

2-1-2011

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Amanda Malik

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Recommended Citation

Malik, Amanda (2011) "Coming Home: An Immersion Experience," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 39, Article 7.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol39/iss1/7>

COMING HOME: AN IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

“You say you love the poor...”

By Amanda Malik

The sun glints through the backseat window as I rest my chin in the palm of my hand. The radio is off, and every passenger stares quietly out at this New Jersey city as a volunteer coordinator turned tour guide narrates the urban landscape around us.

Driving down the main street of the waterfront past the aquarium and ballpark, a tall apartment building looms over us. Nobody walks in or out, and all the restaurants and shops on the first floor are deserted. Further along we pass the Tweeter center, where I saw Britney Spears at my first concert and watched my first boyfriend graduate from high school. I am familiar with these revitalized outskirts of Camden, the fresh fringes of a wilted city. But as we drive further down the same road, we cross into the parts I have never seen, the parts I'm not quite sure I'm ready for.

As we approach the other end of the waterfront, a silver pile rises in front of us, reflecting pieces of the sun. We turn down a side street that leads towards the sewage plant at the edge of the water, which is where my own flushes from home are deposited, and the smell becomes almost unbearable. The plant faces the Philadelphia skyline, where perfectly designed architecture pierces the sky, separated from where we are by just a few hundred yards of dark cold water. In front of us on this side is the massive mound of metal, the dirt and grime much more apparent up close. Small scraps have drifted away and now float on the edge of the water and the shoreline is black with pollution. A few fish

can be seen darting about, and we're told they're poisonous from all the toxic debris in the water, though that doesn't stop some residents from eating them anyway. When you're hungry, anything will do.

Next we head down Broadway, a street once famous for its shops and restaurants, where people came to stroll on a Sunday afternoon. Now, most of the buildings are empty, and nobody is outside. We don't pass a single up-and-running business. Instead, the street is dotted with superfund sites, fenced off and littered. Once the places where paint and dye factories stood, the lots have now been designated by the government as too toxic to be occupied for the next hundred years.

We turn left suddenly and enter the heart of South Camden. Every other house is boarded up, and occasionally we pass entire blocks of deserted homes. Thick iron bars guard the doors and windows. None of the yards have grass or trees, and even the best-looking houses are sagging from the weight of poverty.

Noticing a couple of boys kicking a can around





the empty driveway of a deserted house, I can't help thinking of my own childhood, growing up in the lush suburb of Cherry Hill that is just minutes away physically, but light years socioeconomically.

We pass Cathedral Kitchen, a free meal center that I used to send sandwiches to for the poor but never actually visited. I'm surprised by how nice and new it looks, as well as by the long line of diverse people waiting outside its doors.

When we pull into the driveway at the Romero Center, the sun is fading and the air is still. Terrified expressions fill the faces of my friends who can't ignore the siren wailing constantly for the ten minutes we are in the parking lot. The building we are staying in mimics a fortress, with brick walls and barbed-wire fences. The front door boasts a complicated series of locks, and we are told not to open any of the first-floor windows because they are set to an alarm. But the mismatched couches and cheery paint that greet us in the living room provide a kind of worn safety, contrasting fiercely with the stern exterior. Across the back wall is a quote from Archbishop Romero; "You say you love the poor... name them."

A homeless shelter

The first day I am sent to a men's homeless shelter with instructions not to wear anything form fitting so that the residents don't stare. Sporting baggy

jeans and an oversized hoodie, I am prepared for a day in the kitchen and shocked when the program director tells us we'll be working the floor instead. As we enter the room where residents spend their days, very few look up or take notice of us. The palms of my hands are damp as I look around, unsure of where to go or who to talk to. When I finally pick a seat only one guy looks up and I gratefully introduce myself despite the bitter scowl on his face. Forcing him into conversation with me, others slowly join in. Before long, I've incited a debate about where to get the best cheesesteak in nearby Philadelphia. I listen eagerly to the opinions of fifteen different men, one who includes clackety-clack sound effects of knives chopping steak, and all who seem to have difficulty agreeing about anything.

Once the places where paint and dye factories stood, the lots have now been designated by the government as too toxic to be occupied for the next hundred years.



Back at the Romero Center, planned reflection allows me time to think about the quote on the wall. While participating in a similar immersion trip the year before, though I swung hammers and chopped wood with gusto, I had not met any of the people I supposedly served. This time, I am determined to leave Camden with names of the people I have met.

AIDS

At St. Francis AIDS House during lunch, Vince, a resident, talks so much that his plate's still filled with food long after the rest of us have finished. He tells us about his boyfriend who's currently in jail, but then points to a hickey on his neck to show he's not letting that stop him from enjoying himself. "You know, I got boyfriends 365 days a year, 366 during

leap year!" He spends most of his time cracking jokes and laughing at himself, but when it comes to sex he becomes very solemn. "Now, listen here girls. Wear condoms. And if your boyfriend don't wanna go buy 'em, you go buy 'em. 'Cause it ain't fun when you got AIDS. People look at you different', they don't wanna associate themselves with you anymore." When we leave he kisses us each on the cheek.

At New Visions, a homeless day shelter right down the street from Cooper, it is not until the end of the day that I befriend Brian, who has been sitting with his back against the wall for most of the day. I am attempting to survey some uncooperative fellows when he calls me over with a wave of his hand. "You can survey me," he says, but he begins talking immediately so I never get the chance.

"The guys here, they can get a bit out of hand. They get a little bit rowdy e'ery once in a while, angry at the world for what it's done to them. But they all here for a reason – life was going along and then somethin' happened to 'em. Mostly drugs, but that can happen to anyone. Look here, take Bruce." He points to the man sitting mutely beside him. "He used to be a schoolteacher, even won an award for teachin', and now he's here. No one's safe from drugs, it's so easy just to fall into the trap. And here it's so easy to get 'em. Truth is though, it's not mostly Camden folks who are buyin' and usin'. It's the outsiders, from all these nice towns nearby, that come in for their fix when somethin' goes bad at home. And then what do ya know, soon enough they end up here."

I nod sympathetically. I find myself opening up to Brian, telling him about a former classmate who died of a heroin overdose after buying the drug in Camden.

As he listens to my story, fear grows in his eyes. "Too many people dyin', out on the streets, all because of drugs. I know it's gonna kill me, never know when, but I just can't stop." With that, he goes on to tell me about his family, his 6'3" daughter who plays basketball at Tennessee, his estranged wife who divorced him because of his cocaine habit, and his subsequent spiral into addiction. He beams with pride when he talks about his daughter, tells me to look her up, but is crushed when he mentions how long it's been since he's seen her. He admits he's been doing cocaine for fifteen years now, continually pushing his family away from him and leaving him with nothing but the desire to get high. Putting Brian's face to the problem makes

drug addiction seem less crazy than I previously thought it was.

Tent City

Jamaica, as we are introduced to him, is the fearless leader of Tent City, a triangle-shaped lot dotted with blue and gray tarps just next to a highway ramp. As he shows us around, pointing out the donated water reservoir, the central fire where most of the cooking is done, and the various damage to tents by the recent snow-falls, his chest swells with pride. He leads us through the camp to the community tent near the back, where weekly meetings are held and the written rules are nailed to a tree. He reads them aloud, explaining the importance of each one. "No lyin', cause then there ain't no trust. And no bringin' your tricks around here, cause this is our home, and we ain't gonna stand for that."

We have our pride.

He tells us how important rules are in a community, how everything is bound to fall apart without them. Jamaica is a stern leader, checking tents weekly and prioritizing cleanliness. "We got intelligent people here, skilled people here, we're just down on our luck. The only thing we have now, we have our pride. And we stick with our pride. Our pride keeps us going."

As we head out of Camden, driving towards the freeway and Baltimore, we pass all the sites from our tour earlier in the week. I wonder why it took me until college, until I went away from home, to be able to take a closer look at the place where I grew up. I always knew Cherry Hill was full of wonderful people, but I was a bit more skeptical about the reportedly drug-addicted residents of Camden. Yet now I knew the names, faces, and stories of my hurting neighbors. I knew about Vince's worsening AIDS, Bryan's downhill struggle with cocaine, and Jamaica's desperate attempt to build a community in a place where so many had lost hope. More than anything, I felt their plea for presence, their need for engaging in conversation and sharing their stories with someone who would listen and remember their names. Sending sandwiches along with our sewage to ease my conscience was not what they had required all those years; it was a friend. ■

Amanda Malik is a sophomore at Loyola University Maryland.