Blog
Social Justice



This poster outside the Barbara Blum Residence, the Good Shepherd Services' home for boys, was a project of a group at the house and a reminder that they are all in this together. (Caileigh Pattisall)



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I was under the impression growing up that women made the money in the house and dads stayed at home. My mom worked a 9-5 job doing graphic design in D.C. while my dad made lunches for my brother and me and walked us to the bus. He also had a job, but it was flexible enough for him to assume that role. I was confused when I started to become socialized to think differently about the gender roles in our society.

Feminism has always been a social justice movement I've held a passion for. Maybe this was because I grew up seeing my mom in a strong, career-driven role. Or maybe it's because my generation calls into question the inconsistency of dress codes between genders, protests for equal pay, and supports and inspires other women to come out with their stories of abuse. I loved studying sociological theories behind why society runs in a way that is far more suited to benefit men. I've also come to know that the intersectionality of this issue is critical, and that I am a white woman in this space where it's important to acknowledge my own privilege.



Barbara Blum and Aftercare staff worked together over the quarantine to create an in-house recording studio so he boys at the home can express themselves creatively in the Close to Home program. (Caileigh Pattisall)

I've also always known I wanted to work with children. Most of my experience before this year was working with kids, mostly elementary and middle school girls, in a camp setting: I have been a day camp counselor since I was 14, and I was an overnight counselor in the summers throughout college. My sorority philanthropy in college was Building Strong Girls, a nonprofit that focuses on strengthening girls' confidence in their formative years.

I absolutely loved having conversations about confidence with the young women and serving as a role model, using my own experiences to give advice and help them develop self-love.

As I was going through the interview process with Good Shepherd Volunteers for this service year, I expected to spend the majority of my year at Rose House, the Good Shepherd residence for girls in the criminal justice system, and maybe the Barbara Blum Residence, the boys' house, down the line. I was excited to blend my passion for social justice and building teen girls' confidence.

But to my surprise, I was told upon arriving that Rose House didn't have any girls at the time, perhaps because of the New York City court system and the fact that girls are arrested at lower rates than boys. Barbara Blum, on the other hand, had five boys, so I was to begin there.

The first few days there, I felt like an outsider. I did not know their world or their lives. They did not know me and did not know what my intentions were. On my first day, the staff had to explain to the boys that I was going to be staff, too, and I wasn't a spy for social services.

Establishing trust is difficult, especially with young people you don't have much in common with. I'm white, I'm a girl, and I'm from Virginia, so the initial connection was difficult to find with these boys from Brooklyn, most of whom are Black.

What I found I could connect on was their music. I like rap music, and pre-pandemic, I was able to see a few of my favorite artists at concerts, including Burna Boy, a popular Nigerian rapper. These prior experiences gave me a bit of common ground to stand on, but I still had a lot of learning to do. In Brooklyn, there are a lot of local rappers to know if you want to be a part of the conversation. There are also a lot of gang-affiliated artists and groups, and the context of a song changes once you understand who and what the artists are talking about.

I recently learned about drill music, a genre within hip-hop and trap music that originated in Chicago. The majority of this style of music is dark, and the lyrics can be violent. Certain songs are cryptic, bashing one neighborhood where a rival gang resides. Other songs are literal, and the rappers have no problem name-dropping and even going as far as describing a crime their rival has carried out, essentially "ratting" on them so they will get indicted. In a Feb. 11 *Rolling Stone* article, Eric Adams, the mayor of New York City, outright blames this style of music for initiating

gang conflict and for recent shootouts in Brooklyn. He says that social media and music companies have a "civic and corporate responsibility" to ban this style of music as well as the gun and violent imagery that it includes.



A New York City sunset is a reminder of the beauty of the city and the gift of serving an organization with a mission to make New York a safer place for women, adolescents and children. (Caileigh Pattisall)

At the Barbara Blum, we've had several group discussions with the boys discussing how drill music affects how they feel, their community, and their view of women. Those can be challenging conversations because music is one of the only "acceptable" ways for these young men to express themselves emotionally. Many of our boys want to explore a career in the music industry, and they've seen firsthand that drill music is an increasingly popular way to get to the top. On the flip side, it

can also get them into trouble in their communities, rearrested, or even killed.

Even though I am not currently working with young women, gender equality is still an issue very much at play for me this year. I've realized that a large problem is that these young men aren't given the space to express and name what they're feeling. When they don't, their anger, their pain can manifest in different and sometimes violent behavior.

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My placement site understands the importance of investing time and money into the boys' creativity. During the initial COVID-19 quarantine in 2020, Barbara Blum staff and the team that supervises our youth when they are released back into the community coordinated to make an in-house studio so the boys could explore a creative outlet in a safe environment. We also partner with programs like True 2 Life that provide community-based emotional and financial support. One True 2 Life initiative in particular is providing their participants with alternatives to hanging out on the streets, like spending time in their mobile studio, a converted RV that will pick them up from wherever they are and let them record music.

Life (and jobs) don't always go as expected. I began my year fully anticipating to spend the majority of my time at Rose House with the girls, but if I had, I would never have gained insight on so many issues I was completely unaware of. I appreciate everything I have learned so far. These issues are complex and personal to the boys I work with, but hopefully, by unpacking them together, the boys will have a higher understanding on how to move through the world.

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.