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CEL Journal

My first experience with Community Engaged Learning was at the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. Upon arrival the building looked ominous, it was situated in a dead end of a run down suburb, not only that but on it’s right side was a city dog kennel from which distressed barking could be heard. Once inside I realized that it was actually a quality establishment, equipped with extensive food stores and spotless industrial grade cooking equipment. Once we arrived in the main serving area they informed us that we would be tutoring people who were working towards their GEDs. At first I was nervous but became comfortable with the idea after a few minutes of waiting. Eventually they told the remaining group who had not been assigned pupil that we would be bagging snacks. After an hour or so we were informed that it was lunch time. We would line up at the serving station and deliver trays directly to the poor people who had arrived for a meal. After a few minutes of serving it became apparent that these people were never taught the importance of social order and the place quickly erupted into a frenzy of poor people trying to manipulate servers into giving them multiple meals. Very few said thank you and even fewer meant it. Overall this experience shed a lot of light on why poverty exists in first world countries. It is not a lack of opportunity but a lack of soft skills that prevents people from gaining employment.

My next CEL experience was far more pleasant, we went to a TCNJ sponsored meeting where we got to listen and talk to formerly homeless men that turned their situations around. They had both struggled with heroin addiction and had both decided to make changes in their life. It was very refreshing to find out that they had each perused and continue to peruse education and have dedicated their time to try and prevent others from making the mistakes they did. We then learned about the programs available to poor people in America today that were not available at the time these men were straightening out their lives. I was very pleasantly surprised to find that the system can and does work for individuals who are willing to help themselves.

Our final CEL experience was at a Homeless shelter. We got to see the conditions that the homeless live in when they are lucky enough to get a room. Our tour guide Larry explained how he got his life together in a homeless shelter, yet another reinforcement that with the right mindset and a little help from others the impoverished can free themselves from the poverty trap. I was amazed to see the accommodations like a gym and thrift shop that were there to provide the poor with a little dignity where there would otherwise be none. Overall my CEL experiences were pleasant and eye opening.