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Power, Housing, and the Powerhouse of Engaged Learning

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Power, Housing, and the Powerhouse of Engaged Learning

Cover Page Footnote

To my Engaged Learning instructor, Jon Schmidt, my social justice organizer, Mary Tarullo, and the tenants at the Darlington Hotel. Without your guidance, support and inspiration, my experience would mean nothing.



Power, Housing & the Powerhouse of Engaged Learning

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Abstract

This paper navigates an engaged learning internship experience at a social justice organization during its effort to preserve affordable housing within their community. Affordable housing availability in Chicago has diminished over the decades in the wake of gentrification and economic development, causing the displacement of lower-income occupants. As a student traversing the inner workings of society, the engaged learning course surfaced questions about power, policy and community organizing through the direct exposure to social justice issues. The goal of this course was to inspire students to become civically engaged through active community service with local organizations, and seek answers to questions their experiences surface. This paper explores those questions in relation to the affordable housing crisis that is impacting those in Chicago neighborhoods.

Keywords: Affordable Housing, Gentrification, Engaged Learning, Power, Service Learning, Civic Engagement

Growing up I existed in a liminal space between the economically privileged at private schools I attended and the concrete jungle of Old Brooklyn in Cleveland, Ohio, my neighborhood. I remember my friends from school relaying the fears of their parents after I extended invitations for a sleepover at my house. Their parents were not comfortable with letting them go because of where we lived. By my classmates' standards I was low on the socio-economic stratum, but in my neighborhood my family and I were considered blessed. My father worked two jobs to send us to the best schools and that meant sacrificing the luxuries my peers enjoyed. I was privileged in so many ways growing up, but I admittedly envied the advantages of my peers and their families.

My parents were no strangers to renting. While I was in kindergarten we lived in an in-law suite on a sprawling estate in the suburbs. My father maintained the property for reduced rent, worked at the local gas station, and drove a tow truck. He was fortunate to have received an employment opportunity to work with my great uncle, which afforded him the ability to buy his first home. I was so excited to have my own room, but I was curious about

my place in society. I once asked my father about our economic status, a term unfamiliar to me, after watching a news program. He considered our family lower-middle class. I thought this was shocking, because I felt my parents had achieved a level of success. To me, that label indicated that we remained on the periphery in relation to others around us. I saw myself differently within this category and classification, and it was a title I was not comfortable owning. I almost believed I deserved less because I felt less. Classifying people can create stigmas, and stigmas can be damaging. This makes service tricky, because it is saying something about the people on the receiving end.

Little emphasis was placed on teaching service in the private schools I attended. In high school, I was required to complete a certain number of service hours prior to graduating. This requirement was not honed or developed through the curriculum. Instead, it was implemented with a shadowy threat of diploma retention for not complying—do it or else (but, please, just do it). The service hours included babysitting for a neighbor, helping out at church, and other methods of service that would be considered. Some forged their way through, scouting signatures from willing parties. I stressed about it. I used every last day leading up to the deadline making sure I met the bare minimum.

Not much changed when I was accepted as a transfer student at Loyola University Chicago. In order to graduate, I was required to complete an engaged learning course, which included a minimum of 35 hours of service outside of the classroom. Like high school, I waited until the last semester of my senior year, and stressed over the thought of the additional hours on an already demanding 18 credit semester. The unknown is always scarier than what actually needs to be done, and I will live in fear and battle with myself longer than I need to before I tackle a challenge.

"It is always different experiencing the deeply complex intricacies of the real world than it is seeing it through the lenses of your mentors and teachers."

Service has always been important to me, but incredibly foreign because I never really learned how to engage. For me, service is like getting my blood drawn—it is uncomfortable and filled with a lot of unreasonable fears. What I came to understand from my engaged learning experience is that it is like getting your blood drawn; the more you do it the less afraid you are, but the discomfort still exists.

We can only take from our experiences what we put in them. I knew that in order to receive the message Loyola was trying to send me, by forcing my hand into service, was to give it my all despite the discomfort. So I decided to enroll in UNIV 290, a Community Action Seminar: Organizing for Power and Community Change. It was a two-for-one course, which included an internship at a social justice organization scheduled concurrently with the class. It sounded interesting, and it was a field I knew nothing about. Power is a haughty word that has angered and confused me. At times I have felt powerless as a female, a voter, and a low-income adult. Reconciling with the word did not seem possible, but I was hoping to learn something new that could change my paradigm. The engaged learning course, and the internship, created questions that I still do not have answers to, but motivated me to know more. It also directly connected me to an issue I most likely would not have experienced

otherwise because of my privilege. It is always different experiencing the deeply complex intricacies of the real world than it is seeing it through the lenses of your mentors and teachers.

Affordable Housing

I acquired my own lenses when I was assigned to ONE Northside, an organization that amasses the community against social injustices. By chance, I was placed in the affordable housing department with an organizer who was in the process of trying to preserve a local affordable housing building. The Darlington Hotel—and two others owned by the same landlord in neighboring communities—was under the threat of being sold to potential real estate developers that would displace 65 lower-income residents and convert the hotel into high-end housing. It was then that I came to understand the true struggle of renting and affordable housing—a perspective I may have not otherwise gained.

In 1949, the Housing Act obligated the government to supply housing to all American families and revitalize neighborhoods—a decree that made housing a right for every family. Homelessness and the need for affordable, quality housing still exist despite the good faith housing legislation, as lower-income families continue to be displaced. The government responded to the housing need with public housing. However, mismanagement and underfunding has caused these organizations to fail to provide acceptable and livable conditions. Jacob Riis, a photojournalist during the late 19th century, documented tenement housing in New York City during the second wave migration. The horrors he photographed brought to light issues that existed outside the knowledge of the upper echelons of the social class and shamed property owners who gladly collected rents from tenants who lived in less than acceptable conditions. Money was thrown at the situation, but no real solutions were generated to prevent these situations from reoccurring. Seemingly, public and affordable housing still have their challenges as quality and availability continues to suffer.

Privately, landlords are responsible for the maintenance of buildings by utilizing the income generated from the rents they collect. Freeman (2002), a professor at Columbia University in New York City, explains that the maintenance costs and any needed development a property requires to be acceptable for occupancy—which is mandated through building codes and regulations by the government—may exceed what renters can afford. Landlords want a return on their investment, which usually means renting to more affluent occupants.

Husock (2015), a Forbes Magazine contributor, states that in 1969 the Brooke Amendment, in response to the National Housing Act, was established to keep public housing costs low for tenants. This public housing rent threshold required that a household could spend no more than 25% of their income on rent (Husock). A housing report by the U.S. Census Bureau cites that the national threshold was increased to 30% by 1981 (Schwartz & Wilson, 2006). By 1989, 17%, and in 1999, 20% of renters across the nation paid more than 50% in rent (Freeman, 2002). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (2015) reports that families who spend more than 30% of their income on housing are cost burdened. Exclusionary zones that do not allow the development of multifamily units in the suburban communities worsen the affordable housing crisis, or they require large lots of land for the development of these units (Freeman). These conditions drive up the cost of housing

development and make it difficult for the creation of affordable housing in suburban areas.

Chicago Magazine author Whet Moser documents the evolution of single room occupancies (SROs) in Chicago. SROs were originally developed as deluxe rooms with cleaning services for young and social singles (Moser, 2014). As these accommodations declined in the 1970s, the nation also experienced the deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities. Thousands of patients were released to the care of communities that were unable to be meet them. Nearly 7,000 were released to Uptown in one year (Moser). These units were converted to accommodate low-income renters for no more than 30% of their income. Over the decades, thousands of SROs in surrounding neighborhoods in Chicago were closed, displacing their tenants. Kunichoff (2013) writing for the Chicago Reporter, reports that in 1986 the city had lost 17,000 SRO units in a decade. In 2008, there were 106 licensed SROs and today only 81 are still in existence (Moser, 2014). ONE Northside estimated that 14 affordable housing buildings on Chicago's north side have been sold to developers since 2011. I was shocked to learn that in 2012 Uptown had twice as many SROs as any other ward, but more would close in the coming years.

As of January 2015, the Darlington Hotel SRO, in addition to the Carling and Marshall Hotels, was in danger of being added to this formidable list of closures. A few months earlier, ONE Northside led a campaign to preserve SROs and was able to get legislation to pass called the Single-Room Occupancy and Residential Hotel Preservation Ordinance (2014). This ordinance requires SRO owners to list the building with affordable housing developers in order to preserve the building within the first six months of the sale before offering the property to market rate developers. If the buildings are not sold within the six month period to affordable housing developers, the owner must pay a displacement penalty to each of the occupants in the building if sold to market rate developers. The tenants would receive a small fortune in the amount of \$10,000, but as the affordable housing market suffers in number and quality, the money does not solve any problems for the tenants searching for occupancy elsewhere.

Engaged Learning

I started my internship in February after the announcement of the Darlington Hotel sale. ONE Northside was in the process of ensuring that the city and the owners complied with the new SRO ordinance. In order to protect the interests of the tenants at the Darlington Hotel, the housing organizer at ONE Northside motivated the tenants to assemble in order to preserve the legacy of the hotel and their rights as tenants. My experience witnessing the power of the organization and the tenants at the hotel, in light of existing law, was more than a student could ask for in an engaged learning setting.

ONE Northside encourages leaders in the neighborhood to act on their own behalf. Once the housing organizers learned of the Darlington's fate, they organized a network of residents from the hotel and arranged meetings to help them create a plan of action. ONE Northside is a vessel and implementer of the residents' will and actions. The organization uses its connections and collective power to illuminate the voice of the community. The meetings are a way for the residents to voice their concerns with one another, create collective plans of action, and bring about change to their community.

In conjunction with my internship, the engaged learning course challenged me to evaluate power structures, community assets and organization, and leadership (to name a few), while applying it to my experiences at ONE Northside. Homework assignments included attending public meetings and writing about our experiences during our time

with the organization in order to generate class dialogue.

I had the opportunity to attend tenant meetings and see the faces of those who were personally affected by these decisions as well as the overarching power structures that have led them to less than desirable circumstances. The tenants included elderly occupants, single mothers, working class and mentally ill people—populations on the economic fringes with limited options at their disposal. Affordable and quality medical care, child care, and housing are hard to come by for people who are trying to make ends meet especially when trying to make it on one income alone. To further complicate their precarious situation, they were now in a position where they lose their homes.

Every Thursday I stood on the platform for the 'L' train and summoned every square inch of bravery I could find before making my way to the internship. My teacher and organizer were challenging me to face issues of privilege, class, and race. Meanwhile, I just wanted to hide in the bathroom. In college, the self-awareness of my skin color heightened while learning about hot-button social issues. Here I am being guided towards social service engagement while also learning about things like the 'white-savior complex' and issues of white privilege. So, when I was asked by my organizer to stand outside a men's single-room occupancy hotel to pass out fliers for a tenant meeting, my status as a white, female college student who stutters under social pressure made me glaringly uncomfortable. What reasons did the tenants have to listen to me? I grew to be ashamed of myself in a way that I could not reconcile. Was this white guilt I felt? Ignorance to differences I thought I was immune to? No, this was the reality of service, and all the uncomfortable questions it surfaces.

These thoughts raced through my mind every week, even as I made phone calls to community members about public rallies for minimum wage increases and the opposition of state budget cuts for social programs. I was encouraged to open dialogues about topics I was taught to avoid out of politeness. As I sat in tenant meeting and the office, I tried to ignore my insecurities and find comfort, but it never came. The only thing that got me through was knowing that my intentions were pure.

Gentrification and Affordable Housing

On my first day at ONE Northside I arrived early and stopped for lunch. I sat and observed Wilson Avenue and catalogued what I saw. Uptown is an underdeveloped area that is rich in history and diversity and despite the Starbucks and newer apartment buildings, it reminded Cleveland neighborhood. I recalled a radio broadcast about the effects of Starbucks on neighborhoods. Knowing the struggles of Uptown, it raised a lot of questions.

A phenomenon coined "The Frappuccino Effect" or "The Starbucks Effect" is a term used to describe the appreciation of property values in relation to their proximity to coffee shops—namely Starbucks chains. Taylor (2015) states in Reuters that property values near Dunkin' Donuts have appreciated 80% since 1997; however, properties near Starbucks have appreciated 96%. The Darlington Hotel just so happens to be within 500 feet and 0.2 miles of two Starbucks coffee shops. Sociologists have investigated the effects of coffee shops on neighborhoods, and the gentrification that springs from these franchises. It has become a topic for academic debate. I originally thought gentrification was healthy for communities, ignoring perspectives from the other side of development. I have frequently benefited from and enjoyed the effects of gentrification, all the while ignorant to plight it can create.

As defined by sociologists Papachristos, Smith, Scherer, and Fugerio (2011), gentrification is a process that reworks the culture and configuration of an inner-city neighborhood and may displace those in lower-income households only to replace them with that of wealthier ones. More or less, gentrification manufactures wealth and disenfranchises people in poverty. As a result, neighboring property values increase, and storefronts appeal to higher-income residents (Papachristos et al., 2011). The evidence of gentrification is present in Uptown. This neighborhood is known for its diversity, and gentrification can be a hurdle for communities attempting to maintain its diversification.

Papachristos et al. (2011) indicate that there are two sides of gentrification. Lower-income families can benefit from improved school systems, increased tax revenue, and new business ventures that it generates. However, property values and inflated rent can financially stress families who may no longer be able to live in a community they have lived all their lives, forcing them out.

Surrounding states and communities have experienced the displacement of many families yet eliminated affordable housing units because of gentrification. Logan Square, a community in Chicago, is home to one of the largest Hispanic populations in Chicago. The Logan Square Quality of Life Plan (2005) reports that the community experienced a migration of Hispanic-American families in the 80s and 90s. Developers from Lincoln Park who could not afford to build on the scenic waterfront, moved west into Logan Square and created high-end housing (2005). Development here has displaced many low to moderate-income families, and property values have surged creating the need for affordable housing. Hispanic families seek affordability elsewhere, outside of Logan Square, which destroys a culture that has existed within this neighborhood for decades.

Developers are drawn to the affordability of underdeveloped communities like Uptown and bring with them attractive incentives. Community organizations, meanwhile, cling to the diversity that existed before migrating trends. Chicago journalist Elizabeth Earl (2014), finds that economic development bolsters property values, which may dislodge lower-income families who can no longer afford to live in a developed area. Signs of gentrification are appearing in Uptown, and rents are inflated to keep low-income renters out. Earl (2014) reports that between 2000 – 2012 the U.S. Census Bureau shows Hispanic and African American populations in Uptown have decreased 0.7 % and 8.2%, however, the white population increased by 6.3%. Cities nationwide face the challenge of creating economic development without the looming threat of the displacement to families.

The city of Chicago has changed its focus and policies over time to accommodate the changing economic climates of its communities. The city of Chicago passed the Affordable Requirements Ordinance (2003), which intended to develop affordable housing units. The Affordable Requirements Ordinance Proposed Enhancements (2014) states that future residential developments that use city land are required to retain 10% of the units available as affordable housing. Other projects that utilize financial assistance from the city are required to retain 20% as affordable housing. However, as the city enhances its affordable housing development, real estate developers are able to pay a fee in-lieu-of providing affordable housing units in the amount of \$100,000 per unit to an affordable housing fund—a loophole to the process that seems to bypass the intent of preserving affordable housing. The money set aside in this fund is used to develop affordable housing units elsewhere in the city. The enhancements include Mayor Rahm Emanuel's "Five-Year Housing Plan", implemented in February 2014, which will provide \$1.3 billion towards the preservation and creation of affordable housing units around the

city.

The Darlington, Carling and Marshall Hotels have yet to be sold, and the six month deadline is approaching. The ordinance, ONE Northside, and the tenants can only do so much to protect these SROs and their current tenants. The five year plan devised by the Mayor is promising, yet it does not solve the current problem of displacement for the tenants who may lose their homes. As I sat in a Darlington Hotel tenant meeting, I could not help but be angry with the powers at play. Housing is something that many take for granted, and something I would have continued to see as a non-issue had I not taken this class. I did not come from wealth. However, I am too informed to ignore the privileges from which my family and I benefit, which grant us many opportunities that others may not experience. Not acknowledging the privileges I have may affect my decision making, especially when those decisions affect others.

Conclusion

During my engaged learning course, my professor introduced us to a community organizer named Ernesto Cortes in the book *Cold Anger* by Mary Beth Rogers. For me, Cortes reframed the definition and paradigm of power. He explains, as children we are taught to give consent to those in authority. It is not until we know ourselves and mature, through the process of informing ourselves, that we can begin to make decisions about consenting to someone else's power (Rogers, 1990). We exist in a democracy that functions because of the people. When we are left out of the decision making process, we can withdraw our consent and assemble our power to change the rules, "It is a gift, and we shouldn't give it away to others" (Rogers).

During my first meeting with Darlington tenants, tensions were high after the notice was released to the tenants regarding the sale of the building. What seemed apparent was the acknowledgement that they were facing a power structure that was bigger than they were...if they allowed it to be. What started out as fear and frustration turned into a collective interest in taking on the owners and exercising their rights as tenants. They subversively withdrew their consent and decided to take immediate action against their potential eviction. The housing organizers solicited ideas for their next steps, and many stepped up and became active leaders in the preservation of the SRO. Without the bravery of these tenants lending their voice for the building as a whole, it may have resulted in a non-contested affordable housing unit closure.

I still think that service is like getting blood drawn, and I do not think that will ever go away. I am reminded that service is not simple, and I do not think it should be (Davis, 2006). Service puts us up close and personal with inequality, class, race and a whole slew of other areas of intersectionality that make us uncomfortable. What is important is that we do not distance ourselves from the uncomfortable, but draw closer in order to make informed decisions. I constantly worry about the tenants at the Darlington and those struggling to find affordable housing. I still do not have the answers to my questions, but this engaged learning experience has shown me the stark reality of our society and the 'man behind the curtain.' When Dorothy and company drew back the curtain to reveal The Great and Powerful Oz, they discovered he was not as powerful as he claimed to be. A journey that may have been improbable had they not joined forces—and that is power.

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