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## Opus Reflection: Roots Community Health Center and Oakland STOMP

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Blue tarps and cardboard walls lined the streets of Oakland as we walked in the midday heat. To any passerby, this scene would be overlooked as an all too common and normal reality of this part of the city. As we walked with Dr. Jason Reinking and the Street Team Outreach Medical Program (STOMP) team into the heart of this community, we began to see the real people who called these encampments their home. It did not take long to be struck with the profound reality that deep beauty existed in this place where so many people simply passed by. It is this setting where Roots Community Health Center operates, and where we as Opus Prize representatives found ourselves inspired.

When I was first nominated to apply as an Opus Student Scholar, I must admit that I knew very little about the foundation or what I was getting myself into. However, as I drove towards Regis University to interview, my mind raced with excitement at the opportunity ahead. I vividly remember feeling an overwhelming sense of joy, even then, at the realization that this great work would happen regardless of whether I were one of the student scholars to be selected. I was just beginning to learn of the magnitude of the Opus Prize and was humbled by my chance to apply to be a part of it. Needless to say, you can imagine my surprise and delight when I was offered one of the six student positions.

As February rolled around, we began to learn about the organizations and locations we would have the opportunity to visit, and I learned I would be joining the due diligence trip heading to Oakland, California to meet Dr. Jason Reinking and see his work with the STOMP Outreach of Roots Community Health Center.

From the moment our group met Jason, or “Dr. J” as he is commonly called, I could tell there was something truly unique about him. It is rare to meet someone with the drive, intelligence, compassion, humility, and genuine care towards the work that they do and that Dr. J had; it was obvious that he saw this as his life’s calling more than his career. Dr. J joined Roots Community Health Center in 2015 to spearhead their newest outreach initiative called Oakland STOMP.

One of Roots’ guiding beliefs is that real and genuine care for an individual must be focused around the whole health of the person and that caring for just one aspect of their health is not enough. The organization seeks to care for people where they are at, help them navigate through the system as they are ready to move forward, empower them towards sustainable and long-term solutions, and ultimately help them back into whole health. The organization’s goal is to expand access to care “that brings the highest level of whole health for all people, especially those facing the greatest barriers because of systems of oppression.” It is with this intention that STOMP was born. It provides an entryway for quality care that meets people where they are at by physically going to where they are located, and providing access to quality healthcare. Dr. J and his team begin their work from the ground up, developing new approaches to get to the root of old problems, and building trust with those who have been “chronically disempowered.”

Homelessness is a commonly misunderstood challenge in our society. While some believe that the cause of homelessness stems from poor work ethic or drug and alcohol addictions, the reality is that there are many paths that lead to life on the streets. As we drove with Dr. J into the city, we

learned of Oakland's lack of affordable housing and rising cost of living. Even just one barrier, such as the loss of a job or injury, can be the difference between affording rent and being displaced. As barriers continue to present themselves, it becomes even more challenging month to month, and defeat can begin to set in. When the system fails people in these situations, and they are disempowered in their ability to thrive, it can be difficult to seek out help, or trust that people genuinely care. This is why the unique mission of Roots and Oakland STOMP is key, as it focuses on restoring trust and walking alongside people as they journey out of poverty.

While moving through the homeless encampments and seeing the way in which Dr. J and his team interacted with those experiencing homelessness, I was moved to tears more than

once. Not only did Dr. J step in and care for the physical needs of the people he came into contact with, but he cared for their emotional well-being as well. He looked every person in the eyes, showed dignity through his interactions, and stepped into moments that most would deem uncomfortable. Dr. J and his team were strategic about community partnerships, forward thinking in their vision, and bold in how they jumped head first into challenges and complicated situations. Most importantly, Dr. J and his team recognized the importance of meeting people where they were at, and joining alongside them as they were ready. Interactions such as these can help restore hope and a belief in oneself to take the long strides towards self-empowerment and whole health.



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

It is impossible to consider Oakland STOMP as a standalone solution, as it fits deeper into Roots Community Health Center's overarching mission "to eliminate Oakland's health disparities by providing culturally competent, comprehensive healthcare, mental health, and wraparound services, and by emphasizing self-sufficiency and community empowerment." One of the best surprises of the site visit was the incredible leadership of Dr. Noha Aboelata, and being able

to nominate her alongside Dr. J for the Opus Prize.

After co-founding Roots Community Health Center in 2008, Dr. Noha has been committed to finding long-term and sustainable solutions to eliminate health disparities in the Oakland community. Through our time together, we learned of the intentionality behind every decision that is made within the organization, and were

inspired by their desire to ask hard questions, prioritize the most vulnerable, and innovate as needed. As new programs develop, they work to ensure the program fits into their integrated approach towards whole health, or they will not implement the program. Dr. Noha described whole health as something that is not solely physical, but must also extend to mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being so that no one suffers disproportionately. In further conversation, she stated that “if you are sick, you cannot earn a living, and if you cannot earn a living, then you’re sick,” and described how everything has to work together or it simply will not work. By caring for the whole health of each person, Roots is working to address the challenges that exist on every level.

Rather than being satisfied with the work being done at this present moment, Roots is continually looking towards the future, as the people they are serving and the community they are a part of is too important for status quo. Within five years, the organization hopes to become a major employer of local residents through their soap making social enterprise and within their own organization. Additionally, Roots is making strides towards purchasing property where they will be able to operate some of their services and programs. As they continue to grow, they are working to strengthen and support their infrastructure to ensure they are building their programs in a sustainable way. Lastly, Roots is planning to assess the short and long term impact of services, document findings, and refine, replicate, and scale their model into other communities that might be able to benefit. With strong leadership, a captivating mission and vision, and community support of the value of the work being done, Roots is on an inspiring and exciting trajectory.

The few days with these incredible individuals and organization passed quickly, and I found myself wishing I didn’t ever have to leave; it is safe to say this experience has influenced the way in which I see homelessness, but also the way in which I see the potential of organizations that run relentlessly after their missions. I leave my time inspired and ready to engage the world in a bigger way, and appreciate the honor of spending a few days with this great group of people. HJE