

A DAY IN THE LIFE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY

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by

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to shed light on the experience of those living in public housing, specifically elderly and people with disabilities. Public housing offers a stable and viable option for low-income individuals and families to live. The effects of this living situation deserve exploration and study because of the vulnerability of this population. I used an ethnographic approach to study this group in order to generate a substantial and detailed record of the day-to-day experiences within this community and my reflections of those experiences. In addition to ethnography, I used an arts-based research approach to illustrate my findings via a fictional short story. The fictional narrative conveys the three themes discovered through my research: the importance of relationships to the residents, experiencing isolation, and despite feeling loneliness, finding pockets of community. Short stories provide an opportunity for human connection between the reader and the population being studied in a way that traditional methods do not. It is of the utmost importance that public housing authorities and other social services of the like prioritize community-building events and activities to enhance the quality of life achievable for the residents/clients.

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PREFACE

There comes a time in some peoples' lives when they realize 'Oh, I don't have as much as the people around me.' "Much" being money, possessions, food, etc. For me, it was in middle school. This was the time when I realized that clothes shopping was not part of our back-to-school preparation. That my shoes did not change based on my outfit. That it was better to go over to my friends' houses than have them come over to mine because they would have the latest game stations. I tried not to dwell on it too much. But growing up in a low-income household removes some of the simplicity of being a child. Fast forward to my senior year of high school when I'm scraping together money to pay for applications to apply to college – knowing I would get in, and having no idea how I would pay for it. As far as college savings went, I had a savings account that I opened when I was ten years old that would probably afford me textbooks for my first year. Extremely fortunately, I was blessed to receive a full-ride scholarship to attend college. Because of my background of growing up low-income, I have a compassion towards people living in poverty and the struggles that they face.

I. INTRODUCTION

Using ethnographic techniques, arts-based research, and a grounded theory approach, this thesis explores the experiences of a group of people living in public housing. Going into this study, I had no preconceived ideas of what I would find, but rather entered the field with open eyes and an open mind to making a discovery. I observed the day-to-day lives of the residents at a housing authority where I interned in San Marcos, TX. My field observations consisted of the interactions that residents had in the common areas, as well as the direct interactions that I had with them as an intern for the resident services coordinator. I studied the group over a three-month period. This topic of research is important because it 1) spreads awareness about what life is like in public housing, and 2) provides insight on how to better serve and assist people living in public housing. To present the findings of my study in a way that promotes empathic engagement about issues like poverty, loneliness, and community, I draw from arts-based research techniques and developed a short story. The story blends elements of reality and fiction to portray my perceptions of the experiences of those in my observations, as well as my own. In doing so, I am able to maintain the confidentiality of the individuals in the field; problematize narratives that may perpetuate stereotypes; and offer a sensitive portrayal of those living in public housing. Further, fictional essays have the advantage of creating greater connection between me as a storyteller and the reader as audience.

In the sections to follow, I will 1) overview some literature relating to ethnography, arts-based research, and fictional storytelling; 2) provide a detailed discussion of my methods including excerpts from my field notes and my reflections of these; 3) write a short story addressing the emerging themes from the ethnographical

data; and 4) suggest general recommendations for public housing authorities and other organizations that assist low-income people based on my research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnography is the study of culture through the immersion of the researcher into the lives of those she/he is studying. Culture consists of, but is not limited to, the language, traditions, values, and behaviors of a society. Ethnography attempts to create an understanding of the everyday life of a specific culture, subculture, or people group living a particular lifestyle (Gergen and Gergen 2018; Wolcott 2001;). Denzin (1997) writes:

glimpses and slices of the culture in action. Any given practice that is studied is significant because it is an instance of a cultural practice that happened in a particular time and place. This practice cannot be generalized to other practices; its importance lies in the fact that it instantiates a cultural practice, a cultural performance (story telling), and a set of shifting, conflictual cultural meanings.

Considerations that should be taken into account for ethnographic research include the relationship between culture and behavior, the experiences of the researcher, the way in which the information is presented, and the role of the audience (Van Maanen 2011). Traditionally, ethnography was understood to be written from a place of objectivity. Social scientists studied foreign people with an “objective” lens that categorized their subjects as “Other” (Gergen and Gergen 2018; Denzin 1997). However, in the 1980s, it was recognized that the representations of peoples were not and could not be objective (Denzin 1997; Van Maanen 2011). The purpose of research is to gain knowledge – knowledge being descriptions and analyses that are accurate and unbiased (Gergen and

Gergen 2018). But it is impossible to remove the lived experience away from the researcher, which will inevitably impact what she/he observes.

This acknowledgement opens the door for research that incorporates both subjectivity and creativity. Heaton (2002) explains that there is space for “messy texts” within scholarly literature; that scholars do not have to hide their creative works. Van Maanen (2011) also describes his desire for readers that will be open to inventive writing, rather than critical of this experimentation. Creativity creates room within the current system for the possibility of change/improvement, as opposed to traditional methods which sustain the existing way of understanding (Creswell 2018; Gergen and Gergen 2018; Heaton 2002; Leavy 2009). One way to incorporate creativity into ethnographic research is through the use of arts-based research techniques to represent the data and analysis.

Short stories create opportunity for the audience to connect with the group being studied in a way that traditional ethnographies cannot. “Short stories as a writing genre have a unique potential to bring lived experiences unknown to the reader closer to his or her own struggles for humanization; to touch the feelings and emotions of people,” explains Diversi (1998). The reader builds a relationship with those described in the text and enter a posture of care, compassion, pain, love, and/or anger (Gergen and Gergen 2018). Creating short stories that convey the character of the people in a society and their culture give depth to their humanness which can transform the reader’s stereotypical understanding of the group (Diversi 1998). The descriptions in the story can establish a different way of understanding, giving value or approaching the world (Gergen and Gergen 2018). Gergen and Gergen (2018) contrast the differences between calling an

object a chair, versus an antique, versus a lazy-boy. Each description evokes a different image, action, and feeling. Ethnographies as short stories have the ability to bridge the gap between two very different lived realities.

III. METHODS

When I began interning at Summerwind, I did not go in thinking I would be studying the residents. However, my sociologist hat no longer comes off and I immediately began observing the people around me – their behaviors, their interactions with one another and the other people around them. In the beginning of this study, I was an outside observer because I was new at the housing authority. However, the longer I was there, the more I started to notice the patterns within the community, the more the individuals from Summerwind began to invite me into their lives. Shortly thereafter, I gained insider-status, and transitioned to become a participant-observer.

I decided my internship gave me a valuable opportunity to study how the residents' living situation (public housing) affected them a couple of weeks after interning there. The data for this study is comprised of journal entries detailing the interactions residents had with one another, interactions with workers and other volunteers in the community, and directly with me. I did not take physical notes while interactions were occurring. Rather I remained present and observant of the interactions and conversations. At the end of the day, I would sit in my car and recap the occurrences of the day in my journal. While explicit reflections of my writing were not written at this point, I did make small notes in the margins of the journal entries of my immediate reactions at the time. Writing detailed accounts of what took place each day would take me up to 30 minutes on average. I made observations over the course of three months.

My reflections of the journal entries were recorded at a later point in time. This gave me the benefit of time to process my thoughts and feelings. Because the field notes were handwritten in a journal, I had to transcribe the original entries into digital copies.

This process of rereading the words and then also typing them provided me with more insight into the interactions—a chance for reflection. The re-viewing of the occurrences created an opportunity for the words to become new again and reveal things that went unnoticed the first time. My reflections were based on a combination of both my schooling and my personal lived experience.

In the following section, I have structured the ethnographical data and reflections in this way: date of the entry and record of my field notes with pseudonyms for each of the resident whose experience it detailed in the writing. Each of the journal entries is followed by my analysis/reflection of the data. I have typed each of these in different fonts to distinguish the field notes from the reflections. In the short story, the two blend. From my analysis of the field notes, three themes emerged: the importance of relationships, experiencing isolation, and finding moments of community. In lieu of a traditional discussion section, a short story was written to epitomize and emphasize the themes of the research.

Lastly, I make suggestions for ways that housing authorities and other organizations that assist people living in low-income to improve the residency of their clients.

IV. ETHNOGRAPHY FIELD NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

2/14/19

Field note:

Jared asked me to listen to him read information about kidney stones. He has a speech impediment. He speaks lowly and slowly. He underlined some words that he has trouble pronouncing so that I could listen to see if he said those words correctly. When he finished, I asked him what the speech was for. He explained that on the fourth Sunday of every month, someone talks about a health issue at his church. So he is going to be telling people about kidney stones next Sunday. He asked his doctor for information about them for his talk. Jared also mentioned the Bible study that he attends.

Reflection:

I think that it is very brave of Jared to speak in front of his church. I imagine speaking in front of a large crowd of people with a stutter is not the easiest thing to do. And I would say that Jared is a shy guy; he was hesitant to speak to me when I first start working at the housing authority. So it is quite impressive to me that he had a desire to do this. I think it might be a testament to the community that he has at his church, that he feels comfortable – or maybe not comfortable, but willing to overcome some anxiety – to give the talk about a health issue for this month. I imagine he must trust that he won't be judged; that he will be accepted regardless of his ability to deliver the speech perfectly. Faith probably plays a role in this as well. In the obvious way that he is giving the speech at his church, so without faith he would not be attending the church, and therefore not giving the speech. But also, speaking from experience, there is usually a belief in the

Christian faith that believers' identities are in the Lord. This means that their identity – who they are internally or at their core – is secure in God. So it is not based on their own abilities, their strengths or weaknesses, victories or failures, how they look or how they are perceived by others. Being secure in one's identity, being confident in who they are, gives people the braveness to do things they would otherwise be uncomfortable doing.

How can we help people who are elderly and people with disabilities (ED) that live in public housing to feel secure and confident in who they are? So that they would not feel ashamed of their ability to perform tasks. People who are elderly and people with disabilities could very easily be considered deviant in our society. This is because getting old is very taboo in American culture (even though it is natural) and having a disability is treated as abnormal. Not being able to function independently once you have reached a certain age is intentionally and unintentionally disapproved. Based on this dominant attitude towards people who are elderly and people with disabilities, it is probably easy for these people to place their identity in these characteristics that actually do not define them. It is important that we find a way to empower these people so that they are happy with who they are and can have the confidence to share themselves with others, the way Jared did.

Field note:

Colleen came over to me and told me that I could cross-stitch into my bag. She also told me about some ankle weights that she started using. Honey chewed up one of the weights, so the sand was spilling out. That's why she'd come to the community room looking for tape to patch up the hole Honey made. Last week, Honey ate some pills that Colleen had dropped on the floor. Colleen said it gave her quite a scare. She called poison

control for animals. She was told to give Honey a table spoon of peroxide, wait 10 minutes, and then give her another spoonful if she didn't throw up. Colleen described the contents that came up – what colors there were – which looked to be the pills and the peroxide. Colleen said that Honey was okay. She said it wasn't Honey's fault, it was her own fault. I tried to console her and tell her not to blame herself, but Colleen still proceeded to say, "but it was still my fault."

Reflection:

Colleen loves Honey very much. Honey is a Schnauzer and is so sweet. She is three years old. Colleen has a friend who helps her out around the house, cooking and cleaning. Her friend is the one who takes Honey out to use the restroom and takes her for walks around the building. And these two incidents mentioned here happened within a week of each other. I can't imagine all the things Honey has gotten into and the mischief she's caused. But Colleen still loves her to death. She became very somber when explaining what happened with the pills, even though it was days later and Honey was okay. Colleen is a very happy and talkative person. But just the thought of what could have happened to Honey put her in a different mood. She was so upset with herself that Honey had gotten to the pills, even when I tried to have her focus on the fact that Honey was okay. This goes to show how important Honey is in Colleen's life. In regards to what happened with the ankle weights, Colleen showed no irritation at Honey poking a hole into one of them. It might have been a different story in the moment, but she spoke about it matter-of-factly when she told me about it. And those ankle weights were new. I know when my dog would get into things, we would be mad at her. Depending on what it was, we might give her the cold shoulder or send her to her kennel. And if I talked about what

she did to a friend, I would still be heated about it while explaining it. So I feel Colleen shows a lot of patience towards her Honey.

Field note:

Many, many of the residents have dogs. Even those who are completely wheelchair-bound. At a resident hall meeting, one of the issues brought up was how the food being left outside the building could get a dog sick. Ms. Delores took her dog for a walk a decent distance from building in her wheelchair.

Reflection:

It is a lot of responsibility to take care of a dog. They have a lot of needs. The people living at this housing authority are elderly and have disabilities. This means that it might take a little extra effort for them to meet the needs of their dogs. Not only that, but they have to pay all the extra costs that come with owning a dog. These people are low-income: they are living in public housing, many of them are on other government assistance programs, and their income comes from Social Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability (SSDI). The amount they receive is just enough to get them by. And yet they choose to use a portion of that to care for a dog. Why are dogs worth the effort and money to these people? Well most every resident at this location of the housing authority lives alone. There are a handful of families that live at this residence. There are not too many people coming to visit residents at Summerwind. Dogs provide the companionship that many residents do not receive. They give the residents someone to care for, someone to talk to, and someone who shows them an unconditional love.

Because the residents are ED, they are somewhat limited in the amount of physical exercise they can provide for their dogs. There is a small area of grass in front of the building where residents will take their dogs to go potty. There is a big open space behind the building, but residents do not take their dogs back there because it has been said that there are snakes (the grass is tall which makes it hard to see). I also do not know if/how often residents take their dogs on walks off the property, which is a pretty small space. These things considered, I think having a dog park nearby or even a gated area attached to the housing authority where dogs could roam freely would be very valuable. I think the residents would greatly appreciate the proximity of a place where their dogs could enjoy the outdoors because they are cooped up inside so much of the time. In addition to giving the dogs a place and opportunity to run around, it can also be such a joy to see dogs playing with each other. This could also be a source of delight and happiness for the residents – seeing their dogs have so much fun.

I also think having grants from NGOs or other organizations available to residents who need financial assistance affording a dog would also be beneficial. Or even reduced costs for low-income individuals or families. This would allow these persons to get to experience a relationship/bond with a dog that they are not receiving from family members or friends or anyone. It would also allow the dogs to receive genuinely good pet care, despite their owner being low-income.

2/19/19

Field note:

George wore a cowboy hat and red shirt today. I asked him how he was doing today in Spanish (the whole conversation is in Spanish). He said “Bien, gracias a Dios” (good, thanks be to God). I smiled. I told him I liked his hat and asked him how to say hat in Spanish. He told me (sombrero). We sat together while I waited for Chrissy (my boss) to come back from lunch. George asked me where I was from. I told him Houston. He said he was from Monterrey. He started talking for a long time in Spanish (my Spanish is not that good). I could only pick a few words here and there. It sounded like he was telling me about his life before coming here, or how he came to live here. At one point, he was talking about the work that he did. He had long hours of work, and a few hours to sleep. He kept saying “duro,” it was hard. I just nodded and gave him the cues he needed to continue – laugh when he smiled hard at parts of his story, and widened my eyes when his voice emphasized something. He talked for probably around 15 minutes. Chrissy got back at one point and he asked if I needed to go. I said “en un momento” so he could finish sharing. He nodded with a slight smile and continued. He eventually finished and excused himself to leave.

Reflection:

This was a touching experience to me. The fact that he wanted to share his experience with me, part of his life story, was so sweet and vulnerable. As much as I appreciated that moment, it also made me very sad. Because I could not understand the majority of what he said. But what is most sad to me is knowing that he just wanted

someone to talk to. Because the fact that I asked him how to say “hat” in Spanish at the beginning of the conversation should have indicated that my Spanish is pretty elementary. So he must have really been desiring conversation for him to decide to proceed in telling me a whole story about a part of his life when I didn’t know “sombrero.” Or I guess it wasn’t even conversation that he wanted because I didn’t really contribute. He just wanted to talk, he wanted someone to listen to him. I guess I was kind enough and knew enough Spanish to be able to ask how he was doing, for me to be the person he spoke to. It’s possible that he maybe thinks that I can understand the language, but not speak it as well. I still think it shows a deep longing for connection that he does not get to have very often because he only speaks Spanish. There was one time when there was a nutrition cooking class for the residents. George had his home healthcare provider come with him because she will translate for him sometimes. But he just ended up leaving early on because he could not understand and the provider had a hard time translating the nutritional words that were being said. And it just made me so sad because how often does George not get to participate because of the language barrier. So on top of the loneliness that most residents already experience, George also lacks the ability to even be able to communicate with many of his neighbors. It is a tragic situation to me. When he was talking to me on this day, telling me about his life, I pretended to understand all that he was saying because I wanted to give him that. I wanted him to be able to share his life with someone that day. I couldn’t bring myself to deprive him of that moment of vulnerability and connection by telling him that I did not understand what he was saying.

George should have people to talk to. There are other residents at Summerwind that speak Spanish, but I don't think George should have to wait until he just so happens to run into them that he gets to speak to somebody. I think it would be great to have conversation partners for residents whose first language is not English. English speaking residents could probably have conversation partners too, eventually. But they would not be the priority. Having conversation partners for the elderly residents who only speak Spanish could be such a gift. I actually plan on emailing the modern languages department at my university to see if I can get into contact with some advanced Spanish professors. Many professors will give extra credit to students who do extra language-involved activities. Hopefully there will be Spanish-speaking students who are willing to come spend time at Summerwind talking with the residents, and then can receive extra credit for it.

Field note:

Aaron came to the office to visit with Chrissy. I asked him how he was doing and he said alright, but his facial expression appeared downcast. He went to Chrissy and asked her how her vacation was. She went into the details about the trip and he was very engaged. When she finished talking about the trip, he said "well, I just wanted to see how it went."

Reflection:

This was just a demonstration of the desire for relationship and community that is so evident in the housing authority. Chrissy was gone from work for a few days for her sister's bachelorette party. Eric showed intentionality in his relationship with Chrissy by

remembering why she was gone from work for a couple of days, and asking how the trip was. I thought it was a sweet gesture and I am constantly seeing ways that residents are reaching out for relationships. I think having community/social events is very important to the mental and emotional health of residents to make sure that they are engaged and experiencing that human interaction that is so important to living a satisfied life.

Field note:

I went to Chris's apartment to pick up his HOPE bag (this is for groceries to be delivered to people 55+). On his door, Chris has the Bible verse Joshua 24:15 "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Chris was happy to see me and invited me in while he got his bag. I asked him if he went to Houston because he'd talked about going the last time I saw him. He smiled big and said 'Oh yeah.' And he said this past weekend, he went to San Antonio. I said 'Well, you're a traveling man.' He said 'Yeah, going is better than just sitting up in here all day.' He said it with a smile on his face. I said 'That's true.' He gave me his bag. I wished him a good day and he wished me one as well.

Reflection:

I am reminded of how lonely it can be at the ED housing authority. The majority of residents do not have visitors coming to see them. Some people do not have family or friends that live nearby. Chris always seems to be leaving to go somewhere. As explained during this interaction, this is because he would otherwise be sitting alone at home. This is the route many of the residents do take is staying at home. I know two residents who have bragged to me about their movie collections, which contain hundreds of movies. A

lot of times when I'm knocking on doors for intakes or other reasons, the residents are watching TV. That is a lot of what their life consists of. Are they content with this, or do they long for more, like Chris does? Are there events or opportunities made available to residents so that they have options other than sitting at home, watching TV? At Summerwind, there are activities available almost every day of the week (Bingo, movie night, cooking classes) to get them out of their rooms. But I wonder about if we could be doing more, if there are more interests that we are not aware of. Also, all the events are held in the community room, so they are getting out of their rooms, but not the building itself. I wonder if they would want to participate in things outside of the building. I recognize that I have to consider the practicality of this idea. I plan on creating a survey for residents to fill out where they can voice what social events they would like to see/would attend.

I do want to note that I have never seen Chris without a smile on his face. He is always giving glory to God. His faith really uplifts him and allows him to not dwell on the unfortunate circumstances in his life. He is a very positive gentleman and simply thanks God for his life even in the tough times. I think that his trust in God gets Chris through the hardships.

Field note:

I went and visited Colleen. She welcomed me and said she didn't get dressed today, so she was in her night dress. Colleen was working on her cross-stitch and handed it to me to show me her progress. Clara (Colleen's roommate) came in with Honey, who was in a doggie raincoat. Honey was really excited to see me and ran over to the couch where I was sitting as soon as she got off the leash. Colleen said I could take off her

raincoat. When I did, Honey started biting and playing with it. Colleen said I could hand it to her. I did. She showed me “how cute it is” and how the hood can be buttoned to the back so she doesn’t have to wear it. Colleen got up and went to put some clothes on. She said she wanted to get our opinion on it before she wore it out. She came out in a light pink top with tights that had a bright pink pattern. I said it looked good to me. She asked Clara what she thought, and based on her look, she knew Clara didn’t like it. Clara said she would want the shirt to be long in the back. Clara asked Colleen if it was for Friday. Colleen said no, it was for today (it was about 2:30 p.m. at this point). I asked what was happening Friday. Colleen gave a little shriek and said ‘Oooooo, I get to tell you about Friday! I’m so excited, I get to see my little brother! It’s been six years since I saw him!’ (Her brother had been in jail). She explained that her sister had called her to tell her they were going to see him. Colleen asked her if she would get to go too. Colleen explained that a lot of times, her sisters would not include her on things because of her epilepsy. When she asked her sister that question, her sister got upset and gave her a hard time for it. Eventually she told her yes, she would be going. Her sisters gave Colleen the responsibility of finding a bus ticket for their brother, which Colleen said they don’t usually trust her with that kind of thing. But she did it and they told her she did a good job, which she was proud of. I stayed and talked with her awhile longer. She wants to teach me how to cross-stitch and got up to look for the design she had in mind for me even though she had a hard time walking. When I said I was going to head out, she thanked me a lot for coming and visiting with her. She said her depression had been getting to her lately, so she was really glad that I had stopped by. I told her I was happy to and that I would try to come when I had time.

Reflection:

Colleen is such a sweetheart. She seems to always be in a good mood; this was the first time I've seen her kind of down. And the only indications that she was were from her not being dressed when I came in, when she was talking about her relationships with her sisters, and then when she explicitly told me that her depression had been getting to her lately. But otherwise, she was still so chipper. I feel really loved by the joy she shows me when I come to visit her. I got the feeling that she went and got dressed, not because she felt like she needed to because I was there (she sat there for quite some time before going to get dressed), but because she suddenly felt motivated. I'm also flattered and excited that she wants to show me how to cross-stitch. AND she got up and walked to find the design for me – it was important enough to her to put herself in that discomfort of walking. When she thanked me for coming, it was so so sweet. It warmed my heart.

Relationships are so important. They can be a source of encouragement to continue on in the hard times. It is especially important to prioritize relationship-building opportunities in ED communities because the residents do spend so much time alone and therefore may experience a lot of loneliness. Some of them are alienated by their family because of how they are. Or maybe the family does not have the opportunity to visit as much as they would like. Regardless, living in an ED community can be hard mentally and emotionally. And I think relationships help make life a little (or a lot) better.

2/20/19

Field note:

Sydney (my other boss) asked me to interview Robbie to learn his story and write about it for HUD and the housing authority's newsletter. She had nine questions she wanted me to ask Robbie. I went to his room and knocked on the door. He said come in. He was in front of the TV with the lights off, as I had found him the other times I went to see him for other things. I said hello and asked if I could do the interview with him. He said of course. I turned the light on and sat in his wheelchair, which was next to him on the couch. This was where he'd invited me to sit in the past. This was the Q and A (answers paraphrased):

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: I was born in San Antonio, on the East Side. When I was three or four, we moved to San Marcos. So I would consider myself from San Marcos.

Q: What is your background? (we both were unsure what this question was asking)

A: I worked almost all my life, manual labor. I tell my nieces and nephews to stay in school. Do something where you're using your brain, not your muscles.

Q: What are the circumstances that led you to your current housing (or other) situation?

A: Being poor (he said as if it was an obvious answer). I was diagnosed with renal failure. As soon as I had to start dialysis, I was qualified for disability. But they pay you just enough to scoot by. (I asked how long he'd been going to dialysis and how often). This September it will be 6 years that I've been doing dialysis, MWF 8:00am-12:00pm.

Q: What do you hope that your life looks like in 5 years?

A: I don't really know. I hope to be more slender. I want to be able to get over to the activities center. But they cut my benefits because I didn't re-up my Medicare. I lost 40 lbs while I was in the hospital (after his surgery). They only feed you a little bit up there.

Q: Where did you live before the housing authority?

A: I lived with my sister for about a year. From diabetes my feet were numb at this point. Don't eat too much sugar. (He then somehow ended up talking about how he gets phantom pains in his feet, even though they are gone. He feels like someone is stabbing his feet with a knife or dragging a knife through his feet).

Q: What are some personal challenges you've faced since being here? (health)

A: Not much has been challenging. It's just part of it is doing something, then figuring out how you can do it better the next time. I had Sydney take a video of me walking. I posted it on Facebook to show people "don't be discouraged" because that's your freedom. CARTS gave me motivation (CARTS is the transportation that the residents use to get around the town.)

Q: Lowest point? (if comfortable)

A: I don't really get low points. I get angry at myself. I get frustrated, I think 'That's what you get for not taking care of your legs.' I'm disappointed for not taking better care of myself. I know Sydney thinks I'm depressed because I'm always sitting in a dark room. But I'm not depressed, I just like a dark room. (He laughed).

Q: How did you overcome it?

A: I strive to do better every time. I have yet to fall, but I know it's going to happen. I'm learning new things. I'm trying to take the stairs, we're practicing in PT. And I realized that when I come to a stair, I stop. I realized this when I was practicing getting on a curb. I need to just go with it. "Don't stop dummy."

(At this point, a friend of George's came over and sat on the couch. They joked around and laughed with each other, they were old friends who used to work together.)

Q: Advice you would give to others in a similar situation?

A: Don't give up. Don't ever be discouraged. Have the most positive mindset you can have.

Then George's friend talked about how positive George was even after all that he went through. He talked about how George had such a great character, even after the surgery, and then how George had quickly started walking again. I smiled hearing all the compliments about George. I thanked him for his time and turned the light off so they could watch tv.

Reflection:

I just took note of this conversation because of George's story, and his determination and tenacity. I thought about how I would feel if I had to have both of my legs removed. It's a crazy thought to think about, because that is not something you expect to happen to yourself. George was really inspiring talking about his experience and how he just does not allow himself to be discouraged. It also really resonated with me when he talked about facing challenges he said simply 'you do something, and then figure out how to do it better next time.' I guess because that is so applicable to life in

general – that is all you can really do. You can do all your research, you can ask a bunch of people how they did xyz, but in the end you just have to do it on your own and then learn from your mistakes, your triumphs, whatever it may be. And with him learning to use the stairs: just go with it, don't stop when you come to it. There was just so much practical, challenging, but encouraging life advice in this conversation. And it required a certain level of vulnerability for George to share all the things that he did. It didn't seem especially hard for him to do so, but that doesn't take away from the fact of the matter. I was honored that I got to hear his story and I felt convicted to tell his story well when I wrote it up for HUD and the newsletter. Stories are an intimate thing.

2/21/19

Field note:

Chris asked me to help him with his utilities assistance application. His hands shake really badly, so he can't write. Even where the application required his signature, he was hesitant to sign. When we came to the second spot that he needed to sign, I told him I thought the first signature looked good. He asked, "it did?" I told him it did and after the second signature, he asked me if that looked alright. I smiled and told him yes. He asked me if he'd told me how his hands got to be that way. I told him no. He told me that he was a truck driver for many years. One night on the road, he was falling asleep and he ran into a bridge. He was taken to the hospital and was told he had a pinched nerve. He needed to go into surgery, or he would die. The trucking company paid for the surgery and gave him lots of money, paid for a nice hotel for him. He realizes now it was

to pay him off. He didn't specify how long after his surgery his hands began to shake, or what happened to all the money. But he was homeless after all those years of being a truck driver. He told his nephew not to be a trucker – anything else. He said all these truckers get up and kiss their families goodbye. But they don't know if they're going to make it back.

He applied to live at the housing authority. Part of the housing application process is a criminal background check. Chris told me that after he explained his criminal history to the woman, she cried and told him he could move in. He told me that people were trying to charge him for a crime that he didn't commit. But the chief police officer said that he didn't do it, so he was a not convicted and hung.

One day, Chris was cooking something, and his hands were shaking so much, he spilled the hot food all over himself. After that incident, he was told that he was no longer allowed to cook. Chris can't find the doctor who did the surgery on his pinched nerve. He called the number, but some other company answered and didn't know where the doctor was. Chris would smile throughout his sharing, and thank God that he was alive and well. He was extremely grateful to have his own place. He goes to Houston often – he's got a brother there, and friends. That's where he grew up. They're always asking him when he is going to move back. But he said he's staying here for his granddaughter. She and his daughter live in Austin. Chris shared that his daughter's mother committed suicide in 1974, so Chris wants to be there for his daughter and granddaughter. After we finished up the application as much as we could, I left. As I was leaving, Chris said, as he'd told Sydney, if we ever needed anything, soda, whatever, we could always ask him.

Reflection:

When I went in to Chris's apartment to help him fill out his utilities assistance application, I did not expect to come out knowing so much about his life. I cannot know the frustration and pain he experiences from not being able to do simple tasks such as writing his name. What must he eat if he cannot cook for himself? When I encouraged him in his signature, I did not think much of it. But when he asked for confirmation about it and then inquired about his second signature, it gave me the impression of a child. I was reminded of the value and importance of affirmation. To affirm someone in their abilities is to let them know that they are seen, and that they are capable. It was a simple gesture on my part, but I could see the confidence it gave Chris.

Something else I noted was Chris's gratefulness for his apartment- a place to call his own. There is so much security and relief in having housing. There is another organization that I was involved with for some time that assists people experiencing homelessness. There, finding housing for the individual is the priority; not finding employment, not enrolling in classes, but finding somewhere for the individual to live. This is because none of the other things can prosper, if the person is still worried about where they are going to sleep at night, or where they will use the restroom. It was obvious that Chris took a lot of comfort in having a place to live.

Stories are sacred. And Chris shared his with me, without any inquiry on my part. His story is another hard one to hear. It's not fair what happened to him – the messed up surgery or the treatment he experienced when he was younger simply because he is Black. Yet despite everything Chris has experienced, he is so joyful and appreciative of what he does have. His faith in the Lord heavily impacts his outlook on life.

Affirmations and words of encouragement should be voiced more often because they can be a source of confidence to people who otherwise believe themselves to less than because of their life circumstances. And housing is a vital component, if not the most vital component, to helping individuals improve their life chances.

2/25/19

Field note:

Today the residents played bingo. An outside provider will come put on a game of bingo twice a week. Bingo brings together Spanish-speaking residents and English-speaking residents. One time at a cooking class, George left because he couldn't understand the provider. Trevor [older White man, probably in his 70s] got up and brought the prize over to the older Hispanic woman who won that round of bingo. The women around her and herself looked on surprised because he brought it over to her. They laughed and smiled at the gesture. Today they played both loteria and bingo. They take the games very seriously.

Reflection:

It was a very cool sight to see the two different groups together as a joint unit playing this game. Although they sat segregated, there was still a community feeling to the group. There was a playfulness in the air. Evidently language is not a barrier when it comes to bingo. And kind Trevor did not discriminate his caring personality against the Spanish-speaking women. It put a smile on my face to see him bring the prize over to the ladies, and their corresponding reaction. I never would have guessed that these games (bingo/loteria) could be a bridge between cultures.

Have more events that are inclusive to different cultures.

2/27/19

Field note:

George gave me a homemade crucifix made out of wooden clothespins.

Reflection:

This honestly just warmed my heart. He didn't even say anything, he just gave it to me (kindly) and walked away.

2/28/19

*Field note *did take notes during actual observation*:*

Study about music from sociology department (graduate); focus group.

Most recent experience of music (feelings, how you heard it, when you heard it)

- Gina: Tejano music. Brought back memories of young days (high school). Felt good.

Radio

- Jerry: when at home – classical music, quiet. Live – get out and dance music. Loved rhythm and blues grew up in segregated times but had ear for equal employment. End up on black side of town. Listen to R&B.

- Alberto: Hotel California. Brought back memories. Love music. Radio (car). Spanish, blues. Brings back to high school, drink beer, dance with girls.

- Eleanor: song on the TV, wasn't paying attention. Steve Mera. Spiritual song, find it comforting. About someone who passed away. I told others about it, to comfort them.

Not a religious person, but consider a believer, believe in God.

- Trevor: Elton John on the computer. Listened to Elvis and The Beatles since they started. Classic music. Can't stand TV anymore. Music on computer from CDs. Just to listen to favorites.

- Evette: Elton John from CD

- June: CDs, TV, plays piano, played in hull house when she was young

- Tim: played guitar at young age. Listen to everything, radio, computer, TV, "Fortunate Son."

Delia doesn't want to talk.

- Colleen: Barry Mandalo – song "Ships" means a lot because divorced parents at 7.

Lyrics mean a lot. Played it on Alexa firestick. Listen to variety of music. Don't deal with classic – doesn't get me there, doesn't do it.

- June: Spanish Christian music. "I love God." I can understand it. Start crying cause I feel God.

- Evette: most of my religious music at church, Methodist.

- Trevor: Gospel music (lots of agreeance)

- Eleanor: listen to Christian music when I'm driving. Car radio. Not a church-goer. Nice feeling. Pass this on to others, too.

- Jerry: expand, venture back in history. Where Africans went, there is good music.

- Gina: healing songs or Hillsong. Gets me emotional and to tears. The powerful things He has done in my life and want to do better.

- Jerry: Old country was good. New country music sounds like from a machine.

Tim took over the interview. Asking questions. Went through bands asking who knew them (he did this multiple times.)

- Trevor: music has kept me going. Kept me alive. Been there since I was little. Besides the Lord, with getting me along.

Jerry came back to ask Tim if he lived at Summerwind. Tim told him yes. Jerry asked if they could get coffee some time. He said Tim sounded like someone who had a lot to say and he would enjoy talking with him. Tim said of course he would get coffee with him.

Reflection:

This discussion was extremely interesting and fun to witness. The residents became very lively when talking about the music that they listen to and how it makes them feel. They were eager to talk and had a specific direction with what they were saying, which is not always the case. They seemed to enjoy listening what one another had to offer to the dialogue and were quick to agree and/or comment in response to what someone else had said. Having this particular topic of conversation with the guided questions really sparked their interest and they gave the impression that they would have gone on longer, if time permitted. When the professor said that he would like to return another time for discussion, the residents were all in favor. Not only was the behavior of

the residents interesting to observe, but also the answers to the questions. Music seemed to be a very vital part of their lives, which I would not have guessed. It seems to be quite motivational and helpful in helping through hardships. I wonder if they would enjoy just a music-listening session where they just say around and listened to music.

Jerry asking Tim to coffee was another example of seeking relationship. Jerry seems very philosophical and intelligent. I imagine he enjoys discussing political and social issues, the arts. Those are not topics that residents usually talk about. He took the initiative to introduce himself to Tim with the possibility of building a connection that could create an opportunity for deeper relationship.

V. A DAY IN THE LIFE

Jessica walks out of Summerwind at 5:00, leaving the stagnant air of the building for the warm embrace of the fresh air. Her long strides carry her quickly to her car. The five-story gray building grows smaller in Jessica's rearview mirror as she drives away. Almost all the shades are drawn as if the slightest bit of natural light that slips through might infect the space.

Summerwind is a public housing authority site that houses low-income individuals, specifically people who are elderly and/or have disabilities. Jessica serves as one of the resident service coordinators.

As Jessica drives home, she thinks about the events of her day.

She pulls up to the housing authority at exactly 9:00 a.m. and walks fast-paced toward the gray building. When Jessica gets about three feet out, the automatic doors swing open.

Jessica ambles up the sixteen stairs to the second floor where her office is, taking two stairs at a time. Jessica finished designing the calendar for the next month. Bingo twice weekly. Bus pickup twice a week. Two Bible studies hosted by different churches. Catholic services on Saturdays. Movie days on Thursdays. Jessica prints the calendar and goes down to the first floor to start taping them to residents' doors, making a point to place them a little below her chest level – so it is not too high for residents who are in wheelchairs or those who are a little bent over, and not too low for the residents who are her own height or taller.

Jessica always thought windows allowed a person to see into people's lives. She did not know doors could as well. Jessica can learn a little bit about residents simply by walking up and down the halls and glancing at the residents' doors. Dog owners have pictures of their dogs taped up or signs like "I <3 my Chihuahua." Veterans have their army regalia on their doors and US flags taped up. There are a number of handwritten notes asking the visitor to knock loudly or wait a little longer because it takes awhile to get to the door. The most prevalent adornments are those of believers, crosses, Bible verses, and images of Jesus crowd the middle of the door.

On the fourth floor, I hear the elevator doors open and the familiar *clink clink* of dog tags. I turn around to see a resident unlocking her door to go inside with her Schitzu. She has never spoken to me.

Later in the morning, Jessica went to visit Ms. Colleen because she hadn't seen her at community events in awhile. When Jessica knocked on her door, she yelled to come in. Jessica found Ms. Colleen sitting in darkness, save the blue halo of light from the TV illuminating her form. Her blackout shades prohibit any drop of natural light from the outside world. In contrast to her environment, Ms. Colleen lit up when she saw it was Jessica.

"Oh, hey Jessica! C'mon in," she says. Ms. Colleen is sitting in a worn, brown leather recliner. The sagging material and faded color tell of many hours spent in this spot. Jessica sits on the floral print couch next to her.

"I just wanted to come check on you. I haven't seen you in a while," Jessica tries to say nonchalantly because she doesn't want to make Ms. Colleen feel bad for not

coming to events, but concern seeps through. Ms. Colleen's eyes warm, and Jessica can see that Ms. Colleen is touched that she noticed her absence.

"Yeah, well I just haven't been feeling very well," Ms. Colleen sighed.

"Really?"

"Yeah. My depression is coming back, my doctor added a new pill to my medication, and my foot pain has been flaring up. It feels like someone has stabbed my feet with knives and is twisting the knives."

Jessica tries to imagine what this must feel like. She has never experienced depression before. But from what she has heard about it, she pictures it like having a mask over someone's face that they cannot take off. It obscures their vision, makes everything seem dull. The mask reveals to others that they are happy and everything is fine, or it looks out emotionless, while underneath the mask the person is drowning in sorrow. Depression seeps into their bones so that it feels like it becomes a part of their being – that it can never be removed. Then Jessica imagines having a new medication added to her daily dosage. It may make one thing better, while simultaneously making three things worse. And the imagery alone of the pain Ms. Colleen was experiencing in her was enough to make Jessica uncomfortable. Just one of these would have been enough to keep Jessica from leaving home, let alone facing all three.

"I can see why you were not coming," Jessica responds. Ms. Colleen laughs. She is always so joyful. It is hard for Jessica to imagine her being depressed.

"I'm so sorry that you're going through this," Jessica says with the deepest sincerity and looking into Ms. Colleen's eyes intently.

“Thank you, Jessica,” Ms. Colleen replies with a wobbly voice. She reaches for Jessica’s hand and Jessica grabs and squeezes hers.

“If you need anything, let me know,” Jessica tells Ms. Colleen.

“I will. Thank you for coming to visit me. It really made my day.”

“It was my pleasure.” Jessica smiles at Ms. Colleen once more as she leaves.

By this time, it’s lunch. Jessica has an hour to go home, eat something, get caught up on her emails, and head back to Summerwind. The hour is up within 20 minutes and Jessica is pulling up to the housing authority.

Jessica sees Mr. George sitting on a bench in front of the building.

“Hola chula,” he greets her, a smile disrupting the wrinkles on his face. He grabs Jessica’s hand with both of his and squeezes. He does this gesture every time he sees Jessica, and it never loses its sweetness.

“¿Cómo estás?” he asks Jessica. Mr. George knows very little English. And Jessica’s Spanish is pretty limited, which he knows because she asks him how to say simple things all the time.

“Todo bien, gracias a Dios,” Jessica responds. *All good, thanks to God.* Mr. George is a believer. He wears a cross around his neck every day, and is one of the residents with Bible verses on his door.

“¿Y tú?” Jessica asks as she sits down on the bench with him.

“Muy bien, gracias a Dios,” he replies. His dark eyes sparkle behind thick glasses. “¿Te he dicho como llegue aqui?” he asks Jessica. She understands the question and shakes her head no.

“Naci en Guadalajara, Mexico. A una edad temprana tuve que empezar el trabajo manual. Era trabajo difcil con horas largas. Muchas horas trabajando, pocas horas de sueño y repetir. Me di cuenta temprano que la vida le da amor a todos – nomas que decide quien recibe tierno dulce amor y quien recibe amor duro. Conoci a mi esposa cuando tenia 20 anos. Nos cazamos y tuvimos dos niñas. Fui capaz de obtener un trabajo en un negocio local pero no pagan muy bien. Mis hijas se mudaron a los estados unidos para ir a la universidad. Mi esposa fallecio en el 2009 y mis hijas me mudaron aqui en el 2012. En el 2014 me mudaron a Summerwind.”

Jessica did not understand the majority of what Mr. George said. But she did hear him say that he has two daughters and that he moved to Summerwind in 2014. So she asked him where his daughters live.

“Una vive en San Antonio, la otra vive en Florida,” he explained.

“¿Ellas visitan mucho, o no?” Jessica asked.

“Mas o menos. Estan ocupadas con sus trabajos y sus familias.” He doesn’t look at her as he says this last sentence.

Jessica’s heart breaks. Most of the residents at Summerwind do not speak Spanish. And none of the staff does. So Mr. George has to resort to speaking to her – someone he knows does not understand Spanish very well. Jessica takes a moment to put herself in his shoes. What is it like to live in a place where practically no one understands

what you are saying? You are not visiting, this is not a brief period of time that you are in this place – this is your life. And not only can they not understand you, but you cannot understand them. All the community events and not knowing what is being talked about; forms and paperwork that you have no clue how to fill out, can't ask staff for help. And on top of all that, your family, does not come visit. That seems to be a very somber existence to Jessica. She tries to speak with and listen to Mr. George whenever she sees him, because she knows if it was her, she would be dying for someone to speak to. Even if it means simply repeating the same seven words every time: *cómo estás, todo bien gracias a Dios*. He doesn't seem to mind. Jessica gives him a look that she hope conveys what she does not know how to say in words. After a pause, she strings together some words that express that she needs to go to work.

“Oh, sí. Gracias por su tiempo, chula. ¡Que te vaya muy bien!”

“¡Gracias, igual!”

Jessica is completing paperwork when 3:45 p.m. rolls around. It's time for bingo. She goes up to the third floor, where there is a community room. The wall facing the street is completely made of windows. This room is one of the few places that sunlight is allowed in. Residents shuffle in with their bingo cards. They do not play when it comes to bingo.

Jessica goes to the front of the room and sets up the bingo cage. She notices that Mr. George walks in and sits at a table. The residents are scattered throughout the room, some sitting on the couches, some at the tables. Discussions about the events of the day and appointments that needed to be made were being had throughout the room. Jessica hears the elevator doors open and turns to see Ms. Colleen make a slight grimace as she

makes her way to the room, placing as much weight as she can on her cane. She sits in the chair next to Mr. George because it is the closest one to her and breathes a sigh of relief. Jessica gives her a smile and a bingo card as she makes sure everyone is ready to get started.

“Y’all ready?” Jessica asks. The residents nod and give a general affirmative. Jessica spins the bingo cage and lets the balls roll out.

“B-15...B-15.” The residents eagerly search their boards for the lucky letter-number combination. As Jessica continues, residents repeat the bingo letter and number for others who are harder of hearing and point out if someone around them missed the letter-number on their card. Conversation flows naturally, with little bubbles of laughter emanating from the different group.

“B-76...B-76,” Jessica announces.

“You’ve got that one right here,” declares Ms. Colleen. She places one of Mr. George’s chips on a square, as Mr. George looks befuddled by the English number.

“Oh, gracias, thank you” Mr. George says. Ms. Colleen smiles at him with an authenticity that warms Jessica’s heart as she witnesses the interaction. Ms. Colleen continues to help Mr. George throughout the rest of the game. Words are made null by the dialect of kindness.

At the end of the hour, when the residents finish the last round of bingo, Ms. Colleen turns to Mr. George.

“A group of us gets together on Friday mornings for brunch in here. Do you want to join us tomorrow morning?” Ms. Colleen asks. With a half-smile on his face, Mr. George shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders in a gesture that conveys that he does not understand. Jessica walks over.

“¿Quieres comer con ella y otros residentes aca en la mañana?” Jessica translates.

A genuine smile breaks across Mr. George’s face as he nods yes. Ms. Colleen’s face mirrors his.

“Jessica, how do you say ‘see you in the morning’?” Ms. Colleen inquires. Now Jessica is smiling too.

“Nos vemos en la mañana,” Jessica answers. Ms. Colleen places one hand on Mr. George’s and squeezes.

“Nos vemos en la mañana” Ms. Colleen says with the sweetness of sugar. She gets up and heads to the elevator, struggling a little less than when she first came in.

Jessica turns into the parking lot of her apartment complex and parks. *It’s been a long day*, she thinks to herself. Then the image of Ms. Colleen squeezing Mr. George’s hand comes back to the forefront. *But it’s been a good day*.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

Upon the completion of this project, I think it is necessary that places like Summerwind and other public housing establishments do more to address the social issues as revealed in this project. More specifically, I think it is important that closer attention is paid regarding matters of loneliness, connection and community. The following is a list of recommendations for housing authorities and other low-income assistance organization/programs to improve the experience of the clients:

- Classes that teach about self-love. This would encourage residents to be secure in who and how they are. This confidence could help motivate them to either initiate friendships or be open to encounters with new people.
- Creating a dog park or dog area attached to or near the housing authority. Many residents have dogs as companions. Providing a space for the dogs to roam freely would benefit the owner and the dog. It would also create an opportunity for residents to get outdoors and interact with other residents who are dog owners. This could build relationships within the community.
- Pet care assistance. Helping relieve some of the financial burden of pet costs so that people with low-income can own companion pets and take care of them well.
- Conversation partners. Opportunities for residents to talk with people who are interested in getting to know them and hear their stories. While this would also be valuable for residents who speak English, it would be even more so for residents whose first language is not English.
- If possible, hire employees that speak the language(s) of the residents.

- Host events (for example bingo, movie day, arts and crafts, game day) for residents to attend at the site, but also at other locations (movie theater, a play, art museum) so that residents get out of the building. Ideally, provide transportation and go on days when entry is free or reduced.
- Having relationship-building activities. There are a wide variety of possibilities for these: creating a question jar that residents answer, volunteering as a group, and many other options that can be found on the internet.
- Survey the interests of the residents: what classes/events they would enjoy attending; are there crafts they would like to learn do; what would encourage them to be more involved in the community; etc.
- Speak words of affirmation and encouragement to the residents to help boost their self-confidence.
- Have events that are inclusive to all cultures. This can stimulate cross-cultural relationships which are valuable for many reasons. Examples of such events would be hosting bingo/loteria, cultural potluck (residents cook/bake their cultural dishes), music/dance party that consists of different genres of music.

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