

The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change

Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 5

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Recommended Citation

Shakya, Aakrista () "Examining Environmental Injustice in Detroit Over Spring Break," *The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, p. 26-29. Available at: <https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol10/iss1/5>

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Examining Environmental Injustice in Detroit Over Spring Break

Abstract

Detroit is a city with Environmental Injustice, but yet its story is unheard of. In my Journal, investigate the extent of Environmental Injustice in Detroit by sharing my experience of my service-learning trip to Detroit over Spring Break and the story of people in Detroit.

Reflection

As our group of Valparaiso University students toured industrial parks amidst polluted neighborhoods in Southwest Detroit, we listened to our guide, Dr. Delores Leonard, who is a local community advocate. She was telling us about the bad odor the people of Detroit would smell almost every day, the explosions that they would hear, and how the air quality was affecting people's lives. "Why don't people leave Detroit?", we asked Dr. Leonard. She answered that her husband and son's graves lie in Detroit. Her reply made the connection between the people and the city of Detroit clear. While on the Valparaiso University Spring Break Immersion Trip, we explored the stories of people who stayed; people who are fighting for environmental justice, and how they are rebuilding their lives.

On the first day of our trip, we visited the Detroit Historical Museum. The displays showed us how Detroit was named the 'Motor City' during its economic boom and the generation of successful artists with Motown, a record label. In the early 20th century, African-Americans from the south migrated to Detroit as part of what historians call the Great Migration ("The", 2010). After they arrived in the city, they experienced discrimination in housing through the process of Redlining, which is the denial of mortgage loans to people of color. It resulted in the segregation of African-Americans and increased discrimination against them. We later saw the eight miles wall that was made to separate people of color and white people ("Detroit's", 2016).

We also saw visuals that portrayed the 1967 Detroit Riot, which started when the police officers raided a "Blind Pig", an unlicensed drinking bar ("1967", 2017). As the display recounted the riot's military escalation, we also listened to the stories of racially-motivated violence, including the killing of an innocent four-year-old girl ("1967", 2017). The riot gave us a connection to present-day pollution by the industries. My experience at the Detroit Historical Museum made me question how Detroit went from being a 'Motor City' with a strong economy to an impoverished city with abandoned houses and environmental injustices. I would need to listen to more stories if I wanted to find answers.

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On the second day of our trip, we visited the Shrine of the Black Madonna, a congregation of the Pan-African Orthodox Church (“SHRINE”, n.d.). While there, we talked with Mama Hanifa. She expressed her belief in how God is a cosmic energy and we can find god in ourselves through humility within ourselves and self-actualization. Mama Hanifa is a strong believer in youth involvement. She posits that the young energy has to be harnessed which will cause them to grow. She expresses that the Shrine of the Black Madonna is focused on bringing the young people together and getting them involved. She talked about the summer camp they have for youth. The Shrine of Black Madonna is part of a network of churches and a 2600-acre farm (“SHRINE”, n.d.). These institutions bring people together to empower each other. According to her, farms are not mere places to grow food, but also spaces where people can be in nature and understand their relationship with nature outside the struggles of day-to-day city life. Mama Hanifa showed us how strong the people were staying and rebuilding their community. We all felt that even though Detroit has problems, the people have not lost their hope and are rising in the community as one.

Later that day, we went for an Environmental Justice Tour led by the Sierra Club. At the starting point of the tour, we could see the Marathon Oil Refinery and the Mark Twain School very close to one another. The Sierra Club representatives explained to us that Marathon Oil started as a gas station and has grown into an ever-expanding, large scale refinement industry. The nearby Mark Twain School had students with lower IQs who often skipped classes due to respiratory disease, which the Sierra Club posited the oil refinery production caused. They sued Marathon Oil, and won. The Sierra Club then used the funds received from the lawsuit to establish an advisory board that included members of the community and representatives from Marathon Oil. Through the board, the city government of Detroit built two air monitoring stations within one mile of the school. The establishment of the air monitoring station has given people new hope of restoring Detroit, but there is still much more work to be done to save Detroit.

The following day we went to the Boggs Center, which is an institution for community-based projects and social activism, mostly focused on youth empowerment. The center’s namesake, Grace Lee Boggs, was a civil rights and environmental activist as well as a writer who created a strong impact on the community’s economic and racial justice (McFadden, 2015). At the Boggs Center, we learned about how Grace Lee Boggs created a summer program on painting murals and how the mural had led to a conversation between people of different races. We also learned about the green lights flashing across the city that are surveillance cameras equipped with artificial intelligence to detect criminal activity. This system was set up without notifying

Detroiters; when they found out, they wanted it to be removed. The Boggs Center then took us on a tour of the local neighborhood. We went to Elmwood cemetery where we saw a glimpse of how Detroit looked before there were settlements. Long ago, the area used to be a wetland, but now it has changed due to urbanization. We then went to the abandoned Packard Automobile Plant. The builders did not design the building for a future without the Packard company, which left a hard to demolish building that harbors toxic materials. Our tour guide remarked that “This is where capitalism failed.” We all felt the speaker was right because capitalism favored the rich, and the big motor companies were more focused on the money than environmental injustice.

On the fourth day of our trip, we went to the Charles H. Wright Museum of African- American History. The museum tour made us feel like we were experiencing how the African people felt when they were first brought to the new land. The tour started by showing us how Africans were bought for a certain amount of iron. It felt sobering to think how human life was measured in price. In the next scene, we saw how they were chained and treated as animals. The ones who were not strong enough to walk were left out in the woods to die and the ones who survived the long walk were all compressed inside the ship with no hygiene, no food, and no toilet. The next room was designed as a ship. As we went inside it, we could see their struggle to even sleep. About 10 people were sleeping in a bed. Even imagining how they felt made me feel suffocated. The museum made us visualize slavery through different stages. Slavery might be thing of past but are we at a position to say that racial injustice does not exist at present? Was Detroit’s environmental injustice a part of racial injustice?

There were times in the trip we felt hopeless for Detroit and there were times we felt hopeful. After the trip, I still struggle to answer the question ‘How can people get environmental justice in Detroit?’ During the trip, I felt powerless sometimes when the society chose money over people’s health and how industrial companies were going to get away with harming people’s lives. People in Detroit are in a constant fight for environmental justice. We should support their effort by sharing their story with the world and letting them know they are heard. The struggle and hope of the people in Detroit will one day surely serve them the justice they deserve.

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