Kenneth Cole Community Action – Reflection Essay

Throughout my internship experience at the Interfaith Center of New York, I worked on a variety of tasks and projects and was able to learn a great deal about the Harlem community.

Though I was officially an outreach intern at the Interfaith Center of New York, my primary responsibilities included expanding the “Reentry Family and Faith Circles of Support” Program, hosted by the Interfaith Center of New York and the Harlem Community Justice Center, among other organizations. Therefore, as part of my internship, I had to learn how to work on different tasks for various organizations with diverse groups of staff members. While this was a difficult transition at first, it proved to be a learning experience for which I was able to do work without constant supervision and guidance.

The Reentry Family and Faith Circles of Support Program is a reentry partnership that seeks to assist formerly incarcerated parolees transition back into their lives in the Harlem area, as well as cultivate leadership among clients, their families, and faith leaders. More specifically, the Reentry Family and Faith Circles of Support Program provides resources for employment,
drug treatment, and housing options, in addition to welcoming parolees to the Harlem Reentry Court with refreshments, toiletries, and friendship.

The role that the Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY) plays in this shared program has been both financial support and recruitment of volunteers from faith communities to support the program – though the reentry program is primarily run by the Harlem Community Justice Center.

As an outreach intern, I recruited volunteers to help with the Thursday Hospitality program at the Harlem Community Justice Center, where volunteers would come and provide conversation, support, and refreshments and toiletries for clients at the courthouse for their parole appointments. I would also recruit volunteers to assist clients with job-readiness by facilitating mock interviews, leading resume workshops, and providing networking skills. By involving parole clients’ family members and faith-based volunteers in the reentry process, we foster informal social networks to support successful reintegration.

My responsibilities also included helping plan and facilitate the Family Orientation event, the Mock Interview event, and the *Raising My Voice* Speakers Bureau. At quarterly family orientations, family members of parolees learn how to support and welcome home their loved ones returning from incarceration by meeting their family’s case managers. At the Mock Interview event, clients are trained for job interview readiness and specifically learn how to address the issue of their past incarceration in a job interview. Lastly, the *Raising My Voice*
Speakers Bureau, which only began in 2015, offers formerly incarcerated individuals the opportunity to inspire communities with their personal narrative and build leadership skills. For Raising My Voice, clients participate in an intensive public speaking training, and present their narratives to faith groups, community organizations, students, employers, prosecutors, and law enforcement.

Aside from learning more about the prison system and become awakened to the many harsh challenges that formerly incarcerated people face when coming home, I have learned first and foremost that one of the most valuable things that anyone can provide these clients with is support and trust. While the tangible employment, mental health, rehabilitation, and housing resources are invaluable and have significantly helped clients in the program and ultimately reduce rates of recidivism, it has become painfully clear that much of the difficulties parolees often face coming home is feeling unsupported and unable to regain the trust of their loved ones or of anyone they hope to connect with in society. Before I entered the position, all of the staff members who worked in my role as the outreach staff member for the Circles of Support program were themselves formerly incarcerated, so as to be able to offer advice from experience and inspirational guidance to the clients with whom they were working. As a student who has not only not been incarcerated or experienced many of the difficulties these clients have faced, I was also working in an environment that was relatively foreign to me and in which I was an outsider:
East Harlem. However, what I have found I can provide is a listening ear, support, and trust to help give faith to the clients who are seeking to restart their lives in an environment where it is challenging to start anew without the support of their communities and loved ones.