

Brandon Fenley

I relished my time at ELI. I took in everything, absorbed it all like any other subject I study for: calculus, chemistry, etc. I came to class and asked questions; participated in discussions during the presentations; and I contributed as much as I could in encouraging the rest of the class to be involved, ask questions, and understand the topic as well as I did from the presentations. I went to mentor meetings where we meet in smaller groups to discuss our own service projects. I played an active role in the group in listening intently on what each member had to say, suggesting what they could do, proposing questions that allowed for critical thinking and critiquing, and acting as a contact whenever I could. Questions were also heavily bombarded on me. However, I learned slowly how to stand my ground, and counterattack with answers to my group's difficult but critical questions. Class participation and collective learning is as much a part of the experience as individual learning.

Outside of class I wrote journals about each class session and I kept a progress log on the weekly progress of my service project. To thoughtfully take the time to write in these journals and allow myself the opportunity to reflect truly helped in making something meaningful out of what was discussed – to reflect what happened, what it meant, and what could I do then to apply that lesson. The writing and group discussion also improved my communication skills and taught me how and when to listen, how and when to talk, and what role I take in a group (initiator, facilitator, etc.) The importance of shared meaning becomes very apparent after it becomes a critical factor in selling your service project idea to your mentors by stating your purpose, stating what actions were

taken and need to be taken, and why my project is important to me, to those whom I serve, and to the rest of the world.

My service project went through many ideas. I have much passion about many things and find it hard to focus on one thing. I love to do everything. However, though I am enthusiastic, a strength maximized can also become a weakness. My service project taught me to focus and to discipline myself so as not to procrastinate by perfectionism. I learned from Mike Rosenberg's "Self-Management" session how to discipline myself so I can manage my "time." Focusing then, I chose to work with the Catholic Action Homeless Shelter in recruiting UK volunteers to address this issue, create a tutoring and scholarship advising service for the kids, and creating "fun days" for the kids that would open them up to opportunities they were would not otherwise have, such as an Aikido and Japanese culture night, or basketball night with UK students. These were my original ideas I thought they needed, but I wanted to ask them what they needed and what assets they already had that could expounded. From Louise Stone's session, "Community Assets," I learned that one first must ask if someone is in need, if they want help, what they need, and work with them – not do something for or to them, but to help them help themselves. It took a while to do this however, for Jennie, the director of the Center, is hard to contact. Allowing myself to be patient and flexible was needed, for I realized that the world does not revolve around my project and me; people can be busy with other things and are not necessarily blowing me off.

I had to learn to be even more flexible when after I got the chance to ask what the needs of the Catholic Action Center were, I realized more information would be needed before any action was implemented. I learned of problems that I had not known of, but

that really need to be addressed. Paul, a homeless man served by the Center, told me of what it was like being homeless and of how the homeless feel like they are forgotten and abandoned by society. He discussed the horrible conditions single homeless men face at the HOPE Center, the only place that shelters single homeless men – the other shelters only house women, children, or married families. I felt this problem must be researched to find out why – why would the homeless be treated so? Is it lack of funds, lack of humanity? So, I changed my focus to researching the problem and finding ways to get the resources to the right places.

It was uncomfortable doing this: going up to the homeless, despite the fear non-homeless people have that these people will harm us. It was the kind of uncomfortable feeling Lance Burner taught us in going to the second stage of mindfulness, where we learn to be mindful while being agitated – outside our comfort zone. I felt like I was asking things that were too personal, but Paul and others love to open up. They want to tell their story. If I embraced the diversity, opened up that dialogued discussed in Daren Bilberry's "Diversity" session, allowed myself to be uncomfortable, and collaborate with the common interests of us all in mind, as I learnt to do in "Conflict Mediation," we can overcome barriers and work to a better world. We can lead ourselves to help by working with those who need our help to help themselves.

Whatever situation I am in life, I will now have the confidence to not be afraid of failure, to open myself to what is uncomfortable, to learn and to teach others from that experience. I – we - can do anything. By leading people in such a way, we help them become their own leader. We do not give ourselves that confidence that we can be our

own leader, when that is what leaders do – we (the followers and leader) do the work, not have the work done to us. Thank you ELI.