

You Hold the Key: How my Internship Opened the Door to Unlock Potential

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Virginia Avenue Park: a well-disguised safe haven for misguided students in the middle of sunny Santa Monica. A place where worlds collide, fears are faced, and selves are revealed. It would seem as though this building, endearingly called the “Teen Center”, is just an ordinary structure, an edifice with windows, doors, and walls. But things are not always what they seem, and of all the lessons that the Teen Center and those who walked within it taught me, this was the most crucial.

When I made the decision to enter the Social Work program at Pepperdine University, I knew that there was a required internship involved. However, I was completely unaware of the structure of this particular internship program. It turns out that I was to be placed into an agency by my advisor. I would have no control over where and with whom I was to spend 160 of my hours in the upcoming semester. As I look back on my experience, I can see how this was a blessing in disguise.

The truth is that I was guilty of making snap judgments, creating expectations, and wondering if my time could have been spent better elsewhere. As I pulled open the door on the first day, I knew only the name of my supervisor and that I would be working with teens. I have to say that I was not particularly thrilled. And then I heard, “Anna! What’s up?! I’ll be right with you.” These were to be the first words spoken to me by my supervisor, Michael. The first of many words that would prove to turn into some of the most influential discussions I have ever had.

As the first week turned into the second, and into the sixth, my vision must have changed because I no longer saw windows, doors, and walls, but potential, relationships, and precious lives. I no longer saw tables and chairs, but structures

used to assist in growth and acquisition of knowledge. The figures filling the rooms now had names and the faces had stories behind them. I began to see teenage students, the ones that are so often pushed aside as annoying, rude, and lazy, as smart and talented individuals searching for purpose within their confusing lives. The problem was that they were blinded to this potential by the piercing unavoidable darkness that comes from living in this broken world.

I found that it is crucial to unlock this potential. But it takes recognizing the potential to obtain the motivation to search for the key. And it takes an investment of time into lives in order to gain the recognition. As soon as I was given the task to sit down with individuals in a one-on-one setting, the walls were torn down and this potential I speak of was before me as clear as day. Then, as if like clockwork, came the motivation. I knew that I needed to find the key, but that this key was not mine to use. Somehow, I needed to encourage each individual to search for, find, and utilize his or her own key.

It was in the midst of these one-on-one meetings and personal reflection that a fire was set in my heart. And a passion was ignited, not slowly, but suddenly with great energy. I knew that this was it for me. I would spend the rest of my life convincing people that there is a key for them. It was within the context of Virginia Avenue Park that I was first given the opportunity to do this, but I am certain that this action can be carried out in most any place. I have witnessed firsthand that many young adults definitely have a difficult time understanding their potential and therefore their worth. It has also come to my attention that many of these same individuals lack encouragement and guidance. Nobody believes in them. If this

phenomenon is so prominent in one Teen Center in one city in America, it only makes sense that there are so many more struggling around the world.

With this passion and realization, I have developed a dedication. I am dedicated to a career in which I can believe in people who have never been believed in. I am committed to pursuing those who are convinced that they are not worth pursuing. I want to motivate the searches for the keys that will undoubtedly change this world in which things are not always what they seem.