Brown Action Plan 2012

By: Jacinta Lomba

Topic: Raising awareness of “the root cause of hunger” in America

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I participated in the Leadership and Global Health course as part of the Brown Leadership Institute during the summer of 2011. So much of what I learned during my time in this course related to public health, international policy, and the systemic nature of inequality relating to health both in America and around the world. During my time in high school, I have developed a passion for activism in the fight against social inequality, especially against issues of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Also, I have had an interest in health and medicine since I was a little girl; so when the end of my course at Brown drew near, and we were asked to develop an action plan to address any issue we were passionate about, it only felt natural to combine my interest in health and my passion for social equality into a project that opened eyes and raised awareness about health inequality in America.

The structure of my project changed quite a bit since I left Brown last summer. Regardless of my original plans which had the same theme of addressing health inequality, discussion with peers and teachers at my school led me to reshape
my project outline and put the focus on *hunger*. What made my project unique was that rather than addressing hunger as an insurmountable issue that plagues only the developing world, I decided to put the focus on hunger as it exists right here in America. During my research for the project, I learned that unintended racist consequences can occur as a result of discussing or working against hunger if the issue is not addressed with a critical mind. To avoid perpetuating the unintended and subconscious racist thinking that often results from projects addressing hunger, I tried to call attention to the stereotypical “image” of hunger, which usually includes a starving black child in some poor and distant land. I contrasted this image with ones of typical “white American” faces to make the point that the faces of hunger come in all shades of color and experience; and that hunger might even exist fifteen minutes away from my school’s community.

Every year, my school’s community hosts an “Empty Bowls” banquet. Students spend the year making handcrafted and glazed ceramic bowls, which are then sold on the night of the Empty Bowls banquet, and the proceeds are donated to a local organization that works against hunger. This year’s proceeds went to the organization FoodShare. Meanwhile, the community gathers to share a simple meal of soup and bread. In the past, the night has not included an educational piece, so I decided to take that on as the platform for my Action Plan.
I ended up spending a lot of time researching and trying to understand the root cause of hunger in America. With the help of Dr. Sheri Schmidt, the director of Equity and Social Justice at my school, I was able to find some great sources of information and statistics that ultimately came together into a Keynote presentation that addressed the “root cause” of hunger.

The “root cause” of hunger was identified by classism, which seems obvious because those who can’t afford to put food on the table are more likely to experience hunger. The issue is more complex than it seems because classism and racism are interconnected; so hunger becomes an issue of racism as well, where people with racial and class privileges are less likely to experience chronic hunger. I learned about this from scholarly documents and dissertations online and by watching documentaries on health inequality suggested by Sheri Schmidt. My Action Plan addressed the complexity of hunger, and although I realize that a forty-five minute event was not long enough to communicate the full reality of the roots of hunger, I thought it was important to at least introduce it.

I wrote a script for the presentation and I asked four of my peers to help with its execution. My presentation was very colorful and dynamic—it included a video clip taken from the organization Share Our Strength and it had many images and illustrations to depict staggering statistics. I even included an online quiz activity from the FoodShare website which I facilitated with the audience during
the dinner. I wanted my peers to come away from the night feelings somewhat enlightened about how complex of an issue hunger is. I also wanted them to feel a sense of gratitude for the privilege we have, in a middle to upper class school community, to take food security for granted.

I am satisfied with the work I put into my Action Plan. I am happy that the event was successful and I am proud to say that I have taken a step with my school community, even if it is a small one, towards understanding the systemic nature of hunger and health inequality in America.

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