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HARTFORD HUB:

Transforming Lower Lincoln

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STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCHES

Breeah S. Carey received her degree in speech, language, and hearing sciences with minors in Spanish and psychology from Purdue University in May 2018. She is currently pursuing her master’s degree in speech-language pathology at Purdue University and wants to serve pediatric clients in school and clinic settings. She has volunteered in various schools in Newark, New Jersey, as a tutor in her mother’s after-school program and as a speaker for the Diamond’s in the Rough Program at Belmont Runyon Elementary School, where she encouraged minority girls to attend college in the future.

Lauren Jankowski is a senior in interdisciplinary engineering who plans to pursue graduate school and focus her research on mental illness. She has volunteered with several organizations, such as St. Vincent de Paul, Hannah’s House, and Upward Basketball, since early high school.

Madison Long received her degree in accounting from Purdue University in 2017 and began her career with Microsoft Corporation in Seattle, Washington, in their finance division. At Purdue, she frequently participated in local Lafayette community initiatives centered around child literacy and engagement, including United Way’s Read to Succeed Program and the Beck Lane Boys and Girls Club after-school volunteering program.

Joshua Walker is a senior in mechanical engineering with a minor in computer science and plans to earn a master’s degree in mechanical engineering after a few years of work experience. He has provided one-on-one assistance with students at the free Math and Science Tutoring Center in his high school, refurbished bicycles intended for community use at Revolutions Bicycle Cooperative in Memphis, Tennessee, and worked with Engineers for a Sustainable World to keep tailgating parties at Purdue clean of trash.

INTRODUCTION

The Lower Lincoln Neighborhood is a unique community situated within the greater Lincoln neighborhood in Lafayette, Indiana. Lincoln is one of Lafayette’s historic neighborhoods bordering Union Street to the South, 14th street to the East, Greenbush from the North, and the Wabash River from the West. From a Purdue student’s perspective, the neighborhood begins right when you cross the bridge into Lafayette going east on

Northwestern Avenue. The lower part of Lincoln is the downhill part of the neighborhood—everything west of 9th Street.

With only around 1,000 people in the quarter-square-mile neighborhood, it is interesting to indicate such a significant divide between upper and lower Lincoln. However, there is a clear divide in both physicality and perception. The Lower Lincoln area is known for being high in rental properties; almost 80% of the area

is rented, suggesting that many people are entering and leaving this community. Over 60% of all Lincoln neighborhood residents have a household income lower than \$25,000, which classifies them as low-income residents, and this number is even higher in the Lower Lincoln area (Lafayette Urban Enterprise Association, n.d.). These statistics are visually evident as one walks through the neighborhood. Many of the homes in the Lower Lincoln area are boarded up, unkempt, or vacant.

In the minds of many, there is an even bigger divide than a difference in neighborhood appearance—the Upper Lincoln area also has wealthier residents. When working in the community for our Urban Youth Activism class (HONR 29900), we walked past 9th Street to invite people to a taco night we were hosting, and many of the people we spoke to indicated that they either did not go lower than 9th Street or were not familiar with the community center that was on the other side of 9th Street. We were under the impression that many residents indicated a general disdain about the area and were skeptical about sending their children below that street.

The Mayor of Lafayette, Tony Roswarski, has been working with community center leaders, churches, and city planners to improve the area of Lower Lincoln. His hopes are to have people feel as though they have a sense of community and to instill a neighborhood pride that encourages residents to care for their homes, neighborhood, and community. The local government is trying to improve the wellbeing of the people in this community by building a center and rebuilding homes, in hopes of slowly eliminating the disparity between Upper and Lower Lincoln. Through our HONR 29900 course, we set out to first observe the current climate of the neighborhood and then to develop methods or suggestions for increasing urban youth activism within the community.

DESCRIPTION: HARTFORD HUB

Located in the Lower Lincoln neighborhood of Lafayette at 1103 North 6th Street, the Hartford Hub is a community center that provides various services. It was created by Faith Ministries, a Greater Lafayette Christian organization dedicated to spreading the word of God and carrying out his messages through acts of service. The facility is intended to serve as a space for youth activities, events, and church services. The two-floor facility consists of a downstairs space with a kitchen, television, foosball table, and pool table. Upstairs is a space designated for completing homework, tutoring, and arts and crafts. Across the street from the Hartford Hub is a small park with a basketball court, jungle gym and slide,

shaded eating area, and grill. Although it's a neighborhood center targeted at the Lower Lincoln community, it's open to everyone. The Hartford Hub is always looking for new volunteers Monday through Friday. Volunteers are welcome to help tutor, make arts and crafts, or simply play with the children (Faith Ministries, n.d.).

We assisted the Hartford Hub in many of their day-to-day activities, such as mentoring children, leading craft times, and hosting special events designed to attract a wider age range from the community.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

In the spring of 2017, Professor Jason Ware led an honors course designed to introduce students to the concept of urban youth activism through critical civic praxis, transitioning from theory to action over the course of the semester. First, we researched several of the challenges that urban youth face and how urban youth are perceived by outsiders. Many journal publications prior to the turn of the century cited “social disorganization in poor urban communities” as the cause for youth crime, violence, and delinquency (Sullivan, 1989; Wilson, 1987). Anderson (1990) argued that “ghetto” behaviors (such as lack of respect for authority, lack of work ethic, and indifference toward academic achievement) are taught to youth by older urban residents, who have “given up on legitimate means of economic security.” While many articles focused solely on the reasons to explain the behavior of urban youth, very few provided ways to change such behavior. Ginwright and Cammarota (2007) suggested that community centers in urban neighborhoods can give youth access to the “networks, ideas, and experiences that build individual and collective capacity to struggle for social justice.” We identified the Hartford Hub as one such community center that Ginwright and Cammarota described. We looked at ways in which urban youth can help themselves and their community, with a focus on youth organization and personal growth through critical civic praxis.

Before our first visit to the Hartford Hub we talked with one of the senior leaders, Stefan Nitzschke, to learn more about the mission of the center and how we could volunteer. Afterwards, we developed a plan to maximize the effectiveness of our visits to the Hub. We went to the Hartford Hub not to see if we could fix all the problems of the Lower Lincoln neighborhood in a single semester, but to show the resident youth that they had the opportunity to take ownership of their communities. We wanted to empower them to become active and involved members of their community so that they may affect whatever

change they want to see in their lives. We integrated ourselves into the social circles of urban youth at the Hub to gain a deeper understanding of their lives so we could better understand them as unique individuals with their own strengths, problems, and dreams. After a few weeks of volunteering and observing, we reconvened as a class to restructure ourselves to better meet the needs of the Hartford Hub.

When we first arrived, we discovered that the vast majority of the visitors of the Hub were outside the boundaries of what, for the purposes of this class, we defined as youth. In our research, youth are considered to be those from the young teens to the early twenties. However, most of the visitors of the Hartford Hub were in elementary school, with a few in middle or high school. We therefore shifted our focus from directly influencing the youth of the Hub to the organization of the Hub itself.

We slowly integrated ourselves into the lives of the children by serving as volunteers at the Hub and helping with homework, making arts and crafts, or playing with the children during their free time. The children's schedule is consistent after school: everyday from 4:30 to 6:00 p.m. is homework time, and after most of the kids finish their homework, it's craft time. After homework and craft time end, the children's schedule varies. Sometimes they play outside, take a field trip, or participate in a Bible study. During homework time, we learned about the friends and family of the kids as we helped them with math, reading, drawing, or any other activities they had been assigned at school that day. Playtime offered a more energetic set of activities, such as shooting hoops in a pickup basketball game, giving piggyback rides, jumping rope, and playing tag. There were also a few indoor activities, such as board games, pool, and foosball.

On Saturday, March 26, 2017, we held a dinner and movie night for residents of the Lower Lincoln area. This event was designed to allow our class to coordinate and lead an event at the Hartford Hub ourselves so we could interact with the youth of the neighborhood for an extended period of time in a controlled environment. We were able to experience some of the challenges that the leaders of the Hartford Hub face, such as attracting people to the Hub, organizing a schedule for the day, and entertaining a wide range of ages.

CRITICAL FEEDBACK TO COMMUNITY LEADERS

As the Hartford Hub is a young organization, we decided that the most useful service we could provide was

constructive feedback based on our own observations. The leaders of the Hub admitted a need for assistance in managing the center and were extremely open to our observations. Collectively, we studied dozens of journal publications focusing heavily on urban youth, effective and ineffective methods to connect with youth, and theories on how to provide youth with the resources to succeed. The combination of the research publications and firsthand interactions with the youth and leaders at the Hub provided a unique perspective when analyzing the center. From our experiences at the Hub, we recognized several unmet needs, but even more opportunities for success.

Feedback was provided through formal discussions. Our class met with one of the leaders of the Hub to give suggestions and hear his responses to our ideas. All of the feedback and suggestions were related to one of the following general categories: the volunteers at the Hub, age demographic of the students, homework time, services offered, and the general perception of the Hub. For each theme, we identified the problems, hypothesized the cause(s), and then proposed solutions. For example, one major obstacle the Hub currently faces in the "age demographic" group is a lack of older youth (ages 14 and above) utilizing the center. We speculated that the reason for this is the overwhelming presence of young children (ages 3–12), with whom the older youth may not want to spend time if not required. We suggest planning events aimed directly toward this older demographic, or possibly creating a neighborhood youth council. In Checkoway's 2011 publication, he argues that "youth participation is facilitated by youth leaders and adult allies." We believe that such a "youth council," with assistance from the leaders of the Hartford Hub, will provide these youth with the chance to develop their leadership skills, as well as a sense of belonging to and responsibility for their neighborhood.

Similarly, in the "volunteers at the Hub" theme, we noticed an obvious lack of uniformity in the volunteers. This was especially noted in how different volunteers disciplined the children. Some authoritative figures would tell the child apologize to the child he or she offended and ask God for forgiveness. This was used in instances when one child physically or verbally harmed another child. Some would simply reprimand the child and make him or her perform tasks such as yardwork or cleaning, while others would not discipline the child at all. It also appeared that volunteers didn't have the same reason for volunteering. Some seemed to have a savior complex; they acted as if the children were in need of saving and that they were the ones doing this

saving. Some seemed forced to be volunteering and did not appear eager to interact with the children. Checkoway (2011) states that “youth participation assumes that young people are competent citizens, rather than passive recipients of services.” We believe that some volunteers act as though the youth at the Hub are simply “passive recipients of services.” The vast majority of volunteers, however, seemed to enjoy being with the children and treated them as any other child. To address these differences, though, we suggested a more rigorous background check of each volunteer and, more importantly, a unified training program. Whether this is an interactive meeting for new volunteers or simply a training handbook, it should clearly state the goals of volunteering and instructions on how to appropriately address discipline, among other topics.

While we focused primarily on addressing current issues at the Hub, we also thought of a myriad of other opportunities the center could provide. With full support from the community, we think it is very possible for the Hub to host events such as monthly potlucks, where each family brings a dish to a neighborhood dinner, or create a community garden, which is managed by members of the neighborhood.

This service-learning project provided qualitative data. We used our own experiences and observations to identify the problems and propose solutions. It is unknown how, when, or to what extent our suggestions will be implemented, so we have yet to record quantitative results. Once this information becomes available, we may be able to collect results based on the number and ages of the Hub attendees or even survey residents of the Lower Lincoln neighborhood to record their perception of the Hartford Hub.

STUDENT AUTHOR IMPACT: HOW THE HUB AFFECTED US

Weekly, our class had the opportunity to reflect on our experiences at the Hartford Hub. Informing each other about our observations allowed us to return the next week more aware of various elements. Not everyone in the course had previous experiences with volunteering, working with youth, and/or working in lower-income communities. Because of this, Dr. Ware gave us several case studies, research journals, and other publications to help us understand what environment we may be entering. Obviously, there isn't a single narrative for these types of communities or environments, so it was important not to make too many generalizations before actually diving into the community itself.

At the beginning, a few students felt somewhat hesitant working with youth, as they either had not worked with youth in the past or were not particularly familiar with urban youth. This disconnect was partially due to a lack of exposure to these types of communities and partially due to not realizing that we have more similarities than differences to the youth. After a few visits, however, all of the students grew more comfortable and familiar with the youth and soon built very meaningful connections.

Very often, Purdue students do not have the opportunity to leave the campus bubble. We don't take the opportunity to explore our local Greater Lafayette community, and, unfortunately, this shelters us from thoroughly understanding the dynamics of our city. Many of the students expressed that this opportunity allowed them to take more ownership of the community in which they live. Furthermore, for many students, this experience expanded further than the course. Some students plan to stay in touch with the Hub for the remainder of their time at Purdue. For others, it gave them a direction for their lives. Whether that is developing a better understanding of their professional goals with working in child advocacy or personal goals of getting more involved with local communities throughout their lives, we had the opportunity to share with one another the impact this experience had on our lives.

Our class was able to learn a lot from the Hub: the importance of building community among youth, thoughtful action when engaging youth, and building trust and mutual respect within a community. However, there were some difficulties when observing the dynamics of the volunteers within the Hub. Some of our first encounters at the Hub included us observing the volunteers talk down to children, or seeing how the same-aged youth volunteers from outside of the community showed authority over the Lower Lincoln youth. It created an unhealthy, degrading dynamic. Thankfully, the Hub's professional staff was open to taking our feedback, learning from us, and even extending their future plans with us. They were open about the limitations they face and how they plan to overcome these in the future. Looking forward, the Hub staff now emphasizes the importance of building relationships with the youth in the community and not entering the space with the hopes to “save” them. We are confident that the leaders of the Hub are taking our feedback seriously.

CONCLUSION

Lower Lincoln in Lafayette, Indiana, is stigmatized as an impoverished, unsafe community. Working with Faith

Church, the local government attempted to reverse or disprove the “below 9th street” connotation by starting the Hartford Hub. The leaders of the Hub passionately work with the residents of the neighborhood to bring the community members closer to one another and God. They work extensively with the youth in the neighborhood and are effectively shaping the next generation of Lower Lincoln residents. By caring and providing beneficial resources for these children, they hope the children will feel empowered to follow their dreams despite any adversity from external factors. The Hub has admirable intentions, but with a young and somewhat inexperienced staff, these intentions were not at the forefront of this service-learning project. We hope that our involvement with the center and the resulting feedback provided will help the Hartford Hub come closer to meeting their community-oriented goals. While we focused largely on ways to improve the Hub, we quickly noticed the vast potential this center has to impact the neighborhood. We are confident that with citywide support, the neighborhood and the church community can reshape Lower Lincoln and make it a place that people are proud to call home. We want all students to learn about the communities that surround Purdue’s campus. Anyone with a passion to empower children can get involved at the Hartford Hub and make a lasting impact on a child’s life.

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