Part 1: What?

**Description**

On December 13th, 2014, 13 other students and I set out for New York City. The goal of our experience was to perform service, connect with a new community, and enrich our own personal life experiences. We stayed in a neighborhood called Sunset Park. This neighborhood is located in Brooklyn. Sunset Park fascinated me because of its diversity of culture. In my Ohio suburb, as well as on UC’s campus, I receive little exposure to truly diverse ways of life. Every block of Sunset Park contained a specific and unique ethnic community.

Our service consisted of painting apartments of Mexican families, playing with children at a local library, and helping the community prepare for their annual holiday celebration of “Pastorela.” This was not the most surprising aspect of my experience, but it was still a surprise. Before our trip, we were told little of what our specific service would be. I was under the impression we would be working with the youth or mothers in the Mexican community on education. Instead, we were sent out as painters! I was not at all disappointed, just surprised. My proposal most differs from my true experience in that way. But, ultimately, the take-aways of the experience were relatively similar to that I proposed. The most significant aspect of this experience was certainly the opportunity to speak to the Mexican individuals and families living in Sunset Park. I believe speaking Spanish with them showed I possess a respect for their culture, which facilitated conversation. I also spoke Spanish often with our trip leader, Gerardo Jaime.

**Progress towards Community Engagement Learning Outcomes**

1. Possesses awareness of purpose of service, including need for reciprocity, understanding of social issues, and ability to see those issues from multiple perspectives.

This trip was well planned and focused on our learning. It was made very clear to us that the purpose of our service was not simply to paint. It was not simply to do these families a favor. The purpose of our service was to meet new people in positions very different from our own. The purpose was to connect with these people in new ways, form bonds, and engage in reciprocity where both parties can help one another. I can say that through conversations, especially with a mother named Tere, the president of a non-profit called Adelante Alliance, and the president of a non-profit called Casa Hoy (our trip leader, Gerardo), I was given a new perspective on Mexicans living in Sunset Park.

Looking around Sunset Park for the first time, I saw a busy neighborhood full of people I would never meet. This is similar to my perception at UC: multitudes of people, but I have no excuse to engage them in a meaningful way. But, service opens the door to meaningful interaction. It provided me an opportunity to meet Mexican families I would otherwise never know. It likewise provided these families an opportunity to meet students from Ohio, a place they have only heard of. This mutual interest in each other manifests itself not only in the services we provided, but also in the conversations we had, the meals we shared, and the time we spent together. I am now much more aware of the role that service can play; service can open doors between communities that otherwise remain closed. Of course, the service is only meaningful if participants possess the right attitude. I participated in this experience
eager to meet new people, understand their points of view, and voice my own opinions to them. I remember a conversation we had with Tere about her children. She told us about their school, and how she tries to keep them busy with activities to prevent laziness or bad behavior. I have heard about kids falling into the wrong crowds in big cities like Brooklyn, but never seen it firsthand. Here was a living example of a woman with a legitimate worry for her children, and that was eye-opening. We had another conversation with a married man who was succeeding with his life in New York, who could potentially face deportation if he is not able to get the proper documents. It was conversations like these that enhanced my experience and granted me better awareness of the problems and concerns that face Mexicans living in New York. We discussed in our group how first generation immigrants always make difficult sacrifices for the following generations. This was true of those who came through Ellis Island, and it is true of immigrants coming from the South today. These experiences made real to me concepts I had only ever read about.

2. Recognizes how public policies and practices, and power and privilege, have an influence on social issues. Explores ways to alter public policy and/or identify solutions.

This experience gave me vantage to the immigration issues, and how actual immigrants live. The immigration debate in the US is complicated, with rational arguments on both sides of the fence. While I have not solidified my stance, I have learned about the more human element of the issue. While in Brooklyn, we met numerous people and families, each with their own story. Many left Mexico to better their lives and the lives of their families back in Mexico. There was a common practice of crossing the border in to the US, working and sending money back home, returning to Mexico and taking another family member back to the US. Each person’s story was unique and seemed to justify their actions. I realized that I may very well do the same thing if I were in their position, especially if I was helping my own family, or escaping violence or corruption as some did. The most shocking thing is that the stories are not over. These stories are real people’s lives, and many of them could face deportation in the future. It was a sobering wake-up call for me, a natural born citizen who has been given what these immigrants sacrifice so much for.

We spoke with the president of Adelante Alliance, Carla, about the immigration issue. She works to educate the children of immigrants, as well as immigrant mothers. She recognizes that education is power; education is the way for these children to learn English and stay on par with their classmates; education is the way for these mothers to engage in their greater community, take on higher paying jobs, and create better futures for their children. While our painting family apartments through Adelante Alliance may seem a far cry from education, in fact, multiple learnings took place. These families asked us questions about our education and our lives, and they told us about their experiences, all while practicing their English. These kinds of conversations empower the Mexican community towards a brighter, more powerful future.

Part 2: So What?

A few academic readings and concepts informed my experience and contributed to my learning.

1. *Citizen Leader: A Community Service Option for College Students* by Gerri E. Perreault
This reading discourages the view of service as “charity,” and instead encourages the view of “service learning.” This view encourages those doing the service to fully understand who they are helping, why
they are helping them, and the cause of the need for their service. In this experience, I embraced this view of “service learning.” I asked questions to community members, Gerardo, and Carla in order to enhance my understanding of the community’s need for service. By appreciating this need and understanding its cause, I was better able to connect with the community and learn from it.

2. “The Disappearing Road Home” by David Noriega of News Republic
This article told the story of one family whose story is not so different from many of the families I met. The reading prepared me for the kinds of stories I would hear from the immigrants. Truthfully, I cannot fully understand the hardship and sacrifice that first generation immigrants undergo for their families. But, this reading granted me greater sensitivity to the difficult issues of familial separation and deportation that immigrant families face. Stories like the one in this article, as well as those of the families we met, have given me greater perspective on the immigration issue.

3. Motivation and Education: The Self-Determination Perspective by Edward L. Deci
While this reading is less applicable than it once was, it still informed my experience. The article discusses how it is important to instill a love of education in children. The same principles apply to the families we met. By working with them and painting their apartments, we demonstrated that they are worthy of attention and assistance. All of the families we helped were already members of Adelante Alliance, where they can improve their education. By painting their apartments, we helped show that good things can come to those who pursue education and self-betterment.

4. A fourth concept, which was taught on the trip, informed my experience. Gerardo told me in conversation that everyone can teach you something, and/or alter your path. I have heard this before, but hearing it from our trip leader made a special impact. This idea encouraged me to speak with whomever I could. It gave the courage to step outside my comfort zone and into Spanish conversation with people I had just met. I am so glad I did, for I was able to learn more deeply through those conversations. And, only time will tell if these new relationships will be important in my future and alter my life path. Conversations with locals also improved my conversational confidence; if I can speak in Spanish with strangers, certainly I can do the same in English effectively.

Part 3: Now What?

Every time I participate in some form of service learning project, I am so grateful for the opportunity. With each project, I draw new connections between experiences and gain a better view of myself in the community. This experience resembles and differs from the project “Workfest,” which I participated in roughly two years ago. There, we worked on building an addition on to a home for a mother and her bed-ridden son. This was largely a construction project, with more emphasis placed on construction and team bonding. In New York, less emphasis was placed on the service and inter-team bonding. More emphasis was placed on connecting with the community and engaging with community members. I enjoyed this difference. It gave our service greater meaning, and allowed us to take away more learnings from the experience. However, I believe that the optimal experience would have involved more service activities. This would keep us busier, and facilitate inter-team bonding.

I am integrating what I learned in many aspects of my life. The idea that everyone can teach me something is a wonderful concept that will drive me to reach out to those I would have otherwise ignored. It will make me a better, more understanding listener. Additionally, I have learned that when asked, most people are more than happy to share their story and their wisdom. I learned a great deal about the daily lives, struggles, and desires of Sunset Park community members, and it is all because we
simply asked. I also learned that an issue can be more complicated than it seems. It is easy for many to take a firm stance on the immigration issue, but after meeting immigrant families whose lives have improved greatly after immigrating, the issue becomes much more difficult. It is a political as well as socio-economic problem, and there is no clear answer at the moment. One of my final learnings was unanticipated. I was the only man on a trip with 13 women. While I tried to avoid interpersonal conflict on the trip, in some cases I failed. The trip was marked by people not being their best selves, thus making worse the trip for others. This was an excellent reminder to always try my best, and act with consideration, especially on a service learning trip.

I have posted my journal entries, as well as this reflection on a blog that can be found at http://nychonorsexperience.blogspot.com/. My audience includes my direct family, as well as my friends on social media. Hopefully, they learn the importance of service learning, and the benefits to both the volunteer and the community. Ideally, many will have a new appreciation for service trips. Where some people previously saw them as just a way to travel and get service hours, perhaps their eyes will be opened to the enriching experience of meeting new people, seeing a different way of life, and forging a bond with people one would otherwise never meet. Sharing my experience gave me perspective on how others see my experience. In one conversation with a friend, he jested that I did not have to go all the way to New York to do service. I believe this is a somewhat common view. I tried to inform him of the numerous differences and benefits that are not all available through service within Cincinnati. While he did not agree with my every point, it did at least impress upon him that there is some value to service outside of one’s community.