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Theory of Social Change

My instinctive response when confronted with unmet community needs has always been to build. When a series of hate crimes struck in my town, I facilitated a series of community conversations about racism. When the health teachers at my high school were fumbling their attempt at queer sex ed, I built them a new curriculum. When my university was negligent in the face of rampant, systemic, food insecurity, I organized a food pantry. All my life, I have been confronted by large institutions failing to meet the needs of myself and my peers. This pattern has heavily influenced my own approach to organizing in academia, as I've learned to rely on myself and my peers alone to be cared for - constantly positioning myself against large systems of power.

It wasn't until I learned about the history of harm reduction that I realized this approach to problem solving is a part of a larger legacy and survival strategy practiced by the most stigmatized and oppressed people of our society. When institutions like the state have failed to take action in the face of plagues, hunger, homelessness, and violence, groups of people have come together to meet each other's needs in incredible ways. Providing each other education, sharing the little resources they had, forming groups to protect one another, and seizing control of what they needed to keep each other alive. After working in the harm reduction industry for several years, I see these practices all around me now. From the unhoused encampments in my neighborhood, to the

community fridges, to the overdose hotline flyers on the telephone polls. People who use drugs have been at the forefront of this movement, building collective knowledge about using in safer ways and creating the first models for outreach that are now being used by the modern public health industry. Even after the adoption of harm reduction practices by the state and non-profit industrial complex, the systems of care built by the people, for the people still hold the most power and autonomy. Services designed by those in power are often paternalistic and stigmatizing, relying on systems of documentation and mandated reporting that turn support into a new means of surveillance. I should know, I have been a worker and a client of these systems.

My commitment within the Praxis Thesis process is to remember and honor those who came before me in the legacy of harm reduction. It is a practice of defiance towards systems of power, of love for one another, and of respect towards the risks of life. As I study the institution of Clark University, I will closely focus on the needs of the most vulnerable and most capable group of real change: the students.

Critical Theory of Social Inequity

Growing up in the City of Boston, I was taught to look down upon unhoused people and people who used drugs. My parents would instruct me not to make eye contact and quickly walk around the people asking me for change or talking to themselves on the sidewalk. I can't recall the reasons they gave for this now, but it cemented my view of these neighbors as "others." As I got older this view became complicated as I began to view myself as one of these "others." My parents have always

openly discussed how our multiracial family was different from those living around us in our white suburban neighborhood. And as I came into my queerness, my community organizing, my racial identity, and my interest in subculture, I began to understand what living with stigma felt like.

Strangers on the street began to stare at me in disgust or call me slurs. I would be ignored when trying to seek help and shamed for appearing the way that I did. I started to feel unsafe accessing public restrooms and gendered spaces. Some adults would even pull their children closer to them while in my presence. My sense of justice changed with these experiences and I began to understand stigma as a social force intertwined with systems of oppression like racism, classism, and transphobia. I realized how devastating and isolating stigma can be, and my own complicity in violence against unhoused people and people who use drugs. I committed to unlearning the ways stigma had been taught to me, and began to interact with people I met on the street.

In defiance of what I had been told, I gave them money, asked them about their stories and offered the assistance I could. I learned that stigmatized people are people, and that my privilege granted me power that I have to be responsible with. Years later, I began to work in the field of public health with unhoused people and people who used drugs, but the stigma my family held towards the people I worked with remained. So I pushed back. And after years of conversations and arguments - my relatives no longer refer to high people as "zombies." Instead of driving past someone panhandling, they will now give a few dollars and their sincere well wishes. I have experienced and witnessed how stigma can be dismantled within personal relationships. Now, I am committed to

dismantling the systemic forms of violence that allow the status of "other" to deprive people of the human rights of housing, healthcare, and autonomy.

Positionality and Identity in the World

From a very young age I developed an understanding that being different was dangerous. My father, a Black Puerto Rican man, and my mother, a white American woman, moved out into the suburbs of Massachusetts to seek a better education for myself and my sibling. They succeeded in getting us a well-funded education but there were trade-offs. My parents spent a lot of time explaining to us why we were treated so differently, so poorly by our white suburban community. Our personal identities and understanding of local and national politics were developed around the dinner table every night, as we explained what happened to us that day. As we grew older, and began to express our racial identities and queerness, the violence got worse. Escalating from teasing to threats of violence to physical assault.

These experiences grew my sense of justice. By high school, I joined the Inter-Feminism club, became President of the Gender and Sexuality Alliance, and worked on local racial justice initiatives. This put a massive target on my back. I still felt so unprotected and exploited by my school and my town. I used these feelings to continue organizing. My parents became heavily involved in the school system and in communication with town leadership to try to make change. Unfortunately even their best advocacy could not compensate for the culture of whiteness that continues to permeate

the town to this day. My privileges of a supportive family, lightskin, and middle-class status, only protected me so much.

I refused to conform and so, I learned to navigate the world while feeling unsafe all the time. Unsafe in all white spaces, unsafe in gendered restrooms, unsafe in the classes teaching my ancestral language. I learned how to carry myself so that people would fuck with me less. I learned to stop reporting the violence that happened to me. I learned to disregard the judgement of others. I learned to identify the adults and institutions perpetrating systems of oppression and threw myself into social change work. This effort of working towards liberation for all has become the motivation of my life. I still hold the anger and despair that I did when I was twelve, but now I'm an adult, and I've found the people I'm in this fight with. I've studied the movements and legacies of the past and I bring them with me. I built these skills through survival and I intend to use them until the world feels like a safe place to exist in. Until we are all free.