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Essay #1

Culture Clash

When you push open the doors to the kitchen of St. Ben's, a rush of warmth, delicious smells, and friendly chatter immediately greets the senses. You cannot help but put a smile on your face, because the atmosphere is homey enough to remind you of a Thanksgiving dinner with your loving, and very entertaining, family. On any given week night, the head-honcho of Ben's meal program, a middle-aged man by the name of Mike, bustles over to greet new volunteers like me. In a business-like manner, he assigns every volunteer a position. "OK, you in the red shirt-you're milk tonight. And young lady, how about you do the hot sauce." As he waves his hands around like an avid politician, his finger finally lands on me. "And you, ma'm, what's your name?"

As soon as I say my name, Mike rushes in, "Alright Laura, why don't you pour coffee tonight." With a quick glance at the clock and at the line of people looming behind the entrance to the cafeteria, Mike glances over us as if we are his troops. "OK everybody, let's move!" As each volunteer assumes his or her role pouring milk, squirting hot sauce, or serving piping hot coffee, people from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds filter in to grab a meal. College students who are eager to have a delicious, home-cooked meal for free and families volunteering together sidle into the cafeteria and look curious about the food selection and their fellow guests. Homeless men and women toting mugs and donning puffy jackets also file in, wearing the day's long, chilled journey on their faces. Near the front of the room, cheery elderly men and women

from the week's featured parish scoop generous portions of mashed potatoes, vegetables, and mystery meat onto the plates of the hungry and make silly frowns when someone resists a helping of green beans for a slice of cake. While seeing the smiling faces of the senior servers is a highlight, the best part of the night is the meal, one that will be for many, the only one they will have until they find the next available meal site.

Working at St. Ben's is just one of the many experiences with culture clash I have had while attending Marquette. I have not always been aware of the realities of the outside world, however. Having lived in sheltered, peaceful St. Louis suburbs for practically my entire life, I really never had to experience hardships or pain. With opportunities such as studying abroad, summer vacations, and a superior education, I never realized until I became a young adult that I was actually part of a very small margin of people in America living in above-average, economic standards. My encounters with the "real world" as a child were far and few between, with my only glimpses being the homeless man playing the saxophone for pennies at the end of a Cardinals game or the rare African American boy swimming on my club team. While I do not blame my parents for sending me to a primarily all-white Catholic grade school and private high school, I do see where issues of inequality, racism, and biases can develop early on. I question what causes this chasm between the rich and poor, uneducated and educated, white and non-white to come full circle in our minds. I realized once I got to college that I had not yet fully experienced the dynamics of another's culture because of my content and comfortable setting at home. The world was so much grander and larger than I had previously known it to be, and college would soon introduce me to some shocking, delightful, and interesting surprises.

Deciding to take a risk by signing up for a Marquette Action Program service trip was one of the many "surprises" I experienced during my first year at college. The Marquette Action

Program (M.A.P.) is an organization sponsored by Marquette's Campus Ministry office. Offering students the opportunity to take Spring Break service trips in a variety of cities throughout the United States, M.A.P. provides students at any point in their college careers an opportunity to meet others who share similar values of service and goals for working toward justice. In addition, students who attend M.A.P. have the chance to interact with the individuals of the respected community they and see the effects of their work firsthand. Through my experiences with M.A.P., I encountered a society where education was lacking and individuals had futures that did not go beyond the tiny community they resided in. Upon entering Rhodell, West Virginia, I had the picture-perfect image of a quaint little town nestled in the Appalachians, complete with lots of activity and busy, yet content, residents. As I traveled the many miles from Milwaukee to Rhodell in a boisterous car-load of five girls, my positive expectations were about to be turned upside down.

As we pulled into the gravel parking lot outside the clinic where we were staying, our group could not believe our eyes. Rhodell appeared to be a ghost town, complete with a volunteer fire department, rickety fences protecting shabby dogs, and down-trodden homes that had seen better days. While I was expecting to see a booming mining community bustling with shops and people, I instead saw a place that looked like it had become stuck in the past. Our group spent most of the time cleaning up a dilapidated building called the "Open Door," the town's version of a Goodwill store. While working alongside an enthusiastic middle-aged man named Paul, we began to question his motives for volunteering his time and energy in a community that seemed so barren. After conversing with Paul and other families, we discovered that despite the few opportunities and outlets to the real world these people had, the people of

Rhodell always looked out for one another and valued the tight-knit community as their true home.

We soon learned that like the worn-out town the people of Rhodell lived in, its citizens appeared to have traditional views on many issues. After meeting Dr. Roberts and Sister Greta, the two sisters who worked at Rhodell's only health clinic, it was interesting to hear their views on education. Highly supportive of George Bush's "No Child Left Behind Act," both sisters agreed that students in this part of the country needed to catch up to higher standards for reading and writing. They even went so far as to say that extracurricular activities such as sports were a waste of time, because they distracted students from achieving their academic goals. While we Marquette women wanted so badly to articulate our arguments based upon the knowledge and experiences we had gained from years of schooling, something prevented us from doing so. Because of their tireless efforts to bring health care to the community, these women were obvious leaders in Rhodell and therefore reflected the opinions of the entire community. From that moment, we knew that instead of trying to judge and differ with the people of Rhodell, we had to first understand where they were coming from.

Like my encounters with the individuals of the Rhodell community, working at the soup kitchen at St. Ben's was unlike any service activity I had experienced before coming to Marquette. St. Ben's is a parish kitchen that hosts volunteers through programs like Midnight Run, a student-run organization that provides meal programs at various sites in Milwaukee. Having gotten used to the designated roles and routines of St. Ben's, I challenged myself to interact with some of the homeless men and women. I could not understand why it was so easy for me to take on the robotic gestures of pouring coffee and smiling but then so much harder to sit down and hold a conversation. Amidst my frustration, I was often surprised when a raggedy-

looking man would kindly wink at me from across the table and ask me my name. I felt better once someone like him started the conversation and went through particulars, because then we could really get past the barrier that had been previously separating us. Crossing this barrier, I realized, was not something that happened overnight. It was easy for me to eat a meal with the homeless and then go back to my warm, content, worry-free lifestyle. I realized that this meal was, for many, the only time they had to do what we humans love to do: talk. Therefore, I began to ask my new acquaintances about their daily problems, life goals, and favorite leisure activities.

One of my favorite people at St. Ben's was a man nicknamed "Red" for his fiery hair. He delighted me and everyone around him with his karaoke skills and poor jokes. Fred was another friend of mine who was always up for sophisticated banter on the meanings of literature, religion, and life. It made me realize how these people, often subject to names such as "druggies" or "alcoholics," were real people too. By allowing them to share their feelings, emotions, knowledge, and problems, I made connections with these individuals and began to view the homeless men and women on the street in a new light.

Just as I realized with my experience at St. Ben's, you don't have to go far to learn about another's lifestyle and culture. Sometimes one's diversity is right in front of you, just waiting to be discovered. My current experience with my Puerto-Rican roommate has given me the opportunity to view the diversity of another's culture, habits, tastes, and values in a more intimate setting. After meeting Geysa on my floor freshman year, I liked her positive spirit right away. Her highly energetic, intelligent, and outgoing personality was inviting and inspiring to all those who met her. I even discovered through others on my floor that she had won Miss Teen Latina USA her Junior year in high school but was very humble when asked about it. As I got to know Geysa, I became intrigued by her story. She talked fondly about her tight-knit relationship

with her family and informed me of the close connection her cousins, aunts, uncles, and relatives have with each other in Puerto Rico. As her current roommate, I cannot help but watch as Geysa animatedly talks on the phone to her family members, gesturing intensely and fluctuating her tone of voice to match. I think it is interesting how after moving to Chicago at thirteen, Geysa struggled with English classes at school. She confessed to me how in high school she had to interpret the ACT reading sections word for word, because she could not understand English entirely. Yet with much hard work, she eventually became an avid speech team participant and Vice president of the team her senior year of high school.

I am amazed at all the accomplishments Geysa has achieved while still embracing her Latina identity. As an international studies major and Italian minor, she has big dreams for changing the face of foreign relations. One of her many goals includes working to provide fresh, clean water to impoverished countries. Her motivation to interpret politics and her understanding of the world have had an amazing influence on me, as someone who does not regularly keep up with current events. I now read CNN articles on a daily basis to stay on top of the news and join Geysa at events promoting social causes, such as the current crisis in Darfur. Moreover, I have also realized that despite our cultural differences, we both value our education and share a common goal of making a difference in society.

Sometimes I wonder what was going through God's all-knowing mind when He carefully created humans. I picture Him creating each of us as if He was carefully preparing a dish, throwing in a dash of ethnicity here and a pinch of social status or religion there. Moreover, the final product is a tantalizing mix, chock-full of cultural categories. Some might find God's products delicious, whereas others scorn them because the odor is too strong or the taste a tad too rich. Whether we choose to judge individuals based upon aesthetic factors such as skin color,

clothing, or dialect, we will never know the true taste of their culture unless we give them a chance. By striving to get in touch with those different from us, we allow ourselves the opportunity for a rich cultural experience that does not come from a textbook or class lecture.

The three images of unique individuals I have encountered—the illiterate West Virginian such as Paul, the homeless person like Red, and my Latina roommate, Geysa—not only present three tantalizing mixes, but they also strike the chords of what it means to be human. While I have discovered the unique cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds that accompany individuals at college, I have found it more fascinating to have been able to draw parallels in terms of morals and goals. Whether it was sharing values of service with Paul and the nuns in Rhodell, laughing with Red over a silly pun at St. Ben's, or discussing the news with my roommate, I have had amazing experiences that have allowed me to connect with others on an entirely new level. My experiences at Marquette have inspired me to get in touch with a diverse world more similar to me than I had originally imagined.