

Patrick Quinn
Post Immersion Paper
Urban Plunge: Bridgebuilders
17 January 2017

As I continued to listen to my site leader, Jared, discuss the current segregation of minority ethnicities today in our American culture, I could not help but think about the ways in which I had never truly opened my eyes to the issues that he was speaking about. Yes, I have always prided myself in my ability to remain open-minded and willing to learn when issues arise regarding the response that I might take, but his words and the Urban Plunge experience as a whole challenged me to look deeper into the issue of poverty and the segregation that divides large cities like Chicago. When I first signed up for the Bridgebuilders site for Urban Plunge, I did not exactly know the sort of service that I would be participating in and the types of individuals that I would be constantly interacting with on a day to day basis. Even though it would have been helpful to have some sort of idea of the nature of the trip, this factor allowed me to approach the first day with an open mind and a genuine willingness to serve everyone who I would meet throughout my experience. The nine other Notre Dame students and I ended up spending our time at Sunshine Gospel Ministries, a small organization in the Woodlawn neighborhood designed to provide neighborhood youth a safe haven after school every day. There, I was able to not only view the incredible frivolity and joy that the games and services provided the kids with, but was able to learn about the history of the neighborhood, specifically the issue of racial segregation and its connection to urban poverty.

The large root cause of urban poverty that I both witnessed and heard about on my immersion was the systematic racial oppression of, in the case of this experience, African Americans. Prior to the Urban Plunge, I never before had explored the issue of race in present-

day America and the causes behind the segregation of neighborhoods. The only knowledge of segregation I had was what I had been taught in school: facts about the Civil Rights Movement in the mid 20th century and the prior slavery that was instilled in American culture. A large part of the three-day experience was spent discussing the "segregation" of the 21st century and the effect of systematic racial oppression on segregated neighborhoods in Chicago such as Woodlawn. I learned that initial riots in the early 1900s began sparking segregation when white individuals began becoming suspicious of African Americans as several wealthy African Americans began moving to the nicer parts of the city, areas inhabited solely by white folk. However, because many white individuals were blindly afraid of African American culture and the cultural differences, they began moving out of the neighborhoods as more and more African Americans moved in. One of the individuals who works at Sunshine Gospel Ministries mentioned that in 1950, Woodlawn was an upper-class neighborhood with a population of 65,000 individuals, all white. However, because of systematic racial oppression by these white individuals, building owners, realtors, courts, and even the federal government, by 1960, Woodlawn had become an impoverished neighborhood with a population of 80,000 individuals, all African Americans. I thought it was very meaningful when we viewed the map of Chicago and talked about the segregation of the city during one of the Urban Plunge classes because it provided fantastic context for what I would see on my own Urban Plunge experience.

The incredible change that occurred in Woodlawn, turning an affluent neighborhood into one of the most run-down, struggling neighborhoods in Chicago was as a result of systematic racial oppression of African Americans from building owners all the way to the government. For example, during that time period, real-estate agents directly took advantage of these individuals encouraging segregation by approaching white folks and explaining to them that the

neighborhood would soon be full of African Americans and that they had better sell their house soon and move out. Then, they would turn around and sell those houses at three times the cost to African Americans so that they would profit from the deal and ultimately hurt the family financially. In addition, because of the surplus of African Americans arriving in this "initially" affluent neighborhood in the hopes of finding some fantastic opportunities, building owners began splitting the houses into two or three living spaces forcing more families into smaller spaces which ultimately gave them a large profit as well. I learned that such systematic oppression not only caused run-down neighborhoods like Woodlawn to arise, but that this is still a large issue in the world today. Such oppression directly violates the Catholic Social Teaching Principle regarding the "Life and Dignity of the Human Person" because while everyone deserves the dignity and respect that all humans inherently should receive, individuals in the world today still don't give each other this basic fundamental human right. It's very sad that the world has wealthy individuals living lavishly while individuals such as some of the ones I encountered in Chicago continue to struggle with receiving their basic dignity.

While in Chicago, I was fortunate enough to interact with youth ranging from first to fifth graders in the Sunshine Gospel's after school program. Every day, the kids would come racing in from school and the other Notre Dame students and myself would throw footballs around with them, assist them with homework, lead them in games, and simply act as mentors. Seeing the joy in their faces and understanding the fact that so many would one day appreciate the efforts of this organization that helped provide a positive influence and guided them to leading great lives was extremely thrilling. This joy that I witnessed made me think of a part in the Ehrenreich article that we had to read for our Urban Plunge class where they talk about how the individuals that seek happiness for others ultimately find it for themselves (Ehrenreich 20). It again reminded me

how important and vital it truly is that all kids receive a place where they can be themselves and learn in a stable environment. Even though many of these youth might face issues with instability in their homes, the care and support that they receive at Sunshine is life-changing. While playing and assisting these kids, I was again reminded of the fact that service isn't just about doing something for another person just to do it. Service is about learning from others just acting in a way that promotes the dignity of all human people and care for God's creation, the seventh Catholic Social Teach Principle. I thought it was very effective that the individuals at Sunshine Gospel Ministries didn't always tell us what to do at every moment, they just allowed us to view the moment that was ahead of us and figure out how we could promote this care for every person as well as God's creation.

A huge aspect that I will take away from Urban Plunge is the realization that systematic oppression against African Americans is still happening today in the US. Even though many individuals like to believe that segregation is over and slavery doesn't exist, it unfortunately does. I thought that this realization that occurred to me was very similar to what we discussed in the course as we touched on how there are so many issues contributing to urban poverty that many individuals don't realize. On my Urban Plunge, I watched a documentary that talked about the incredible injustice that is being done regarding the mass incarceration in the United States today. The stunning fact is that there are more black men in prison today around the United States than there were enslaved African Americans years ago. In addition, I also learned that the more individuals that are kept in jail, the more certain companies and politicians benefit financially. That being said, politicians are continuing to influence police departments through certain legislation that is continuing to add more individuals, particularly African American males, to jail. Before the Urban Plunge, I had no idea that there were secret deals in place that

allowed companies to have a say in political legislation, ultimately increasing the desire for filled jails and larger financial benefits. This new information really struck me hard because just as the third Catholic Social Teaching Principle talks about, "Rights and Responsibilities" is an integral part of promoting the dignity of all humans so that individuals who are fortunate enough to have a voice in society such as myself can stand up for their neighbors. I believe that if more individuals knew about this systematic oppression of African Americans in society today, there would be a larger outcry for change and this racial oppression could be broken.

While on the Plunge, I was very surprised to know that the group of Notre Dame students and myself wouldn't be doing the typical perceived "service work" such as serving meals at a soup kitchen or visiting with individuals at a homeless shelter. I experienced a similar Plunge while in high school in the city of Portland, Oregon where I partook in these volunteer activities and so I was expecting to have a very similar experience on the Urban Plunge. However, I thought it was as meaningful if not more impactful to spend the majority of the Plunge learning about the root causes of poverty and the racial segregation in Chicago because it was all knowledge that I didn't know. This slight difference in Plunge experiences definitely challenged my view of "service" because I had always viewed serving others as partaking in specific actions such as serving meals at a soup kitchen. My new view of service directly connects to the Claiborne chapter which we had to read for one of the Urban Plunge classes in which the author talks about how some individuals serve the people of their community simply by going downtown and holding conversations with those suffering from homelessness (Claiborne 47). I learned on the Urban Plunge that serving others doesn't always mean participating in concrete actions, but being there for others and assisting them in whatever way needed. For example, there were many times that I served the youth of Sunshine Gospel Ministries simply by cheering

them on during a dodgeball game or just letting them hold my arm when they were listening to directions. Although I felt as though I wasn't doing anything special, I realized that those actions served the youth as much if not more than if I had been teaching them a game or helping them with homework.

Although systematic racial oppression is an incredibly large problem, I feel that if I continue to educate my peers and stand up for the inclusion of all races, I know that this will make a positive difference. By spreading knowledge and changing even one of my peer's negative views of race in the United States, everyone becomes more aware of the problem and are more likely to make small differences themselves. Another way I can combat this racial oppression against African Americans is by continuing to find a way to volunteer within communities like Woodlawn that struggle with such segregation. In working with individuals that are constantly persecuted, I will not only get a better sense of how I can help, but what sort of legislation and legal tactics are greatly restricting the freedom of these individuals and contributing to this segregation. The more people that stand in solidarity with all those being racially persecuted, the larger chance that this issue will be solved. Even though it can be hard to label specific actions that individuals can do to make a difference in this issue, another Catholic Social Teaching value, the "Call to Family, Community, and Participation" is extremely important as it provides knowledge to others and makes people more aware that such systematic oppression and segregation is still occurring even today. Also, just as it talks about in the reading we did in "Tattoos of the Heart," God's joy ultimately makes a difference in our world (Boyle 39). People can take up this "call" by voting down legislation that enforces such segregation and standing up to political corruption as well. I enjoyed my Urban Plunge experience as it connected large issues such as slavery and segregation and tied it to issues occurring in the modern day and

how they contributed to urban poverty. I definitely grew as a person and will continue to fight against the oppression of African Americans as I return to Notre Dame.