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Trust, Health Care, and Homelessness: Reflections on an Opus Prize Visit to Roots Community Health Network

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“Nothing matters more than trust,” said Dr. Jason Reinking, one of this year’s Opus Prize finalists, as he described the importance of establishing a reliable and non-judgmental presence in the lives of the people experiencing homelessness whom he serves in Oakland, California. Dr. J, as Dr. Reinking is called familiarly, spoke these words near the beginning of our site visit this past May to Roots Community Health Center, a community-based organization “dedicated to improving the health status of East Bay residents.” Our team was composed of two students from Regis University, Amy Kennedy, a graduate student in Regis’s Masters in Nonprofit Management Program, and David Mooney, an undergraduate majoring in Economics and Philosophy; the Director of the Opus Prize Foundation and one of the Foundation’s board members; and me, an associate professor of Peace and Justice Studies in Regis College. Together, we spent three-and-a-half days with Dr. Reinking, the directing physician for the Street Team Outreach Medical Program (STOMP); Dr. Noha Aboelata, the Chief Executive Office for Roots Community Health Network; and a number of other key staff members who work tirelessly to promote the mission and work of this organization and the community it serves.

Dr. J’s emphasis on trust set a powerful tone for our visit, and highlighted profound insights about this organization’s focus on health disparities. In serving people living on the streets, under highways, or in encampments tucked away from most people’s view, there is nothing more vital to

improving their health—and literally saving and extending their lives—than the building of trust. For people who have been not only overlooked but often disposed of by our society, their capacity to believe in themselves has been severely damaged by our larger community’s inability to believe in them and provide dignified pathways to access health care and other networks of support. That morning at Dr. J’s initial presentation, we began to see the powerful ways in which he lived out the values of the Opus Prize: For him, building trust with the people he served was essential to the care he provided and to the larger project of re-integrating them into the presently inaccessible social fabric of the larger community. Building trust was and is essential for his and Dr. Noha’s transformative vision: address the root cause of injustices that have led to health disparities within their own community in the first place, and then foster greater social justice within that community.

The possibility of witnessing such dedication to social justice is what drew me to apply as an Opus Prize faculty delegate in the first place. As a professor who teaches peace and justice studies, I remember feeling a profound sense of calling when the initial announcement went out. After reviewing the Opus Foundation’s core mission and values, I felt even more drawn to participate, for I knew that I would encounter people whose work would inspire and teach me. I am constantly seeking answers to the question of how best to support the work of innovative, sustainable, faith-based, social transformation. The opportunity to

connect with community leaders and members who are actually succeeding in transforming lives and building a better future for people experiencing marginalization resonated powerfully with my own values and dreams. I also hoped that I would be able to bring my own experience and expertise to the prize's discernment process. But most importantly, I myself hungered to be challenged and transformed. I wanted to be pushed beyond my comfort zone and learn from—and with—extraordinary people who are doing the kind of work I discuss with my students every day. I wanted to witness firsthand how this kind of sustainable, justice-oriented change works in a new context.

Dr. J, Dr. Noha, STOMP, and the larger Roots Community Health Network did not disappoint. Over the course of our visit, we witnessed countless examples of social justice being embodied and enacted. One moment in particular stands out in my memory: on our second day, we joined Dr. J on one of his outreach visits to an encampment along an industrial street in a warehouse district. Dozens of tents, make-shift shelters, and some trailers lined the street where dozens of people lived. As we split up into groups to pass out water, snacks, and information about the mobile health clinic, we spoke with many individuals who were familiar with both the services and the program, and eager to talk more with Dr. J and his staff.



Opus Prize finalists Sr. Stan Therese Mumuni, Dr. Jason Reinking, and Sr. Marilyn Lacey

As we walked along, we met a young woman in her late teens; when Dr. J caught up with her, he asked about her grandmother who hadn't been doing well. The young woman's concern prompted us to stop by her grandmother's tent. Lying on her pallet in her sleeping bag, the grandmother spoke softly to Dr. J. Sensing her distress, we gave them privacy and turned to help a few other members of the camp. As I turned back, I glimpsed him helping her stand up. With the help of some of his staff, he washed her and helped her into clean clothing. The moment was striking for it illustrated her extreme

vulnerability—and burgeoning trust. It also gave us insight into how Dr. J worked: As he helped her, he kept speaking softly to her, providing what comfort he could, creating a space in which her vulnerability was both nothing remarkable and yet absolutely worthy of his attention. His treatment was careful, patient, quick, efficient, loving, and respectful. It was in a sense automatic and natural—compassionate in a matter-of-fact kind of way. They clearly trusted each other, and this moment in their relationship preserved a sense of human dignity although in a situation that was very much undignified.

This moment illustrates powerfully what Dr. J described as the core values and practices of what he calls “backpack medicine.” A physician like himself must be prepared to go out to these patients because most of them cannot or will not venture into traditional medical clinics. The consequences for these folks of not accessing care are drastic. He informed us that the people he serves on the streets die fifteen to twenty years sooner than people who are not homeless. These folks are sick people and suffer disproportionately; he emphasized that “they deserve the same care as my father at Kaiser.” During our visit, this woman clearly received quality care. What we saw that day, however, was even more important. Given this woman’s need, she received perhaps better, more individualized and appropriate care in her situation than she might have received in a more traditional medical setting. Dr. J, Dr. Noha, and the rest of their organization’s staff embrace individuals with care and understanding like this on a daily basis.

As I hope this reflection suggests, this experience moved me profoundly and has taught and reinforced many things I hold dear. But as I conclude, there’s one last point I wish to make about my experience. As the faculty delegate, I also took seriously my role in helping to frame this experience for our student delegates. When I applied I felt called to be present for our students and to help guide them through an interaction that could potentially transform their lives as well. Professionally, I mentor numerous students every year and find great value and meaning in this work, and the Opus Prize’s intentional commitment to engaging students in the evaluation process struck me as a unique opportunity. As a teacher, I wanted to participate in and contribute to our students’ learning process: to support them as they encountered this kind of work firsthand and to use the knowledge gained here at Regis to engage the finalists and evaluate their capacity to win the Opus Prize. I also knew and trusted that, as much as they would learn and gain new insights about these issues, they would offer up their own perspectives to the process and give as much as they might receive. It meant so much to me that Amy and David did just that. The self-possession, humility, grace, tough questions, and critical insights that they contributed during our process provided yet

another set of lessons and insights that I took away from this trip. As is often the case with students, they teach us as much as we teach them. And their contributions to our visit will stay with me for many years. 