for those types of simple disappointments. All of a sudden, in strolls the most vibrant looking, pink haired, spunky woman I have ever seen. *Is she the professor?* She tosses her tote on the front table with unforgettable confidence. *Oh, she is the professor.* My mind was put to a slight ease at this moment. I immediately told myself, how could you struggle in a course when the professor looks like the lovechild of Joan Jett and Katy Perry. Totally judging a book by its cover—I'll admit—but it seemed to calm my nerves at the time and after learning what a true badass she is, I couldn't help but admire her more as time went on.

“How many of you know this is a *service learning* course?” she cheerfully asks the class. *Oh no.* A flood of panicked emotions come over me. *Why did eServices not specify this? I'll never finish 20 hours of community service before the end of the semester!* I cannot believe I put myself in this course. I had no real understanding of what service learning was other than the fact

that it will require me to provide 20 hours of my time outside of the class to fulfill the service requirement. As someone who is easily overwhelmed, this daunting task set before me consisting of service and writing that paper on top of taking 18 credits that semester, and trying to join an organization on campus just seemed like too much.

I did not think I was going to find the time to complete everything and do it to the best of my ability. There is a lot of pressure I have always put on myself to give everything and everyone my 100% all the time. And yes, that is as draining as it sounds, but that's who I am. Can you relate to feeling that way?

Opening myself up to a new experience is easier said than done. This was a character trait that I did not realize at the time was a giant part of my identity. My mom reminds me all the time that no matter the situation growing up, I would angst over any new environment I would go into, but come out of it so filled with joy and excitement towards whatever it is I started. Whether that was joining a new club or even a childhood birthday party where I was unsure about what we were going to do. I constantly have that feeling to this day, but at least now I can calm my own nerves and move forward with the “you never know until you try” mindset. Opening myself up to service led me to dedicate the better half of my college career to the VCU service learning community. I was discovering new parts of Richmond while exploring unknown parts of myself which was a journey that began that fall as a service learning student.

Towards the end of the semester, that same iconic punk rock professor asked to speak with me during her office hours. Immediately I start to think of every possible way I could have got myself into some kind of trouble. I didn't do anything bad, but as a college student, I know I am expected to take the initiative and show up to office hours, not be invited. Hesitantly, I

walked into her office. She didn't seem like she was angry with me—I relaxed a little bit. After some casual conversation and sharing how our days were going, she finally asked:

**“Would you be interested in becoming a TA for my class?”**

A wave of relief and excitement overcame me. *This was going to be amazing.* I did not really know what to expect or what I was getting myself into, but if it meant sharing my experiences with other students and watching them grow through similar experiences, then I wanted to be right there with them. I still question how I got to that point and what my professor saw in me that semester to be so confident in that fact that I could support other students, and even her.

Back in that dingy corner classroom of Harris Hall, glancing around the room, there is a similar dazed and confused look on a majority of the other students' faces. A huge sense of comfort washed over me after recognizing the feelings were mutual throughout the classroom. That moment also made me feel like we were all starting on an even playing field, a feeling I never felt in a classroom setting. At least we are all shocked at the realization that we are now in a service learning UNIV course. A quick google search to VCU's Service Learning website will bring you to a big block of text identifying that “service-learning is an intentional teaching strategy that engages students in organized service activities and guided reflection” (Virginia Commonwealth University Center for Community Engagement and Impact, n.d.), ultimately telling an unwilling student that they will be put in an uncomfortable situation to learn in a non-traditional way. I was curious about service learning, but hesitant and unwilling to warm up to the idea fully just yet. The language used on the website is filled with words that instantly turn me off to any learning environment. Words and phrases like “activities” and “guided reflection” make me groan almost instantly so naturally, I had low expectations for enjoyment in this course.

The professor continued with her first day spiel for the class, as much as I wanted to hear every detail of what to expect here this semester, my mind was glued to the idea that I am alone in the challenge. I was intellectually aware that each student in that classroom was also responsible for meeting the course requirements, but I realize now what made me feel so isolated was the idea that I couldn't lean on anyone else to help me get my hours. That was my task and the only one who could accomplish it was me. There I go again, seeing my service as a task, rather than an opportunity to learn and grow as a student within the community that I was still trying to discover. I gradually transitioned away from this approach where I could "cross it off my checklist" towards the idea that this was a space where I could fully immerse myself to gain a lot more than just school credit.

Something I had to constantly remind myself after stepping into a Service Learning TA (SLTA) role; you can't make someone love service. We can share our experiences and talk about the outcomes found by those who have researched the impact of service learning but, when it is boiled down to its basic form, not everyone who enters a service learning setting will have a positive or meaningful experience. I wonder if having a "positive" experience even allows room for what may create a more meaningful environment for some students. Becoming uncomfortable with the topics that service learning exposes you to will ultimately affect the students experience and that doesn't necessarily need to be positive. I guess I'm more frustrated with the students that can't grasp the power that service learning holds.

Once I entered this mysterious other side where I am friends with the professor and have a group of people sharing the same passion for service learning, I was thrilled to begin a new journey with my education. This was more than a new paragraph of my life story; I was ready to begin writing an entirely new chapter. Every Friday at 2 p.m. I could count on an hour of

regrouping with this exclusive club that is our weekly SLTA meetings. I quickly discovered that these meetings were not used solely for planning purposes or to discuss what happened during class that week. These meetings served as an outlet for each of us to openly share whatever we needed to get off our chest. A consistent topic for discussion was the idea that some students just aren't getting it. Our professor cared for our wellbeing and we cared for hers. I was also granted the "inside scoop" on how parts of the course really work and was exposed to certain components that I missed while being a student in the class. I can still remember the day I realized I was in this inner circle: I found out that one of the most memorable in-class activities of the semester was not left up to chance as I had thought. Picking names out of a hat for an activity seems so innocent, but my professor knew that there would be a better overall outcome for the class as a whole if she was able to have a bit more influence. So, the Friday meeting before class, the SLTA's work with her to assign specific students to a role that will maximize learning. The pulling names out of a hat in front of the class was really just for show... brilliant.

Walking by the same 7-Eleven where my nights out typically end consuming the \$1.49 taquitos, I thought about what else I was missing in this city that wasn't within walking distance of my apartment or VCU's main campus. I told myself that in order to do well in this class, the service was going to be crucial. Too caught up in deciding whether I should join Greek life or search for an internship, no part of my mindset at this time allowed me to consider the deeper meaning behind the course description, "service learning." But, this course is required. I gave myself a small internal pep talk and acknowledged that it was time to accept my fate, figure out the best way to execute this service, and get it done.

A few classes pass by and it is time to decide my service placement. As I suspected with a service learning course, this is turned into an assignment. Based on my initial introduction of

the course it felt as though each assignment was going to be the classic “busy work” that makes you feel like you are getting nowhere and not doing anything productive. This was the experience I had in my last UNIV course so adding service learning to it just left room for more meaningless work in the classroom setting. Why must everything be an assignment? Classes that create assignments just for the purpose of creating more possible points always make me feel as though I am wasting my time and effort on something that will go nowhere. I want to go into a class feeling like there is substance and purpose behind each assignment in order to gain the most from my education. Thinking back to the amount of “busy work” assignments I completed throughout my undergraduate college career seems pretty substantial. Maybe those assignments felt like busy work because I didn’t comprehend the purpose of the assignment. That makes me question whether it was my fault for not discovering the meaning on my own or, the professor's fault for not explaining what I was supposed to get out of it. Perhaps having this experience and reflecting on it even today is part of my continuous growth. This is one of those moments where as I am writing, I begin to reflect on a lot of classroom experiences where I don’t think I fully understood my purpose and did not question those moments as much as I should have. That’s what learning is all about, isn’t it? These are the after effects of what my experiences really taught me. I value the education I was privileged enough to receive, but taking the time to invite personal reflection on my own learning and growth as a student was something I wish I had done more of and sooner.

Certainly I had those moments of reflection as a student, but looking back at my time as a service learning student in its entirety makes me wonder just how much I may have missed. There are countless ways I immersed myself in my community both actively in my service and in the classroom giving guidance to other students. I would have never understood just how many

notable lessons and personal growth I took away from service learning if I didn't sit down, think, and write about it as a whole. Some of the moments I can remember the clearest from that first semester of service learning as a student was when we had short stints of time during class to just free write about our experiences. Documenting the way I was feeling in that present moment was a key way to examine the way my mind was operating. It becomes even more impactful when I can quite literally go back and review the way I felt in one scenario compared to another or even understand the way I may have viewed the same situation, but with enough time elapsed to have almost an entirely different mind-set.

Now I had to decide between mentoring at a local elementary school, becoming a mentor for students from middle school to high school, or volunteering with the Real Chances reentry program at the Richmond Urban Ministry Institute. At this point, I felt an uneasy pressure to decide what I wanted to do, make up my mind quickly, and not put as much thought into my decision as I would have wanted. Part of me thought that if I was having a bad day and suddenly had to complete a few service hours with kids, that maybe my negativity would project onto them. That was the last thing I wanted in a situation where my purpose was to be a positive component in their life. There is that word again... "purpose." Could the true "purpose" of my engagement be my presence as a positive addition to the community?

I discovered later that not only kids, but adults, could sense my hidden emotions as well. Regardless, when would I have another opportunity to interact with individuals who were recently released from prison? *Now I am interested.* I was far more compelled by the idea that somebody would willingly share the story behind what caused them to be in that situation, than the fact that I was actually going to learn about how society systematically puts certain roadblocks in place so that specific communities have less of a chance to survive than others. I'm

not proud of it but, at that moment, I was so interested in the backgrounds of those who I was going to meet and wanted to understand what they understood to be the reason behind why they ended up where they were today. So I chose Real Chances. While doing some preliminary research on what reentry programs are, I stumbled across Cynthia Caporizzo's blog post "Prisoner Reentry Programs: Ensuring a Safe and Successful Return to the Community." She described that reentry programs are something "designed to assist incarcerated individuals with a successful transition to their community after they are released" (Caporizzo, 2011, para. 2. "Their community," *what is it? Where is it?* Surely this community can't be so foreign from the one I was perceiving all this time as the "real" Richmond that my experiences thus far had shown me. The Richmond I knew is full of life, art, and incredible food. It's about those days sunbathing on the rocks at Belle Isle and meeting your friends for power hour every Thursday at Tobacco Company or for bucket night every Wednesday at District 5.

Knowing this experience will be one that I've never had before, I made the assumption that it would simply become what I made it out to be. I was still dreading the work that was ahead of me but the optimist inside of me knew that if I tried to look at this next step in my college career with an open mind, my situation would inherently become better. As my service learning journey continued into my SLTA career, I was exposed to the drastic spectrum of attitudes towards service. It was truly gut wrenching to work with students who simply did not care or at least did not seem invested. Not only was it challenging for me to even attempt to get through to these individuals, but it was also devastating to think about how their negativity would translate into their service. I wanted to figure out what else I could do to make those students care. Any sort of outside negativity whether that be a lack of interest from the student or inconsistency in a student's participation will affect the community where the service is being

carried out. A VCU student doesn't show up one day to mentor their 3rd grader at Carver Promise, the kids notice. A VCU student only shows their face at Real Chances once in a blue moon with no expression of wanting to be there, the residents notice. There were seemingly countless times I, as well as Real Chances residents, noticed an awkward silence from a classmate. Seeing the looks on the faces of the members of the Real Chances community proved to me that adults can be just as disappointed by lack of effort as children.

I did not realize that when you become a Service Learning Teaching Assistant at VCU, you also have to take a class on how to improve your own learning, while also understanding different ways to facilitate service learning for the UNIV 112 and 200 students. I appreciated that there was another element that could help me settle my doubts about being an effective SLTA, but I also had concerns about whether I set myself up for a larger commitment than I could handle. After learning that I would need to make time in my schedule to also attend a two-hour class every other week, I was concerned that I simply would not have enough time to balance my class schedule and continue to give my all to assisting students in their service learning. I had moments of doubt when I thought I wouldn't be capable of serving as an SLTA based on my own abilities, time management, and concerns for what else could happen.

Service-Learning is built off good intentions--at least that's what I thought sophomore year. After witnessing the failure of good intentions and the sour taste it left in the mouths of Real Chances residents, I now appreciate the scholarship of Service-Learning that proposes a considerably more complex conception of community engagement that is about outcomes that benefit community members, and even students. I had a dramatic realization once stepping on the SLTA side of service learning. It was almost as if I was in a long stint of *deja vu*, but with the

knowledge of what to accept next. Somehow when I was on the student side I was incapable of understanding that not everyone will take the time to seize the opportunities of service learning.

These students are also disappointing to work with because it proves how not everyone is going to leave service learning with the personal growth that I unexpectedly found from my experience. It's disappointing because I wanted nothing more than for those service learning students and future ones to have the same experience that I did. Thinking about it now, that was a completely unrealistic expectation I set for myself and the students I worked with. I know now that every student will have a different experience with engagement. Service truly has multiple, and perhaps, contradictory goals. As much as it is intended to be a way for students to dedicate themselves to their community, it is also a way for students to become more self-aware and discover the other layers of their community. Only now do I fully appreciate that the personal challenge of UNIV 200 and even my occasional failings revealed that my familiar self was not truly me. Discovering the potential magnitude of my impact on the residents of Real Chances taught me that there was no room to slack. As I peer back on my misguided belief that I could dictate the personal growth of students I worked with ignores my own realizations when I was a UNIV 200 student. It was not until I looked squarely at the Real Chances experience facing me that I committed to dive-in head first and put every ounce of effort I had into trying to create positive change in someone's life...little did I know, that someone was me.

When the time came to introduce myself to the place I would be visiting twice a week around dinner time for the foreseeable future, I became more anxious. Anxious about who I will meet, what we will do, if we will have anything to talk about, and whether or not I could really make an impact. Disclosing my anxieties throughout this piece allows me to discover my own identity by becoming comfortable being uncomfortable. My anxieties when starting something

new never seem to skip a beat, however, these nerves came from a different place. I couldn't figure out what exactly was making me so scared at first, maybe I was afraid of disappointing complete strangers or simply feeling unwanted in their presence. It's pretty startling to think back to these beginning steps of service and will always remind me of a brilliant article that I was introduced to as a student, but really didn't understand the importance of until I became an SLTA. *Helping, Fixing or Serving* by Rachel Naomi Remen, which breaks down and wrestles with the thoughts behind the "savior complex," a commonly discussed theme within service learning.

Driving only a few minutes down the road, this thing called Real Chances became a tangible place. It was just orientation day, but the nerves made me take an extra deep breath in the car before heading to the door. Let me know if I'm the only one that felt this way but, when I started service, I was under the impression that I was going to help and fix the community I was walking into. However, Remen reminds us that "helping is not a relationship between equals" and "in fixing, we see others as broken" (Remen, 1999, para. 4). I was no exception to these assumptions. It wasn't until I was in the classroom setting actually learning about the differences between "helping," "fixing," and "serving" explained in that article, when I realized what my presence at Real Chances was supposed to be like by textbook standards. I was in what felt like a constant battle between comprehending my own impact or purpose, while keeping other goals in mind during the beginning part of service; *What do the returning citizens expect from me? Should I be doing more? How do I really know I am helping?* I see this quite clearly now and understand that without being able to identify one's purpose earlier in service, some students may not take away as much from their own experience. Once I realized that service was going to open my eyes to a side of my community that I would never be able to discover in another

setting, I was able to make myself more vulnerable to the experience as a whole. At the same time I am telling you about my specific and unique experience with service, I am wondering just how “unique” it actually was. We had countless reflection-based classes where students were able to express how service was going and what they were feeling towards their experience. But I can’t remember opening up this much about what I was really experiencing, nor do I remember what my fellow classmates experienced. I do know that those reflection moments impacted my personal growth, but I cannot recall what I was thinking or feeling. I truly became much more grateful for this experience only after I sat down to write the first draft of this piece that somehow found its way to you. The more I allow this version of myself to emerge—almost a year out of college—the more questions I’m left with about every stage of my personal journey.

On that first day at Real Chances a bunch of students in my class arrived around the same time. The building had a keypad next to the door. *At least there is good security...* I thought to myself as I continued to gather more initial impressions at face value. It was like stepping away from VCU’s campus made me mentally and physically vulnerable to the actual community. Before any of us could press the call button, a man with big baggy jeans and an oversized white t-shirt opened the door with the most welcoming smile I had seen in a long time. The bunch of us then proceeded down the hall to the front office to sign in. *Always remember to sign in.*

**“Welcome everyone!”**

Calling from the other end of the hallway, I turned around to see the familiar face of the house director at the time, Mr. Day. This was one of the two individuals who presented this service option to our class. The one who deemed the residents as “bridge-crossers.” Mr. Day started by giving us a tour of the house followed by elaborating more on what we should expect. We walked with Mr. Day down the hallway toward the common area. A couch facing a

television with some sort of football game playing on one side of the room and a pool table on the other next to a door which led to a small patio area with a few residents scattered around. Each hesitantly looking at us while we timidly smiled and waved. Mr. Day encouragingly prompted the residents to say “hi” while explaining to them that we were VCU students and our presence was going to become much more frequent. Slowly each resident got up to introduce themselves to us. Not expecting anything but a simple “hello,” I made eye contact with an incredibly tall man. He had this intense look of gratitude and said without hesitation:

**“Thank you for being here.”**

Did he just thank us? For showing up to orientation? It was at that moment when I realized, I could actually make a difference in someone’s life. That difference being something as simple as creating a sense of inclusion and predictability within the Richmond community. But could I really? This ping pong game of internal doubt was constantly forcing me to question my purpose and if I could really make an impact or even learn from this experience. This lack of self-confidence was always at the forefront of my mind: *That was only one guy anyway. Maybe he was just friendly.* While names escape me as soon as I hear them, I can still picture his face, and the face of every other person I met at Real Chances. As much as I try to remember everyone's names in this present moment, I can't. In retrospect it feels like I had to protect myself and was not willing to fully engage. I was going through the motions—not capturing details, like names—because I feared the unknown.

A week later, I made the short drive down Chamberlayne Ave. with the bright orange sunset flooding into my car and the nerves slowly creeping back up on me. *How many people will be there? Will any of them want to talk to me?* No one is at the door this time. I pressed the call button and waited. Waited until I heard the quick, sharp buzz of the door unlocking. As I

headed towards the sign-in desk, an older looking man passed me in the hallway and gave me a quick smile with a slight wave. That incredibly small gesture provided me with enough reassurance to believe that tonight was going to be a good night. Not only did I become more relaxed, but I went into that dinner convinced I would push myself to have at least one meaningful conversation. When writing my name in the sign-in booklet, a man sitting in the office called out:

**“You here for dinner?!”**

And even though I had not yet seen another VCU student, I felt instant relief as though everything was going to be alright. My fears derived from the thought that I would stick out like a sore thumb because I was entering this environment thinking about all the differences between our life experiences. The excitement in his voice gave me confidence that my presence was expected and welcomed. I realize now that while I cannot control my initial anxieties, I can decide how I react to the irrational fear that will determine the outcome of my experience.

More VCU students arrived in time for “dinner buddies” that night. It was every student’s first official day there so none of us really knew what we were supposed to be doing. Eventually, someone called out that dinner was ready and all of the residents slowly emerged. Everyone began making their plates and finding a place to sit. Still off to the side of the room, the bunch of VCU students I was there with decided we were just going to spread ourselves out and sit with some of the residents. I sat down with one other woman from my class and two men who seemed quiet. We introduced ourselves and the two men were polite, but clearly were not interested in keeping a conversation going with us. I almost expected that exact response, but still was unsure how to continue the seemingly dying conversation. I initially doubted and questioned if they were actually invested in the conversation, but failed to realize at the time that there was a good

chance that the residents were just as nervous about this experience as we were. When the slight stall in the conversation had passed, we found some common ground and ended up having a stimulating conversation that carried on for the rest of dinner. Before I knew it, dinner was over and it was time for us to leave. We said our goodbyes and one of the residents called out:

**“When y’all comin’ back?”**

I recognized I was not there to change the residents or directly make their transition back into the community 100% better, but I could definitely be a positive light in their day. Something was clicking now... Here was a community that I was serving, not helping nor fixing. Serving: the powerful word expressing what “makes us aware of our wholeness and its power” (Remen, 1999, para. 5). It wasn’t about me stepping into an unfamiliar place to change someone’s life, but finding that purpose of a reciprocal experience. Real Chances became a way for me to remove myself from my university bubble and allow me to step into a part of my community that I had no idea existed. It feels self-serving in the way I viewed these moments of removing myself from VCU’s campus as an “escape” when in reality this was all part of the same Richmond community, just another side that is seemingly ostracized for something they did in their past. My escape was a place where the residents lacked specific basic freedoms like not being able to keep razors in their bathroom. I remember seeing a resident check out a razor like a library book from the locked metal box where they were stored. The more I attempted to digest the characteristics of what created *my community*, the more I realized that these communities were very much based on my own perception. My community was no longer secluded to the students roaming around W. Cary St. trying to find the next party to go to or the spatially unaware skateboarders flying through The Compass. My community now consists of individuals who are constantly trying to rebuild their life in a system that is built with the odds stacked against them.

It felt like I was being introduced to a whole new Richmond. That first year where all I saw was the VCU bubble was a barrier that was finally broken and I could no longer look at Richmond as solely the “city where I went to college.” This also gave me more motivation to explore the city beyond the giant VCU logos, which is honestly very difficult, but possible. These service hours were what I needed to make me realize that a simple conversation can improve someone’s day; can improve my day. It did not matter what a person’s background may look like or how different it may seem from mine at face-value, the possibility of the smallest commonality could surge an incredible connection.

Stepping into a service learning setting made me develop a deeper sense of understanding for each individual’s talents, personalities, and insecurities. One evening, there was a unanimous decision to play hangman after dinner. The room divided into two teams both consisting of a combination of VCU students and residents. It quickly turned into a heated game with both teams engaging in some friendly competition. I had the opportunity to be a part of the winning team with the most help deriving from one man who had read and studied the dictionary while serving his time. He was pulling out words that no one else ever heard of. This man’s extraordinary vocabulary and boisterous personality truly thrived in this environment. Discovering this man’s vocabulary was honestly unexpected. This was another one of those moments where I came face-to-face with my faulty assumptions that if a man was incarcerated than he could not possibly have a robust and extraordinary vocabulary. His revelation about reading the dictionary while serving his time revealed my misperceptions and limits. Moments like this made me realize that “serving makes us aware of our wholeness and its power,” (Remen, 1999, para. 5) by bringing unexpected individuals to find each other in a much more intertwined community than what we may realize. I felt this greater sense of empathy for

everyone in the Richmond community when I was realizing how common it is for us to just walk by someone and not even think about where they were coming from or what their backstory is. There were moments during this game when I forgot where I was or the fact that I was there earning service hours. It was as if I was playing a game after thanksgiving dinner with my family. I think a lot about the rawness of experiencing that level of comfort with a group of people that in retrospect I hardly knew. Although it seemed like just a group of people having some lighthearted fun playing an elementary game, it is remarkable to think that of these two groups coming together and getting along like we've known each other for years.

That game night uncovered so many more sides to each Real Chances guest. Aside from being absorbed with the joy that experience granted me, it also clarified the importance of little moments. I was positioned further away from the board that night and sat at a table with some men who I had never spoken to before. It was obvious they were more reserved than some of the other residents and I did not want to make them feel pressured into playing the game if that was not what they wanted. A few rounds went by and the man sitting across from me chimed in to guess the word. He got it correct and won that round for our team. That was a win for our entire side of the room but I noticed that his ability to jump in the way he did meant so much more to him. After our team cheered for getting the answer correct, we all high fived and the quiet man that guessed the word sat back in his chair, tilted his head down towards his lap, and whispered to himself:

**“Contributed.”**

My heart stopped. The sense of accomplishment I could feel from across that table was so poignant and made me tremendously grateful to be able to experience that moment with him. This particular evening brought me to a moment of reflection on how important it is for me to be

compassionate to everyone I meet. Each and every person faces secret battles. I put on a front of confidence to mask my own internal battles and that have hindered my self-growth. It eventually occurred to me how many other secret battles were surrounding me every time I set foot in Real Chances. *Who was worried about how they are going to land a job with a record? Who is thinking about people they need to take care of, like their family? Who is concerned about their next move after their 90 days at Real Chances expires?*

Walking into class for the first time as an SLTA, there was a calmness I felt knowing I was there to help and did not possess the same first day jitters I usually carried with me at the beginning of each semester. However, I was also experiencing a level of uncertainty with my personal abilities to help other students throughout that whole first semester. I was constantly questioning if what I was doing was enough or if I was actually helping anyone. My self-doubt battled my confidence almost daily. Yes, I was happy to not be getting graded on a 15 page paper, but I also felt a great sense of responsibility for making sure the students I worked with would thrive.

The following semester, I worked with the same class as most UNIV 112 students tend to move to the 200 level together. While still feeling an underlying sense of discomfort with my abilities, I could reassure myself by remembering I have done this before. However, it greatly disappointed me when I noticed that many students did not possess the same drive for service that I did. It was an issue that bedeviled me and I attempted to affect, but ultimately I could not force someone to love service the way I do. My goals as an SLTA were motivated by the chance that I could be the reason that a student finds their passion or experiences self-growth or just simply be an example for someone who may need more guidance than others.

Oftentimes during my visits to Real Chances, I would meet someone I have never talked to before. Sometimes the residents would approach me with a particular question surrounding things they want to work on or even ask me what college is like for me. After I finished serving dinner, I went to join the residents as they ate and one man called me over to his table. He asked me so simply:

**“When are you supposed to start a new paragraph?”**

I was taken aback hearing that question. Based on the school systems I was fortunate enough to grow up in, learning when the appropriate time to begin a new paragraph was a middle school level task at the latest. The pressure I felt from having to answer this question from a Real Chances resident was somehow far more overwhelming than it would have been had it come from a student asking for an SLTA’s perspective. There was a weight I felt from this question, as if this resident had much greater expectations of me. Slightly still stunned by the question and hoping my face did not reflect my internal monologue, I sat down and explained as best I could. Was I providing an appropriate response to the question? At first blush this was not a complex question, but as I responded I began to doubt my command of writing rules and guidelines.

A few semesters into the SLTA experience I had developed some efficacy with many students thanking me for helping them with their papers. I was genuinely enjoying working with them. Beginning my third semester as an SLTA, even though I had an entirely new group of students, I had more confidence in my abilities as a TA. But it wasn’t just my performance as an SLTA that I began to notice some personal changes in. I was speaking up more in other classes, applying for more leadership positions, and becoming more involved in certain aspects of the community that I hadn’t before. I also found myself giving helpful, sane advice to the newer SLTAs. This was the first time, in all the years I’ve been going to school, that I didn’t feel like

the most incompetent one in the room. I had always been so hard on myself, but that semester made me realize that I was smart, capable, and belonged in a higher education setting.

But that writing question from the Real Chances resident was different. *Did the standard rules apply here? Could I answer without understanding the reality of this individual?* As we talked more about different writing strategies, he finally told me he was applying to VCU. The questions he asked me about various ways to improve the way he wrote were all being used for his application to the same university that brought us together in that dining room. This man continued to explain how he would like to join the VCU arts school. He then proceeded to pull out photos of his artwork and a few of his sketches. I was in awe. These drawings were wonderfully meticulous and beautiful. I'm not sure what I expected and maybe that was a stereotypical assumption to not expect much, which shows just how much my perception changed once I was able to open myself up to different experiences.

One of the other students from my original UNIV class that also became an SLTA had also served at Real Chances. Later on in that semester, she had approached me to tell me she saw the resident who told us he was applying to VCU, walking around campus with a backpack on. I became a little choked up as I realized that explaining when the proper moment to start a new paragraph could have set this man up to thrive on a new career path. There really is no way for me to know for sure whether he actually became a student, but that small glimpse gave me the sense that there is something mysterious about Service-Learning. When it is truly working it is so much more than “an intentional teaching strategy that engages students in organized service activities and guided reflection” (Virginia Commonwealth University Center for Community Engagement and Impact, n.d.).

It didn't come as a surprise to hear what kinds of struggles each resident faced in their attempt to dive back into the world. There was a moment late in my service when I thought to myself, this is a part of the community I joined. Being able to recognize that Richmond is not VCU alone illuminated just how trapped I was within the VCU bubble. I thought back to when I first drove down the road to Real Chances and had a similar thought. Why didn't it feel like I was still in Richmond when I was with the residents of Real Chances?

The same resident I had run into during my orientation who thanked us for merely showing up, sat with me on one of my last dinners of the semester. He was always so lively and talked about his mother's cooking with the brightest smile on his face. At one point in that dinner after asking me about what my plans were with school and what I was studying, he got quiet. I asked him what he was thinking and he replied:

**“You know it really means a lot that you are here. Whenever I go out to find a job I always feel like there is a target on my back.”**

He continued to explain that he felt as if everyone knew his past and that he could not really get a fresh start in the community. I did my best to reassure him in whatever way I could, but it was incredibly heartbreaking to hear. I remember having that overwhelming sense of disconnect between us for a moment. When he would talk about his family, I could relate to that, but that feeling of having a “target on his back” was something I had never experienced. The genuinely simple comfort I feel in my community is an unfair experience that I unfortunately still take for granted. The insecurities the residents face on a daily basis with finding a sense of normalcy in the community was something I could not begin to understand. All I knew was over the previous few months each person I met was remarkable and I wish there was more I could do

to alleviate the daily challenges they face. I didn't realize it at the time, but those seemingly ordinary conversations and dinners we shared were changing the way I saw the world.

The fourth and final semester of my journey as an SLTA had finally caught up to me: Spring semester of 2020—also my final semester as a college student. I never thought this day would actually come and that it would end in a pandemic setting. Finally being able to understand my learning strengths and be able to provide guidance to my fellow VCU Rams, I was devastated to have it all come to a close so abruptly. As difficult as it was for a social butterfly like myself to suddenly not be able to run down Cary Street and knock on my friend's door to just say “hello,” my transition to online learning was, dare I say, easy? Thankfully I am in a position to move to this platform without much trouble, but I also found it oddly impressive how powerful the service learning community is in this sort of situation. The particular skill of adapting is something I gained from my experience as both a service learning student and an SLTA. Rolling with the punches and doing whatever it is you need to do to get things done was a lesson learned from my initial service and has proven itself to be helpful while going through this pandemic experience.

Service learning was brought into my life by chance. There was no indicator for what I was signing up for and no warning that it would be a more time-consuming course than most. Why is that? Why did I happen to fall into a course that redirected my learning abilities in college? Why aren't more students required to be a part of something like this?

To think that all the positive change I was searching for in my life was waiting for me just on the other side of my own fear. If I had switched out of that section of UNIV 200, my life would be completely different. I met some of the most inspiring people and learned more about myself than I would ever imagine. Now, I too have discovered the moments in my life where it

may be time to start a new paragraph, and acknowledge how to take the time to close one chapter in my life so I have the ability to start a next one. I am walking away from this experience still wondering; what would my college experience have been like without service learning? What would my outlook on Richmond as a whole reflect? And on the other hand, I'm also left wondering; did my service make an impact on something greater than myself? Is there more that I could have done or still be doing?

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