Reflection on Urban Ministries

My summer at Urban Ministries can not be adequately described through words. It would be much easier to understand my experience if one could be at the shelter, and meet the people that I had the privilege to see every day. Urban Ministries is located in the heart of downtown Durham, clustered with several other aid organizations and low-income housing. It provides many services to the homeless population of Durham, including a shelter for men, women, and families, a food pantry, a clothing closet, a Community Cafe, and a drug and alcohol recovery program. It took me several weeks to figure out who was employed staff, volunteers, members of the recovery program, homeless, or just lived below the poverty line and needed assistance (interestingly enough, several members of the staff were graduates from the recovery program). I got to know people in all of these categories, learning their stories and personalities.

My first week at Urban Ministries was very frustrating. I was the first intern of six who were to arrive that summer, and as a result, was sort of a test for my boss. While I was assigned projects to work on, there were many hours of my day that I did not know what to do with my time. I felt like my passion and time was being wasted. I did not realize I had the authority to do things when I saw it was necessary. I had to learn to find work, and needed to understand the basic tasks that had to get done every day. Gradually, the other interns all arrived. Having the other interns was crucial; I had friends to work with and also process the hardships we encountered. We could dream up projects we wanted to tackle, and it gave us more confidence to talk to strangers. We became incredibly close this summer, sharing stories about our personal lives as well as our hopes for the future. After their arrival, and a better understanding of the place, I loved going to work every day. I loved it so much that even after my internship was technically completed, I didn’t stop working until my last week-day at home. Work was exciting, because while we had a rough idea of what would take place, every day was radically different. Each day I encountered a new face, problem, beautiful child, or heartbreaking story. Every day I saw acts of radical love and kindness.

These acts of love were definitely one of the highs of my summer. The week before starting my internship, I read Shane Claiborne’s *Irresistible Revolution*. I finished the book excited to love everyone I met, no matter who they were or what their circumstances may be. I was inspired by Claiborne’s words. The one thing I never realized was that I would be shown love in return. So many people at the shelter knew me by the boot that I wore to help a healing stress fracture. No matter what their own problem, worry, or illness, so many people would constantly ask how my leg was feeling. Many told me they would be praying for me, which deeply touched me. Here was an entire population with problems on a much larger scale than my own, yet they still were concerned about me. People were almost more excited than I was when my boot finally came off! I saw incredible love when a little girl brought in bags of food, saying that for her birthday party she asked her friends to bring canned goods. I saw love in the volunteers who came faithfully every week for years, and in the hotel that donated eight boxes full of soap for our hygiene kits. I saw love when I burned my hands on chili-peppers, and people went searching throughout our building for ways to stop the pain (we settled on chocolate milk).
However, the deepest love I was shown came from people in the recovery program. These were grown men (and two women) who had hit rock bottom in their lives. Most had severed ties with their family, and had been successful before alcohol and drugs ruined everything. One of the men I got to really know through working in the clothing closet, James, would occasionally say how much he appreciated me being there and volunteering. My first few days of work I actually thought he was a volunteer from a local church because he always wore dress pants and a tie. On my last day, he presented me with a packet of papers. He said that because he couldn’t afford to buy me a gift, he had something else for me. He gave me pictures of his family and children (that I assume he hasn’t seen in years), a piece he wrote on getting over addiction, and two poems he wrote. This is one of the most meaningful gifts I have ever received. I was so touched I nearly started crying.

While I could talk about all the people I met at the shelter for hours, I will only talk about one more, Mr. Cole, who is a sixty-year-old Cheyenne Indian from Oklahoma. Mr. Cole was a favorite of many people at the shelter. He was also in the recovery program, but the alcohol had damaged his memory. He could never remember what time his classes were, (or my name for about a month), but he was one of the sweetest people I’ve ever met. Mr. Cole looked out for the other female intern and myself. When shelter clients were belligerent or bothering us, he would defend us. We would eat lunch with him whenever we could. My last day at work, he walked me out to my car. After hugging me a few times, he began to cry. I couldn’t believe it! It nearly broke my heart, and I began to cry as well. He kept asking me not to go, calling me his “buddy.” I was so proud of him, because he wanted to begin taking art and Spanish classes at the local community college.

I fell in love with the population I was working with. Yes, some were dirty, smelly, and even scary, but each person was absolutely amazing. I learned this summer that it all comes down to relationships. Whenever I am asked about what I did this summer, I think about the people. I learned that the majority of the people there had mental or emotional problems. While the stereotype is that everyone who is homeless drinks or does drugs, I found that many people were simply sick. I encountered people who were schizophrenic, bi-polar, had PTSD, or physically handicapped. They had no one to care for them, or no way of securing an income. It broke my heart to see the children that were brought in. Some were adorable and joyful, but had parents that would yell constantly at them for making any noise. Moms would laugh and tell the people around them that they were shocked their kid was so smart, given that they did drugs or drank while they were pregnant. It was really hard to hear this, and realize how difficult it would be to break these children out of the cycle of poverty.

One specific problem I had caused the most anxiety and heartbreak of my summer. My individual task (aside from doing intake on those getting clothing and food or helping out in the kitchen) was to administer homelessness prevention surveys. I would give these to people who were facing eviction because they couldn’t pay their rent or a utility bill, and then fax the information to the Durham Social Services. June was my toughest month because I gave out over thirty of these surveys. Each person I talked to was desperate, panicked, and often had other serious problems. One man I talked to was on oxygen, in a wheelchair, and couldn’t read (even thought he completed the ninth grade). Another was blind, another had AIDS, and another was a victim of a hit-and-run car accident.
I thought for a while that I was helping these people. I never knew what happened to them after I faxed over their information, because DSS wasn’t getting back to me. Eventually, I called them inquiring after my faxes. The man I reached told me they had only been able to help a few people out of all that I had sent them. Even though they had plenty of money (which none of the other agencies who helped with financial assistance had), DSS had nearly impossible qualifications. Urban Ministries didn’t help with financial assistance, just could refer clients outward. DSS was my last resort, but they only would help clients who made at least three times what their rent costs. This was infuriating to me! I knew most people struggled to get $600 a month (mostly coming from SSI or Disability), so would never be able to make three times their rent. People desperately needed assistance, and I knew there was hardly any money in the system to be had. I had to just hand them our resource sheet, even though I knew that none of these places had funding. This was a problem with the system, but it really depressed me. I was horrified that I had been giving these people false hope. I don’t think I did more than two surveys for the rest of the summer, simply because after a few questions I knew that most didn’t qualify for any aid. I told my boss about this problem, who was also shocked. Out of desperation, I would tell people to just try calling churches to help them. Even this would often fail, with churches saying they didn’t have the funds set aside to help with these awful situations. I tried to think of ways to connect our clients with wealthy church members, but never had time to implement a system that could work. What depressed me the most was that most of these people only needed between $50-$200 to keep them and their family from being homeless. This kind of money could easily be spared by so many people, especially the type that attend Furman. This problem was incredibly disheartening and frustrating.

Working at Urban Ministries has changed me. Going into a grocery store is still really hard for me. I look at the shelves and think about how empty Urban Ministries’ food pantry is. I hate thinking about how I can buy razors or deodorant whenever I need them, yet I had to tell so many people that we were out of both most days at the shelter. It is hard not to feel horribly guilty about everything that I have. I made sure to bring in food, clothes, or toys from home each day I came to work. I was delighted when my little brother used his “points” from an arcade to buy a deck of cards for one of the men in the recovery program who told me he became bored every afternoon. Every time I went into a drug store I would buy as many razors as I could (I could get 36 for only six dollars). I have realized that I want to continue work of this type. Whatever I do, I want to be able to implement more concrete change than just feeding or clothing someone for a day. However, the idea of being a social worker exhausts me. There are so many problems and snags within the system that I could get burned out really quickly. Hearing tragic stories and not being able to help would be very painful for me. However, I never want to work so high up in the system that I lose touch with the people I am trying to help. Relationships are the key to understanding what needs to be done. I am still brainstorming where my niche may be. All I know is that I feel called to work with those living in poverty. They are my equals in so many ways.

I have learned so much about myself and the world through this experience. I have learned to be more confident. I have learned to interact with people who are incredibly different from me. I have learned how horrible it is when food stamps are delivered two weeks late. I have learned that almost no one receives their disability the first time they apply, no matter what the situation (because the government figures only those who really need it will apply multiple
times). I have learned how good and necessary welfare programs are, even though there still may be corruption and inefficiency. I have learned that love exists even in desperate situations. I could talk about my summer experience for hours, and I know that I am leaving so many important things out. I am so thankful that I worked at Urban Ministries this summer. Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity.