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Spring 2020

Social Justice Capstone Paper

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Recommended Citation

Donnell, Margaret Ann, "Social Justice Capstone Paper" (2020). *Social Justice Class Papers*. 25.
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Introduction

As a senior in college, and especially as a senior in college whose final semester at their undergraduate institution was cut short by the coronavirus pandemic, you spend a great deal of your time reflecting. You remember every mountain top moment and every dark valley, but what you really remember are those who were by your side every step of the way. You remember that one class you never thought you would survive, but you look back now and ultimately appreciate the challenge it provided for you and the effort it required of you. You may even think back to your first time on campus, which in my case was during the fall of my senior year of high school, and remember that feeling of “This is the place for me.”

I can vividly recall both the day I made the decision to attend Ouachita and the day I received my acceptance letter. I was over the moon that my dream was becoming a reality: I WAS GOING TO BE A OUACHITA TIGER! I still had over half of my senior year left to complete, but that did not stop me from imagining what was in store for me in the years to come.

In April of that year, I attended Early Registration on campus. I sat there in Dr. Wight’s office, beside myself that I was sitting in a “real college professor’s office.” (I am telling you: I thought I had it made). We were hitting it off as well as any two strangers could; he seemed interested in me and interested in the things that interested me. He asked me if I knew what I wanted to study and what I would potentially want to do with my respective degree(s).

Confidently, believing I had a unique answer he had never heard before, I told him that I intended to study psychology because—and this is a direct quote—“I had always had an interest in people: how they saw the world, why they saw it the way that they did, and

what life experiences did they have that contributed to that view.” I continued by stating that my intention was to go to law school and then work in one of the International Justice Mission’s field offices, advocating on the behalf of individual’s who had been trafficked. He looked at me with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

“Nailed it,” I thought to myself. “I must have really impressed him with that one.” He leaned forward in his chair, a smirk beginning to form.

“Did you know we are in the works of a new program that will launch this upcoming fall?” he asked. I sat there dumbfounded—was I supposed to know there was a new program? I had done all of my research; I had thought long and hard about my decision of what I wanted to study. How could I have missed this?

“No sir,” I replied with a slight quiver. I was convinced I had blown it with this man.

“Well, we have not worked out all of the logistics quite yet. But the idea behind it was to create a versatile major that encompasses classes from many different departments that explores the idea of social justice. With it, you could go into a variety of sectors: nonprofit and governmental work, politics, law, education, ministry—do you think this is something you might be interested in? You seem like you would be a good fit.”

Without hesitation, I responded with an emphatic “Absolutely!” He went right to work in adjusting my schedule so that I would be in the introductory course. It was set: I was going to be a psychology and social justice studies double major. I could not have been more excited. In fact, it was all I could talk about for months, and even more so when those months turned into weeks. I never passed up an opportunity, especially in those last few weeks at home, to tell people that I was attending Ouachita Baptist University in the fall and would be pursuing my

bachelor's of arts in psychology and social justice studies. Though what I did not expect when I told people was: "Well, that sounds really great! Good for you! I am curious though—what is social justice?"

And it was a perfectly reasonable question for them to ask. Indeed, it was probably what I would ask, too, had someone given me that same little spiel. Even more so, it is such an important question that it warranted an entire personal manifesto in our introductory course (but more on that in the following section).

But there was one little problem: I did not know what social justice was. I did not even have the slightest clue as to what it could mean. Which then made me feel really dumb—why would I study something that I had absolutely no knowledge of either what it was or what it entailed? Thus, my typical response in these situations included tensing of my muscles, releasing a nervous laugh and a shaky, "Ask me in four years." (Which, mind you, I thought I was really clever, especially for me). You may then rightfully be asking, "Four years have passed, so what is social justice?"

A Fair Question with a Humble Answer

Having devoted myself to the study of social justice for the past four years, I can now say with confidence what I personally believe it to be. While that is not the focus of this capstone paper, I do believe it is imperative to at least provide a brief description of it, before expanding upon my own pursuit of the study and seeking of social justice throughout my undergraduate career and what it looks like for me moving forward. I do want to be clear and make a note that this description is simply my humble observations that I have made

throughout the years. By no means, is it exhaustive as the concept of social justice is incredibly abstract and complex.

Personally, I believe social justice is best summarized by one of my dear friend's definition of perfection: a worthy yet unattainable goal. But by no means do I take this to mean that we should halt any and all efforts to not only understand social justice in its entirety but to pursue it in our everyday life. This conviction has been the cornerstone for my four years as a social justice studies major, both in the classroom and beyond.

I am a firm believer that the most telling sign of my learning is my ability to apply the information I have received in the classroom to the things I am witnessing and experiencing in the world around me. Doing one without the other—to either learn without acting or to act without learning—is meaningless. As Albert Einstein once put it, “Information is not knowledge. The only source of knowledge is experience. You need experience to gain wisdom.” These things are indispensable.

Thus, it is important that I connect my education to my experiences, both of which I have had the opportunity to gain, both independently and simultaneously, by being a part of the social justice studies program. This is what I hope to accomplish through this capstone paper.

To accomplish this, I will first highlight specific courses that I took throughout my time at Ouachita that I found particularly relevant and beneficial. Then, I will detail two of my three broadening experiences. Following that section, which will understandably be a substantial portion of this paper, I intend to explain how both my education and experiences have shaped my understanding of my purpose here in the world, and how that understanding has

contributed to my current plans. I will then close with a brief word for my fellow justice seekers and why I believe we all have a calling to pursue social justice.

Understanding Social Justice Through Education

Introduction to Social Justice

As previously mentioned, the very first course you take as a social justice studies major is Introduction to Social Justice. The entire semester is devoted to researching, writing, and discussing about the various spheres the notion of social justice permeates and what it encompasses, and of course, what it does not.

It was through these three components that I began to recognize the breadth and depth of this topic. The definition of social justice provided by Dictionary.com is far too simplistic: “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society.” These are certainly touchpoints in any conversation regarding social justice but they are by no means the only ones; they only begin to scratch the surface. Thus began the process of not only taking this definition apart but also piecing it back together in our own terms, culminating in a personal manifesto answering the question “What is social justice?”

If I am being honest, as a timid and uncomfortable freshman, I found this to be incredibly difficult. I would think to myself “Yes, I have spent months at this point studying this topic; I should be able to answer this question. I have all necessary resources” And yet, when it came time to write, I still did not feel confident that I could even scratch the surface of it no matter how hard I tried. I felt, to some degree, that not only had I wasted an entire semester but that I may have chosen the wrong major—because if I could not even grasp the

fundamentals, how did I expect to grasp anything that builds on them? Needless to say, it was a defeating time.

But in actuality, what it really came down to was that I did not appreciate the value in that course. It was my first college course, and those feelings of inadequacy had been felt often throughout the semester. These feelings were not necessarily due to the topic of the course but rather its structure, for even though I had taken advanced courses in high school, I had never experienced a class that was predominantly centered on outside reading followed by in-class discussion. In retrospect, it is clear that this course laid the foundation for the years to come within this program. My classes continued to have heavy-reading loads outside of class with the actual class time being made out to be more like a forum rather than a lecture.

Although I was opposed to this style at first, it quickly became my favorite one, as it revealed to me the importance in discussing topics, particularly sensitive ones, with individuals of varying opinions. In these discussions, you are enabled to ask those particularly difficult questions that are often left unasked and explore them together. In doing so, you obtain a greater perspective both on the topic at hand but also on the individuals involved in the conversation.

And it was through these meaningful and productive conversations that I began to find my own voice in the matter. By my passive nature, I would rather not speak up, especially if I do not believe my voice will be heard or my input will be valued. Often in this course, I felt as though both of these were the case, so I spent many of the class periods sitting, listening, and not contributing to the greater conversation. (In hindsight, that was detrimental to my learning).

However, I was not just sitting and listening; I was thinking through the implications of the things I was hearing. Instead of being quick to speak, I would take the time to formulate thoughtful responses so that the few times I did speak, I knew that I was not doing so just to be heard. To speak not simply to be heard has been crucial to my understanding of social justice.

Apartheid

One of my all-time favorite classes that I took during my undergraduate career was Apartheid; I enjoyed it so much that South Africa is actually at the top of my list of places I would most like to visit. While I enjoyed seeing my professor's pictures of the beautiful landscape and learning about its many peoples' cultures, my greatest enjoyment came from neither of these.

Indeed, my greatest enjoyment came from the enlightenment that the injustices we see in our world today are not simply "low moments" that are perpetrated by a single individual or a single group. Instead, many, if not most, of the injustices we witness and experience today have historical roots and have actually become a part of our very systems. To some degree, this is quite unsettling to know that many injustices are not new conceptions but rather, they are "age-old traditions" that have been allowed to continue to be pervasive in our societies.

Yet it is important to note that the injustices we see today are not necessarily the same as they were when they were first imposed and/or enacted. As one of my colleagues once put it to me, in the wise words of Mark Twain, "History does not repeat itself. But it does rhyme." In light of this, the injustices we see in our societies today are not mere reflections of past injustices but are the result of them, often revealed in similar manners.

With this in mind, it is important that in the pursuit of social justice one does not neglect the historical influence on the current nature. Moreover, I would be inclined to argue that the pursuit of social justice begins at the root of the issue, which is often found decades and even millennia ago. This should not go overemphasized nor understated.

Eugenics

Another one of my favorite classes was one entitled Eugenics. If you are unfamiliar with this term, you are not alone, for I was not familiar with it before enrolling in this course. Eugenics is defined by Dictionary.com as “the study of how to arrange reproduction within a human population to increase the occurrence of heritable characteristics regarded as desirable.” And the Eugenics Movement, like other dark periods in human history, is often left in the shadows. But as similar rhetoric like that utilized during this movement is resurfacing, it is all the more important we turn our attention to it.

When I first enrolled in the course, having only that dictionary definition to build on, I could not help but ask myself why that term seemed to have a negative connotation associated with it every time my professor said it. On the surface, it seemed to be perfectly understandable; I did not could not gauge what could be so terrible in wanting to increase desirable traits, especially if they were just that: desirable. Besides, are those desirable traits not what fuels the thing we love most: progress.

That line of reasoning sounded familiar, so it did not seem out-of-the-ordinary until it hit me: the Nazis. As I had expected, the original intent behind the eugenics movement was not inherently malevolent. Yet very quickly, it became clear that there was a discrepancy in what constituted desirable and undesirable traits. In other words, these two terms were subjective

and what was deemed as desirable and undesirable was often done so by those with an elevated level of status, authority, and control.

Inevitably, those individuals who were already disadvantaged to begin with, often found themselves to be the victims once more. And today, we can see the very same thing happening to our very own vulnerable populations. But instead of working on their behalves' to protect and provide for them, we as a society are far too quick to further marginalize them and see them as undesirable and unfit, just as we did back during the Eugenics Movement.

Technical and Professional Writing

On a much lighter note, there was one course that was not necessarily intellectually stimulating but that I found invaluable as I began to apply for internships for my broadening experiences. That course was entitled Technical and Professional Writing. The focus of it was to develop one's resume, interview skills, concepts of design, and ability to correspond in a more professional manner. (It almost goes without saying that these are valuable skills that I have utilized not just in a professional-setting but in my day-to-day activities and interactions).

Prior to this class, I had never been instructed on the proper way to go about applying and interviewing for positions, and how to work in a professional setting. While I was fortunate to have held a few jobs prior to my broadening experiences, none of them had prepared me, for lack of a better phrase, "for the real world." Undoubtedly, it was because of this course that I was successful in securing my three broadening experiences. Without this class, I most likely would not have secured these opportunities—opportunities which not only molded me, personally and professionally, but also shaped my perspective on social justice as well.

Understanding Social Justice Through Broadening Experiences

The Family Defense Center in Chicago, Illinois

It was fall of 2017 and I was taking one of my college friends home with me for the weekend. We had only just met a few months before but we had become fast friends. As we were driving down the highway, she turned to me and asked if I had ever considered living and working in Chicago for a summer. It was a random question, and truth be told, I had never given it a thought. I did not think that that would ever nor could ever be an option for me. I replied with a shake of my head and just sort of laughed it off; she could not be serious. Minutes later she brought it up again but this time provided the full story: she was interested in applying for the Chicago Semester program but knew her parents would not let her go alone, so she wanted to know if I would apply and go with her to be her roommate.

I sat there in silence, listening to her tell me all of the information she had and thinking about what exactly that would look like. If I am being honest, I was excited about the prospect of obtaining my first “real job.” I was not all too excited about living in Chicago, though; I had only ever been twice, and even then I did not actually visit Chicago. I did competitive dance when I was growing up, and two of our nationals had been “in Chicago,” even though the competition and our lodging were in a western suburb. Thus, I had maybe spent two full days in the city and really did not remember much of it.

I had seen the announcements that the Chicago Semester representative would be on campus next week to answer questions, and I had heard multiple professors of mine mention in class how great of an opportunity it was to participate in this program. I thought that maybe, just maybe, there was something to it, but there was a problem.

I had been gone for the entire previous summer; I had studied in Europe for three weeks, worked as a counselor at an out-of-state summer camp for a month, and visited multiple friends all across the nation. That summer had been tough on my parents, both financially and emotionally, so I was wary that they would agree to let me go off for another one. I did not think it would hurt to at least mention it to my parents.

While we were home that weekend, my friend and I sat my parents down and explained everything we knew. They were reluctant at first but then said they did not see any harm in at least trying. (My parents have always been my biggest supporters, and they were not the ones to hold me back if they and I knew something was a great opportunity). I emailed the representative and scheduled a meeting with her for the following week.

At the meeting, my friend and I enjoyed a wonderful conversation with the Chicago Semester representative who was equal parts informative and personable. She identified with our concerns (well, really our parents' concerns) and was able to diminish any personal fears or anxieties we had about it. After our conversation, there was no doubt in my mind that there was any other way I wanted to spend my summer than living and working in Chicago. I completed my application and was accepted into the program. Then began the waiting game.

Chicago Semester is unique in that you apply for their program and then, upon your acceptance, they work with you to coordinate with internship sites that align with your passions and interests. What is especially unique about them is that Chicago Semester does all of the communication work for you and aids in the process by reviewing your materials and hosting mock interviews. (As someone who had never gone through this process before, it was a tremendous help). Once you interview and are accepted by a site, you then begin preparing for

your move to the Windy City. If you are not offered a position by any internship site then you unfortunately do not move forward in the process. But by the grace of God, they were able to connect me with an internship site and I was ecstatic! I was the new Development and Communications Intern at The Family Defense Center.

The Family Defense Center is a legal nonprofit that was founded in 2005 with the mission of “advocating justice for families in the child welfare system.” Its vision is for the Illinois child welfare system to be one “where families are respected, protected, and supported.” Ultimately, its goal is “for accused parents and caregivers to keep their children, whenever it is safe and possible for them to do so, and to clear their names.” The Family Defense Center strives to accomplish these things through legal assistance, impact litigation, policy advocacy, and collaborative partnerships.

As the Communications and Development Intern, I aided in fundraising functions, including researching and writing grant proposals and event planning, and managed the organization’s website, email marketing, and social media platforms. While my day-to-day tasks were centered around these things, no day ever looked the same unless I was working to complete a major project—which I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to complete multiple major projects throughout the summer.

The one project I am most proud of from my time at The Family Defense Center was planning for their annual benefit that was to be held in the fall. My supervisor had provided me with materials that had been used during the previous year’s planning and encouraged me to make this one all my own. To be sure, I was the only one who was to work on this project while

I was there and then, when I inevitably had to leave to return back for school, she would take over where I had left off.

At first, I was incredibly nervous to do so. This was their annual benefit, and it was up to me to not only submit to her but to have a confirmed theme and design for the event, a list of hosts, our speakers, invitations, programs, and silent auction items—was she sure I was the person for the job? I worked diligently and tirelessly, pouring long hours into this project. When my last day came, I was amazed by the work I had produced; it was really something. Of course, I was back at school by the time the annual benefit rolled around, but my supervisor made it a point to contact me to share what a success it had been and how it was because of me. It was incredibly reassuring, as I had had little to no experience as I was developing all of the materials for it.

My experience at The Family Defense Center will always be one that I cherish. I attribute some of that to it being my first internship experience, but I also attribute it to my experience in Chicago as a whole. Almost all of my friends and family and professors can attest that my time in Chicago was transformative. I wish I could share all that I had learned that summer, but that is beyond both the scope and scale of this capstone paper. But arguably the greatest thing I learned during that time was that child and family advocacy was not a mere interest of mine but actually a deep-seated passion that I wanted to devote my career to. I am not sure I would have come to this realization had it not been for my time in Chicago and at The Family Defense Center.

The Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center in Arkadelphia, Arkansas

It was that realization, compounded with the flexibility of my fall semester senior year, that compelled me to apply for an internship with The Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center (the Center). I had known about our local children's advocacy center since freshman year, but due scheduling conflicts, I had never been able to get involved until my second-to-last semester. But since that day, when the Executive Director of the Center had come to speak to our Introduction to Social Justice class about who they were and what they did, I knew I wanted to be a part of the work they were doing in our community.

The Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center, which first opened its doors in 2015, "exists to share hope and healing with victims of child abuse by offering support and services at no cost to children or their families." They provide a range of services which include conducting forensic interviews, trauma-focused therapy, advocacy, and community education. In doing so, the Center works to prevent the retraumatization that often occurs by the very system meant to protect and care for children following their traumatic experience.

As a Direct Services Intern at The Center, I had a wide range of responsibilities including aiding in prevention and awareness efforts through various community presentations, fostering a welcoming and comforting environment in order for children to find hope and healing during their visit to the Center, and conducting research to create a Community Assessment for their NCA Accreditation Profile. Each of these responsibilities contributed to my appreciation of children's advocacy centers, and the seriousness of them working efficiently and effectively to best serve abused and neglected children.

Working at the Center came at a pivotal point of my senior year when I was questioning if I wanted to go to law school immediately following graduation or if I wanted to take a gap

year and gain experience. In addition to this questioning, I was struggling with self-doubt; I knew I had the passion and work ethic to study and practice law, but did I have the mental capacity and sheer ability to do so? I had thought I did, but it seemed as though the LSAT was telling me otherwise.

The summer before my senior year of college, on top of working full-time, I was attending an in-person LSAT prep-course that met twelve hours a week. That prep-course also required homework after each session that warranted a minimum three hours of work per class period. It was physically, mentally, and emotionally draining, but I felt as though I was prepared to take the test.

The day I took my first LSAT, I felt confident walking out of the testing center. I had utilized the strategies I had been learning and practicing for weeks and thought I had just nailed it. Come to find out, the score that I received for that testing day was not just low, it was lower than the score I had received on my first diagnostic exam having never looked at an LSAT before. I was absolutely devastated. All those hours, all that money, for nothing. Literally. It was not a matter of "Oh, I am not getting into my dream school." Oh no, it was a matter of "I am not getting into any law school."

It was a dark time that took many weeks and even months to recover from. And as I was preparing for my next LSAT test, I fell into a nasty feedback loop: if you are not good enough to get into law school, why bother trying? Do you even have a good reason for wanting to pursue a career in the legal field? Deep down I knew I did; I knew I wanted to be an advocate for children and their families and I knew I was capable of doing so and doing it well, but was I sure that that is what I wanted to do if I could not even get into law school? But the clarity I needed

came from one particular experience during my time at the Center that has never once made me question again.

It was a rainy Thursday morning in November, and I was shadowing the Center's Child Advocate in court. We were sitting together in a waiting room with a sweet seven-year old girl whom I will call Kate. Kate was at the courthouse, prepared to look her offender, accused of sexually abusing her, straight in the eye and not only recount but reenact in open court what he did to her. After about twenty minutes of us just sitting, waiting, her team of attorneys walked in, tears gently gliding down their faces. A woman, who I later found out was her aunt and caregiver at the time, bends down and says: "Sweetie, you did it. Because you were here and ready to speak out against him, he admitted what he did to you, and you no longer have to face him ever again. He will be locked up for a long, long time, and you are free to go." What happened next I will never forget.

Sweet Kate, ever so calm and collected, just smiled and said, "So that means I can go back to school and to recess? We are playing Piggly Wiggly today, and I am really excited." Even if it were for but a few hours, Kate was free to be a carefree seven-year old, something she probably had not had the opportunity to be in a very long time. In that moment I realized what it meant to me to devote my life to being a family lawyer; I realized that, for me, a life well-lived is one in which my labors are directed toward helping every abused and neglected seven-year old simply get back to school in time for recess.

What's Next

There is no denying the profound impact these two experiences had both on me and my understanding of social justice. Who I am today and where I am going tomorrow can be accredited to my time at The Family Defense Center and The Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center. Nonetheless, I cannot forsake my own personal contribution, and that is my own adoption story and the ways it vastly differs from the stories of so many others.

In 1998, my birth mother was at the University of Arkansas on a volleyball scholarship. By a series of events, she found herself in a situation where she quite possibly never could have dreamt or imagined herself: she was pregnant. She had to make a decision, one that would not only alter her life, but the potential life of the baby inside of her. That is, my life.

Whether she realized it or not—I do not know if this was the case—she had options. She could a) terminate me, leaving me to be only a figment of “what once was,” b) carry to term and raise me, ultimately creating a more difficult life for the both of us, or c) place me for adoption, with the hope that the two of us would both be better off without the other. Acting selflessly, with both her and my best interest in mind, she made the decision to willingly relinquish her parental rights and place me up for adoption. Within twenty-four hours, I was adopted into a family that lavished upon me the finest luxuries one could afford their child: a roof over their head, food on the table, clothes on their back, and a community of unwavering support and unconditional love. Throughout her childhood, although knowing I was adopted, I never questioned whether I was wanted, beloved, protected, or cared about.

Because of my birth mother’s decision, I can sit here today and share with you my story. I can tell you that I am one of the lucky ones, one of the few whose story is not written with

pain or suffering or trauma (although that is still not even the case for some adoptees who were placed at birth and still experienced trauma due to their placement).

Unfortunately, though, my story is extraordinary and, by many standards, exceptional. While I can share the label of “adopted” with seven million individuals in the United States, I cannot share the experience of the four hundred and twenty eight thousand children who are waiting in foster care to be adopted. Building on that, I cannot share the experience of the individuals in the child protection system at large, experiences that are often as detrimental if not more detrimental than the original trauma they have experienced.

This past summer, as I was contemplating this, a question arose in my mind that I have continued to wrestle with. It still haunts me and oftentimes keeps me up at night—who am I and on what authority do I, an individual who has not experienced many of the injustices of child protection that I am seeking to understand and combat, have to speak on such matters? I still do not have a great answer for this question, and I acknowledge that this will be a question I constantly find myself coming back to.

The fact-of-the-matter is, though, that I do not have to have had experienced these injustices in order to advocate well for those who have. Ultimately, what it boils down to is that I am considerate of and actively seeking to understand and represent those individuals that have. It is a matter of empowering them to use their voice to speak up for themselves, and I am simply a vessel that amplifies their perspective. That is what I hope to accomplish in the rest of my days.

Tomorrow I will graduate from Ouachita Baptist University summa cum laude and with honors with degrees in psychology and social justice. This summer, I will be interning at the

Washington County Public Defender's Office and working part-time as a Youth Care Specialist at the Northwest Arkansas Children's Shelter. In the fall, I will be attending the University of Arkansas School of Law to pursue my juris doctorate. Upon graduation and passing the bar examination, I intend to work within the field of child and family advocacy, and I will continue to be an advocate on the behalf of children and their families in difficult and often harmful home situations. My ultimate desire is to reconcile, restore, and redeem broken families, communities, and institutions.

A Final Word

My fellow justice seekers, this is what I wish to impart to you before I close. I recognize I noted this statement verbatim near the beginning of this capstone paper, but I am convinced of the truth in it that I believe it is necessary to reiterate it once more.

The most telling sign of your learning is your ability to apply the knowledge you have gained in the classroom to the things you are witnessing and experiencing in the world around you. It would be unethical for you to neglect your duty as a social scientist to warn about the injustices you see. Moreover, it would be disgraceful for you to not only fail to call them out but to fail to take action against them and their perpetrators. And yet, you can never take action if you do not know what is happening in the world. Get out there, my friends, because the world needs more people like you.

I want to end on this note. If you do not take anything else away from this capstone paper, I hope that this last bit is what you do. My final takeaway and really my prayer and greatest desire is this: that you would find joy in the journey. Joy in where you have come from, where you are, and where you are going. Joy in seeing your education and your experiences as

acts of service. Yet we do not do these things to serve man, but rather, we do these things to serve our God. I want to leave you with this call, found in Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Let us go forth, then, in the pursuit of social justice for the sake of the Kingdom.