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## Senior Capstone Paper

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Dr. House

Social Justice Practicum

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### Senior Capstone Paper

#### **Abstract:**

This piece follows the arch of my experience in life as it pertains to Social Justice. It starts with the foundational experiences that built in me a heart for others and helping. Next, the paper examines lessons I learned at Ouachita in my major, Social Justice Studies. Lastly, I tried to find some connections from my knowledge gained at school and my internship experience at Our House in their out of school program called Our Club.

#### **The Foundation:**

My heart for helping others stems from my faith, my parents, and an experience in high school. Learning about a loving God as a child, I could not help but be struck by the idea of being loved even though I was flawed. This was never easy to believe though. The sentiment is inspiring and life altering. But in the daily existence, this salvation is hard to accept and live in. Throughout my whole faith journey this has been a struggle. However, I have found that extending this grace to others makes swallowing the idea of salvation much easier. So, naturally this action of forgiveness and helping those who are struggling is very enjoyable because I find more peace with God.

Along with my faith influencing my desire to help, my parents have lived a life of service that has taught me and inspired me similarly. My father worked tirelessly for his children to have the best possible life and the most opportunity. He often worked eighty hour weeks and hardly ever spent money on himself so that we could be put in the best position possible. Going to public school, I quickly realized that my experience was sometimes very different than some of my classmates. I never worried about food, shelter, or feared my parents unlike some of the students I went to school with. This difference taught me that people's problems are often because of the situation they are in rather than the individual themselves. Thus, people are not always the problem but the world around them which can be fixed. This is where my mother inspired me. Through my whole life, I have only known her as the kind of person to step into bad situations and help out. When Katrina hit, she helped people who came to our community who had escaped the storm. She bought food, water, and helped drive people without cars. Not only that, for years now she has been a Court Appointed Special Advocate for children in the foster system. In this position, she is helping stand up for kids in court to make sure the best possible situation is arranged for these endangered children. Through this service, many people have been uplifted and their lives changed for the better. Watching her over love others, I realized that she was being uplifted just as much as those receiving this help. Through this example, I learned that service is beneficial to all involved. This lesson has had me thirsty for the same blessing.

In high school, I got my first drip from this stream of service. My Senior year, I came across a Youtube video about an orphanage in South Africa. The hope and joy in the children's eyes struck a chord deep within that reverberated as a call from God to help them. I quickly did a lot of research and read up on the organization that helped these children. I learned that they

were called Intsikelelo and that their mission was to “ improve the lives of orphans and vulnerable children in South Africa by developing and supporting community-driven initiatives and connecting them to the world.” I fell in love with this mission and was emboldened to help even more.

I first shared this idea with a beloved teacher about seeing what could be done to help. She quickly came up with the idea of doing a class gift. So, we did just that. In just a week, we raised \$3,100 as a graduating class and donated it to Intsikelelo. We did this giving from within and then a few of us went out into the community and raised the funds from important business and leaders in our small town. I worked a lot of hours that week but the overwhelming feeling of joy for helping someone else was well worth it. Furthermore, the sense of purpose for which I moved that week was unlike anything I had ever felt. I realized that week that I was called to help others and enjoyed doing so.

### **What I Learned at Ouachita:**

So, through my faith, my parents, and this experience in high school, I came to Ouachita looking for a major that would put me in the best position to serve and love others. As either coincidence and or God would have it, such a degree was being built. It became known as the Social Justice Program. My sophomore year, I declared this major and have not looked back since. The major is interdisciplinary with a focus on Social Sciences, English, and Christian Studies each having a frame on justice issues. I got to take classes such as Apartheid, Eugenics, Social Theory, Constitutional Law, Life of Christ, and upper level writing courses. All of which, changed my life and has given me the opportunity to understand justice better through various

eyes and experiences. Through these classes, I have amassed a wide variety of knowledge, but it is a little difficult to connect what I learned because they are all so specific and distinct from each other. What I do know is that justice is not always clear and easy, the capability to commit evil is not that out of the ordinary, and that faith in God is not as crazy as it seems.

Taking Intro to Social Justice, I learned that right and wrong is usually more grey than black and white. This realization came about as we we focused on certain justice issues. We did not focus on this in class but for the sake of comprehension will talk about abortion. Many maintain that this procedure is not murder and is therefore okay. But, many also believe that this act is actually murder and thus should not be legal. Our country has been divided on this issue even before its legalization. The whole crux of this issue is the issue of truth. Is it true that abortion is murder or not? We cannot come to a conclusive agreement. This is why deciding what is justice is so difficult because defining truth is rather difficult. Thus, justice is hard to define and be black and white because it hinges on an accepted truth.

Along with this realization about justice and truth, I also learned that the propensity to commit an atrocity against mankind is not as odd as one would think. Studying Apartheid at Ouachita, I found it rather shocking how the majority of white afrikaners just went along with this movement of mass segregation and taking advantage of the other races in the country. Many of these people never murdered anybody themselves. But, they supported a government that did kill people and rule ruthlessly. Thus, these people played a part in this evil with their complicity. This action of just letting things be despite their wrongness is not specific to white Afrikaners but to all mankind. In America, we have done the same with our treatment of Native Americans,

minority races, and so many more people. Seeing these patterns, I realized that committing evil is not that out of the ordinary because we do it all the time in our complacent living.

Along with noticing the fact that we commit evil through our self satisfied actions, I also learned that God most likely exists. This sounds strange saying because I go to a private christian university. But, having faith in God has always been a tricky thing for me. I have always struggled to find peace with God in my daily life. Often, I experience anxiety and stress. It is sometimes self inflicted and rather unkind. I doubt my worth and God's love. This uneasiness led me to believe that maybe God does not exist after all because He is sure not helping me. This doubting period proved fruitful though because I was able to learn to show more grace to non-believers because I was one of them. Not only that, I was able to find answers that satisfied my intellectual qualms with God as well. It was through a philosophy of science class that I realized that in reality we are placing a lot of faith in our science that we hold to be true today. This helped put God and science on the same level which made placing belief in Him seem not as crazy. It normalized religion for me. Thus, my time at Ouachita taught me that believing in God is not as crazy as it seems.

There is no doubt I learned more than this. But, from the gut, these come to mind first. My time at Ouachita has been very enjoyable and transformative. I enjoyed the small classes and the ability to get to know my instructors well. Some lessons will be forgotten and relearned. However, I hope to never forget that Justice is harder to define than we think because it is built on an accepted truth, that ordinary people can commit evil through their complacent acceptance, and that faith in God is not as crazy as it seems.

## **Learning to Practicing:**

Not only have I had the opportunity to study during my time at college, I have also had the chance to intern with Our House during the summer of 2018. This organization is a non-profit that seeks to help homeless and at risk homeless families and individuals. They do this by focusing on the whole circle of a person. If admitted, a person or family can stay at the shelter for two whole years. They are expected to get a job and live by certain campus rules. Along with lodging, there is a career center where one can find a job, get continuing education, and prepare oneself for the future and putting themselves in the best position to succeed. Not only do they offer a place to stay and career building opportunities, the organization runs an out of school program that services the children staying in the shelter, in surrounding shelters, and children nearby in the community. All of these kids are either homeless or at risk homeless.

This department is known as Our Club, and I worked there this past summer. During the break for school, our students spend Monday through Friday on our campus taking classes and doing experiential learning. My position here was called the Community Safety Vista. It was my job to implement and help run the in school suspension program and ensure the children's safety on campus and on field trips. A typical day started at 8:30 am with meeting with my boss to talk about anything from yesterday that needed to be communicated or cleared up. By about 10 am, our first student would be arriving to in school suspension.

They would be coming because they had done something that granted such a response. It was my job to then calm the child down and do intake. This included filling out documents about the students behavior that landed them in suspension, making sure it was worthy of such a response, and getting adult witnesses to sign off on the document. All the while, this child is still

with me and often made life difficult in accomplishing these tasks. Once a kid was in our care, we had specific programming to try and work through with them to get them to think about their behavior in a healthy manner that brought about changes in the future. We would do worksheets that helped them work through how they ended up where they are and what could be done next time. Furthermore, we would spend time outside doing group activities to build teamwork amongst kids and working with one another. Lastly, we would spend the afternoon doing chores and cleaning up classrooms. If the children were good, we would let them play outside for the last hour.

This schedule was simple in the abstract. But in practice, it was often difficult and could be complex. The difficulty came from the fact that children could come to us at any time and made our programming very wishy washy. We would try and stay on schedule. But when upset crying kids show up, your focus goes elsewhere. Furthermore, we would often get flooded with children at random times. It was not out of the ordinary to have four kids be put into in school suspension at the same time. This made life hectic because you are trying to get the documents in order and also control a multitude of upset boys and girls.

Not only was the mass sending of kids an issue, the children themselves were not easy to deal with. Since these children are homeless or at risk homeless, the likelihood of trauma experiences increases. This made trying to help them calm down a lot more difficult because many of them are not upset with the situation but are experiencing and responding to something from their past. This struggle to help these hurting kids became very tiresome and difficult because there is only so much one can do. I am not a trained child psychologist. I am college

student doing the best with the training I have. We needed yards of behavior change and trauma help, but we could only ever get inches. Thus, this job was rather difficult and a struggle at times.

Despite the trials and pains of this position, it was easy to find connections between what I have learned at Ouachita and my experience at Our House. Having grasped that justice is not always clear and that it hinges on the truth, I was able to walk into tense situations at Our House and do my best to establish facts and provide evidence so that all parties involved had to accept what I was presenting. For instance, many of our children would try and refute the claims of their behavior that landed them in suspension. In response, I would do my best to listen to their points and then go out and check the facts. This allowed me to be as just as I could because sometimes there was a misunderstanding that got a child in trouble and other times it was actually worse than reported. Using this information, I was able to get some kids out of trouble and in turn use the data to share with parents to let them understand the fullness of a situation. This allowed me to build more credibility with the kids, staff, and parents. Thus, learning about the greyness of justice and how it hinges on truth, I was able to walk more justly in my job because I tried to rely on facts solely.

Not only did I apply how to act more justly, I also learned to be more gracious in my job to the kids, staff, and parents. Often times, my job was the epicenter of some really stressful times for people. For example, kids would be upset for getting in trouble and staffers and parents would be angry with the children involved. There were some very difficult days. Thankfully, I knew to be more gracious to all parties because we are all capable of evil. I had this foresight because I studied so many atrocities at Ouachita. I understood Apartheid. I Knew the effects of the Cold War on Germany. I had studied the Ford Pinto case. I had full knowledge that

every day people do bad things and sin against their fellow man. Having this wisdom, I was able to walk into these intense times and dole out grace because I knew I was capable of similar ill responses and actions. This response of love actually helped calm down many situations and prevent further escalation. Thus, it was very helpful that I learned this lesson before working at Our House and will serve me well in the future.

This lesson of grace was important, but the execution of this action was not always great. I am not a perfect person and actually found it rather tiring to keep being so nice to the parties involved in these situations. Many times, I was cut down by parents for contacting them about their child's behavior. There were times I was yelled at and called a liar. These experiences were not pleasant and left me wanting to quit periodically. But, the families that were gracious to me in my interactions were signals of hope and a reminder of God's love. They kept me going and hanging on. The philosophical confusion towards God continued at this time but my feelings toward Him were rejuvenated. Thus, this job helped change my posture towards God because I saw moments of his love and light. As well, seeing such difficult circumstances, left me with only turning to God to find comfort.

I saw a lot of the after affects of domestic abuse, molestation, and food insecurity. I knew the numbers and figures but had never had faces to put to the statistics. Many of these children's innocence were taken away from them, yet they still smiled. This was not easiest thing to swallow. There is and was no compartment to put that information in. I found myself often going home and not knowing what to do with this knowledge. This at first led to some depression. But, I learned to cry out to God about what I had seen and heard. This led to more peace and the ability to move forward. Thus, I found even more utility with God by giving Him my burdens

and in this experience helped led in me getting back to school I found a way to believe in him philosophically.

So, as one can see, my experience at Ouachita has and will continue to heavily relate to my future employment and journey in life. My time in college brought about a love of learning that had not existed before. It created a genuine curiosity that will hopefully never cease. During these four years, I learned a plethora of things. But, the what sticks out the most is that justice is hard to define, all people are capable of evil however small or big, and that God makes more sense to me know both spiritually and philosophically. Not only did I amass this knowledge, I used them in practice at Our House. I applied the greyness of justice by establishing the truth in order to bring about right actions. I practiced giving out grace to others because I understood that we are all capable of evil. Lastly, I found hope in God which later connected to my finding philosophical peace with God.

Going into the future, I hope that these lessons will continue to ring true and be relearned in all aspects of my life. Furthermore, I hope that more will be learned and understood to help me in my journey in unraveling the story that is my life. I cannot see into the future. Even scarier, It is difficult taking the next step in life not really knowing what I exactly I want to do. But, I do hope that loving God, others, and learning will continue to be a theme and play a major role in my story.

## Work Cited

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