

Krishna 1

To truly value the power found in community is a radical act. I would be remiss to discount the impact this current pandemic has had on my personal understanding of community—I was inspired to see how community is composed of the people performing mutual aid and support to offset the most debilitating aspects of this pandemic. Feeding, housing, and providing resources to those who needed it most was a radical act of love, as actively marginalized populations faced the brunt of such inequity. Thus, hope was my flame during this pandemic; needing constant rekindling, this flame was often suffocated by the resounding traumas faced by many. Movements for racial justice and equity catalyzed a deeper look into systemic issues that added further complexity to the already tenuous thread people were walking on amid a mass-trauma event. Yet, when I maintained integral relationships within my community, I realized how relationships we build within our personal communities keep us strong—a testament to our strength and resilience amidst chaos. As prolific author Bell Hooks had reflected: the bonds of *community* are the strongest. I was lucky to see this in action as I engaged within my own personal community at Rutgers.

I turned to my community to make a difference to rekindle those flames. Prior to my transformational reflection upon the strength of community, I thought that simply dipping my toes into the waters of change-making meant that I had to first simply learn of injustice—I stuck to theory. I had taken part in a global human rights organization, Amnesty International, and worked my way up to an executive board position as we researched human rights and brought forth campaigns for refugees on campus; I thought bringing awareness to causes was enough. I also engaged with STEM Ambassadors, where we empowered women and non-binary individuals in STEM through both social and academic support; I didn't think to do much else as we were donating STEM kits to a local elementary school, without personally meeting the children we intended to help, either. I focused on helping in the theoretical, without truly conceptualizing or meeting who I intended to help—yet I realized that meeting people and forming connections was what mattered. It was building community, providing people support, taking a step back, and acknowledging the wisdom and experience in those who need help.

I came to this conclusion across disciplines. As an EMT, I can say the same—it is when I'm meeting patients that I feel the most empowered, with the greatest ability to catalyze change. I once met a patient who had experienced domestic violence; I remember the endlessly flowing "Thank you, thank you, thank you" as I simply showed my patient kindness. I validated his concerns, sat with him, listened, and advocated for him when I alerted the charge nurse; this was how I slowly recognized that I was dealing with problems that were outside the realm of theory. He was tall, trained in judo, and yet felt powerless. He was hurt and in despair—and truly, all I could do at the moment was talk to him. This domestic violence survivor was not a story in my textbook or reading—he was a real person. I realized the necessity of lending kindness and gratitude in such difficult situations. In fact, during this pandemic I saw firsthand how preventable emergencies stemmed from pushed-off medical care because of initial inaccessibility; inequality doles out suffering through institutional barriers, I learned when listening to patients. While I understand my limits as an EMT, I was able to appreciate the beauty of teamwork during divisive times, serving with integrity and compassion to impact my extended community.

I am driven to give others the tools for advocacy, but I acknowledge that I must first be willing to learn from the very people I intend to serve. Interning at a New Brunswick health clinic serving people living with HIV, I interacted with a diverse array of patients who inspired me—some were even activists who fought for their right to access safe, effective, and affordable treatment, some were a part of the LGBTQ+ community, and some had struggled with overcoming a substance use disorder. I saw how social workers, nurses, and physicians worked together to ensure

patients felt comfortable and welcomed, especially given people's diverse array of lived experiences. I loved listening to patients' stories and being able to help teach people about HIV through both informational brochures and outreach opportunities. Further, I was inspired as I was witness to the drive people within the clinic held to truly ensure people would be able to access this necessary treatment. Stigmatization's power to harm well-being is highly underestimated, yet meeting unique people with different life experiences defined outside a one-dimensional label "underserved" informed my ability to interact as an ally. I am happy to also educate others outside the realm of healthcare on HIV, too.

Witnessing the stigmatization of substance abuse and gender identity affect patient quality of life and recovery efficiency, I resolved to investigate addiction humanely. In the Aston-Jones lab, as contributing author on an upcoming publication on mechanisms of biological sex differences in cocaine addiction, I collaborated on a team study of environmental toxicant exposure during development impacting sex differences in adulthood addiction phenotypes—immersing myself in a largely understudied female population and seeking justice for low-income populations. Indeed, low-income areas have greater likelihoods of toxicant exposure, from insecticides on non-organic food to a higher prevalence of low air quality. I realized individualized care's necessity in a difference-centered society where research methods impact the treatment models influencing actions towards unrepresented individuals. I am happy to aid in ensuring more equitable treatment down the line that takes into account such diverse lived experiences and backgrounds.

I believe that I was better equipped with tools of learning to finally organize via my coursework in Women's and Gender Studies; my personal praxis dramatically changed as I came to acknowledge how different lived experiences shape one's perspectives and outcomes. I learned how often, zip codes determine one's health and education status. I am pleased to now reflect on how my work with the Youth Empowerment Services opened my eyes to the greater concerns surrounding my community at Rutgers. Mentoring students and guiding their reading skills was a wonderful opportunity to learn from them as much as they learned from me. They were not defined by the label "underserved"—they were kind, intelligent young children who taught me how caring they were with their classmates by giving them an extra sticker that they won, or how lucky one felt to have their father, a cook at a local restaurant, create the most delicious meals to come back home to. It was through pedagogy I was able to open my eyes to the transformative power of education in truly uplifting lives. Aligning oneself with a community is an honor when you truly learn from your neighbor; it is a service done to genuinely forge connections to improve lives, amplify voices, and recognize an individual by giving them the grace to simply say "I see you" when institutions do not.

With this newfound appreciation for the transformational aspect of education, I soon became a tutor for students living in the Middle East through Paper Airplanes. In theory, I was aware of the impacts of cultural bias on my worldview. Teaching conversational English to refugees of war in the Middle East, I realized I was still affected by implicit biases, and had a lot to learn from my own students. I had been avoiding possible traumas to ensure a safe environment for my Syrian students facing vast disruptions to their education. Yet, I was attempting to speak for my students without consulting their perspectives beforehand. Ill-informed, I sheltered those who relied on me for education by forgoing lesson plans on politics and social justice. Following a trauma-informed approach without strict and overt sheltering—patronizing in assumptions of ignorance and capabilities that I similarly face as an Asian woman—was a challenge.

As I saw my students' eyes dim with another lesson plan focusing on food and dining, I asked for their input. One student advocated for our next lesson to center on stereotypes. I was

shocked. I assumed they wanted to avoid difficult conversations when facing immeasurable loss. With conversations on stereotypes come further difficult conversations I felt comfortable talking about with peers at home. I was not confident bringing up difficult conversations with new cultures, as in my ignorance I may offend. To rectify this, I consulted with their comfort levels while developing a lesson with topics from BLM to imperialism. I became educated as I attempted to educate. Initial discomfort in speaking on personal bias and stereotypes was our conduit to connecting; we explored similar passions for justice despite our differences. Then, I apologized for circumventing hard topics. Taking accountability for actions influenced by implicit bias, I learned to step back and allow others their stage. I practiced humility and embodied learning from mistakes by acknowledging my faulty assumption. Growing and learning to better treat others with respect and dignity, I realized the need for cultural humility in every interaction to ensure people are not just accepted, but actively included. My students who lived vastly different lives than I—some fled Syria, and some sought Master's degrees, while others pursued dreams in the arts—taught me a lot about this clear need to learn from one another.

This further inspired me to one of my proudest achievements at Rutgers. Through True Inclusion, I learned of true collaboration with diverse voices as we sought to change systemic inequities that went acknowledged amongst protests for racial equity. After social surveys were conducted, I soon learned how many underrepresented students within my Honors College community felt their voices went unheard; I also learned more about microaggressions and traumas that other marginalized identities faced. I doubted myself along the path to ending an environment of exclusion as I balanced both idealism and skepticism in my pursuits. Yet every day, I learned from others as I collaborated with a driven group to ensure everyone within the Honors College can benefit from learning to truly love their community to better serve their community. I constantly educated myself on microaggressions while pitching to executive deans every other week about the importance of requiring cultural competency within each school to better promote hundreds of self-aware, culturally competent young professionals. This encourages the recognition of inequities to promote student engagement in overlooked communities and beyond. Unlike my activism and direct aid in underfunded school systems aiding a handful, saying “You matter” when institutions forgo doing so, here I actively changed structures to ensure the institution itself listened to all who needed it. My commitment and passion for bringing change were successful in leading efforts for a required cultural competency course; this is the first of its kind expressly required by the Rutgers Honors College. I aim to keep such momentum going. If even one student feels more included because of how the course is now structured on learning about one's own identity, others' identities, and applying this to the greater Rutgers community, I believe that we as a movement at True Inclusion have succeeded.

Giving a beloved community the ability to constantly improve their lives through compassionate care and persistence, I found gratitude in cultivating reciprocal relationships. Every interaction transformed into a potential to learn. There is a lack of access to healthcare and education from institutional oppressions in the local community, and so I must aid in a position that allows me to serve to my best ability. I have always involved myself with social justice movements, yet being able to study movements through academic coursework and put it to the test by directly involving myself with my community, people become much more than the label “the underserved” in New Brunswick. I am eager to continue my endeavor of reflective compassion, professionalism, and integrity on my journey to help a beloved community—and continue to find the beauty in helping and learning from the people I serve, cultivating relationships that are a two-way street of progress.