

A Reflection on a Napier Class at Pomona College – Fall 2019

By David Mann, co instructor, with elder participants John Howell, Connie Green, Lyn Juckniess, Michael Witmer, and Meg Mathis

Sugar-addicted elementary school children and college students who find themselves habitually indulging weed may find healthier alternatives because of a recent intergenerational religious studies class at the Claremont Colleges. It is known as a “Napier Class”, as a result of a unique partnership between Pilgrim Place in Claremont and faculties of the Claremont Colleges. Through this partnership we offer courses that include both retirees and community engagement components. There are currently four such classes taught at two of the colleges. The faculty co-instructor for the past 4 years has been Dr. Zayn Kassam of Pomona College. Last fall, 16 young idealists and 7 “elders” became co-learners in a 15 week journey that was transformational for many.

From an elder perspective, our job is to engage as “mutual mentors” with the students. Older and younger participants are prompted throughout the course to reflect introspectively. Dr. Kassam and I articulate the goal as developing our “morality muscles” and vocational aspirations—both young and old. At times elders may become sages or mentors for the students, but at the same time are equally gifted by a reciprocal mentoring from the “youngsters”.

Undergraduates bring their hopeful vision for a radical shifts towards a more just and communal world. Elders become both inspired, and able to begin a “late-in-life” vocational renewal. Elders also often feel invited into new social practices. All are stimulated by a carefully designed syllabus drawing from narratives of well lived moral lives.

The essential genius of the class may be illustrated through the lens of two students and their capstone projects. These two projects were designed and presented as “final exams” last December. Projects are intended to pull together many learning and growth points for the students. They also are a crucial skill building aspect, whereby aspirations to address needs and inequities can become discreet realizable projects for change. Projects build on the community based “work internships” requiring students to give 4 hours per week in a supervised non-profit situation. Internships are in the nearby low income communities. The final exam period is devoted to student presentations of their projects before the whole class.

Lauryn’s Taste Labs for Healthy Snacks

Lauryn moved confidently to the front of the class for her 12 minute presentation of her project – “Taste Testing Labs for Food Health Education”. Her work internship had been to teach a healthy food and gardening class to 4th to 6th graders at a community garden run by Pomona Hope in the barrio of Pomona. Lauryn had noticed that the snacks that Hope provides the kids offer both veggies and something sweet. She began noticing that the children ignored the veggies and moved straight on to consuming all the sweets. She asked them why they ate snacks this way, sparingly indulging in the vegetable snacks? “Uuunh! They’d say, I don’t really like carrots and celery “

Here is Lauryn's Executive Summary of the Project:

"During a post-baccalaureate fellowship following my senior year at Pomona College, I will launch a mobile taste-testing lab centered in the Pomona Unified School District. This taste testing lab will serve as a dynamic, functioning link between school chefs, nutritionists, directors, and students. This project has target goals of increasing palatability of healthy food, dismantling the negative association between "healthiness" and "tastiness", reducing food waste in public schools, and amplifying student voices in school meal choices. When students learn about the sources of their food and are empowered to interact with it, they are more likely to incorporate nutritious foods into their diets. Because children's taste preferences develop early, this engaging testing lab will help cement a foundation of lifelong healthy choices."

Lauryn began developing the underlying analysis that food preferences formed eating habits and they were influenced early and often to have a taste preference for sugar based snacks. She read and researched the issue widely and began collaboration with Frecia Gonzales, Regional Director of The Institute for Public Strategies, an NGO located in Pomona that has one program centered on Food Insecurity. Frecia had been introduced to Lauryn by Michael Witmer, a Pilgrim Place resident member of class.

Lauryn's personal essay for her project reflected well upon the source material of her deeply held values. In her words:

"I grew up in Gallatin, Tennessee, a small rural town near. My hometown is comprised largely of poor whites and poor African Americans, of farmers, janitors, brick layers, teachers. My father, an intensely kind man born and bred in the south, has coached Gallatin's little league football team for years. Aside from my half-Chinese brother, these teams were and continue to be made up of African American boys. These young boys and their families, overwhelmingly, are systematically disenfranchised by crumbling public school districts, a lack of access to nutritious foods and preventative healthcare. These boys enter the world of football with visible, tangible anger built up over years of fighting a system designed for their failure.

I have watched my father, utilize both his own outrage and the rage of these young boys and their families to build relationships and community, carefully empowering his players to realize their own power and ability. For as long as I can remember, these boys were my brothers, their families my family, my fights their fights."

Lauryn will be seeking to develop new "preference" habits for the youth. She closed her presentation with passion as she laid out a timeline beginning with a "pilot" program at Pomona Hope. None in the class – "audience" doubted that this project has serious "legs" and had a high probability of success. Lauryn is a junior at Pomona College. She is spending the spring semester in Kenya, studying in a Global Health and Human Rights Program. Her project will be further developed during her senior year. She intends to turn it into a post graduation fellowship application.

Aaron's Peer to Peer Support Group for Early Addiction patterns

The next student up for his presentation was Aaron. A wise sophomore, Aaron immediately grabbed our attention by sharing that he is a recovering addict. He's had two bouts of being addicted to "weed". The first time was in high school. In this episode, he was able to conquer a growing habit of smoking marijuana, with help from a mentor-teacher at his Jesuit High School along with his own

resourcefulness. However he relapsed during his freshman year of college. Again he was able to improvise his own recovery path through a couple of very close friends/allies. Now, Aaron intends to facilitate the creation of a student run support group for recovery from addiction.

Aaron wants to create a new pathway to address addiction in early, pre-crisis stages. His research showed that the substance abuse support program at the college was oriented to trauma moments. He wanted to provide avenues of student to student support. Here is Aaron's Project Executive Summary:

"My project aims to improve the substance abuse and recovery resources offered at Pitzer College while creating a communication framework for students to learn and understand what resources are offered and how to access them. This will be accomplished by the implementation of a student-run (with administrative oversight) peer-to-peer support group for students in recovery or attempting to overcome abuse, the creation of wallet cards and bathroom pamphlets with mental wellness and substance abuse resources, and a dialogue with faculty and administrators about the communication of resources. My project will formally start at the beginning of next semester with no formal conclusion, but my action plan is structured until October 2020. It involves the collaboration of another student leader, various administrators, and a faculty member."

Aaron's personal essay is equally important, so as to understand the roots of his character and his journey to find this project's visionary goals:

"I became sober due to a plethora of lucky circumstances, but chief among them was a man named Fr. Frankl. He's an openly gay priest and a recovering alcoholic. I was touched—inspired—by his selfless love, kindness, and drive to serve, especially considering the pain he experienced both in the Catholic Church and with substance abuse. I realized that he filled that same hole in his heart with genuine relationships, with service, and love. I could do the same... I'm slowly learning how to face my issues, in a way that embodies self-respect, love, and friendship. I've realized—like Fr. Frank—that is the only way to fill that hole in my heart. We are both blessed, yet broken. We are stumbling. It is in the embrace of our own brokenness where each of us is touched by grace, by love, where we find ourselves."

Again, elders and Aaron's fellow undergrads were clearly moved by his sheer honesty and the clear strategy he'd developed. Perhaps, most importantly, this all had grown directly out of his own experiences. What an inspiration we felt. Aaron was roundly applauded by the class.

All elders experienced the thrill of these remarkable students expressing their serious intentions to become change agents and soon, 14 other students had presented a wide range of important projects. Clearly each project draws from the ethical framework that the student has been developing through the course as they explain why this is important to their values. I love to hear and see the fruits of this course come together in such concrete action plans.

For elders, the "work" they offered came in the form of encouragement, networking connections, or just practical feedback. Now they were able to witness strong, confident project plans. These designs for realizable social change had been largely unformed, searching for focus, just 8 weeks earlier.

On the December night set aside for "final exam", elders served a scrumptious array of home cooking now prepared for the stressed and tired students. This night expresses the degree to which a true community has been created. After presentations are complete, we all gather for a closing circle. Each

member of this community is invited to take up the sticks and talk about what the class has meant to them. Undergrads give voice to the valuing of what they have received from elders. They talked about how important the elders sharing of their own struggles and shifts in life. But also about their long and lasting commitments as change agents inspired them. Specific elder-younger moments of deep connecting were recalled. So much!

Elders talked about having experienced the thrill of seeing how some of our “presence” and companioning, had become manifest in the lives of these students. They also talked about a renewal of their own hope and commitment. For all seven elders it is about the satisfaction of supporting and being inspired by undergraduates with huge appetites to create a just world. All in all, amazing!

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