

Reflection of Woodward

My time with AmeriCorps at Woodward High School was one of the most defining experiences of my life. As a white girl from Milford I've experienced some of the truest definitions of privilege. I thought I supported diversity and advocated for other rights but there's only so much change you can do from your suburban home stocked with all the food you want and the support of a family who shows up every day for you. I've heard some of the worst stories of abuse, neglect and discrimination from children and teens who themselves can't comprehend the profound impact of trauma they've experienced. Woodward High School is a 100% poverty school with an African American population of 98%. To say that segregation has ended is a complete lie.

Working with the summer youth program at Woodward enhanced my tolerance, empathy and expanded my view of the inner city. I realized how underserved the black youth in our city truly are. The children I worked with lacked the most basic needs, let alone slim access to a quality education. Working with the students showed me the flaws in the educational system and how deep the racial and socioeconomic disparity is. Even the organizations that serve the youth are riddled with budget cuts, poor organization and a slightly jaded outlook.

I really struggled with staying positive while seeing students struggle in an unjust system. The little moments are what you have to strive for. The moments when students understand a concept you're tutoring them in or when they feel comfortable sharing personal issues.

The most rewarding part of my year with AmeriCorps was the summer program. It provides an escape for the students from the chaos at home. It brings consistency and structure for students without home support. Although the students complained about field trips like a walk in the woods at Evergreen due to the perils of the outdoors such as mud and bugs, they were given 10 minutes to splash through the creek to find salamanders and create mementos from rocks, sticks & leaves that allowed them a carefree experience enjoying nature. It was the first time I truly saw them act like kids.

So many of the children had to grow beyond their years. Particularly the female students were tasked with taking care of younger siblings and securing basic needs for the family. I bonded with a particular student who lost her mom suddenly in a medical accident. I have never seen such strength in someone of her age. Although she struggled financially and experience too many types of grief, she consistently showed up, mentored younger students and proactively sought out work. It's students like her that make me curse the system. Here is an incredible, talented, strong, beautiful and smart young woman who has had so many obstacles thrown at her yet she dares to dream. A lot of the students settle with their circumstance and see dreams as too far-fetched. I believe the summer program serves as a way to show students what more is in the world past the confines of their neighborhood. The students need someone to believe in them and show them their worth in this world and that they are so much more than their circumstance.

I met and worked with many incredibly strong black women who have become my mentors. My supervisor, Ms. BB was an activist with the Black Panthers and has dedicated her lifetime to serving at risk youth. The Resource Coordinator, Rayna Moore was the first person in her family to go to college and has dedicated her life to protect minority rights. She grew up in circumstances similar to the students at Woodward and provides an example to the kids that you can control your future. There is so much more I could say about my time at Woodward, but it wouldn't give justice to the human experiences I was blessed to take part in.