

San Francisco, California

AIDS and Art

Over spring break 11 St. Norbert students traveled to San Francisco, eager to learn about HIV/AIDS and the many artistic and literary responses to the disease. Leading the anxious travelers were Alli Skibbie and Livy Traczyk who had helped planned a week's worth of service in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. The Tenderloin District has one of the highest proportions (of any United States city) of homelessness and people living with HIV/AIDS.

Upon arriving in San Francisco, I, the designated historian of the group, Megan Engsberg, began snapping pictures of the beautiful palm trees, sun, and weather, all of which are not generally experienced by Wisconites this time of year. Our first day in the city we explored the area we would be serving, the Tenderloin. As the leaders, myself, Nicole Been, Jessica Stratton, Camron Jayelerson, Danielle Kapolnek, Kate Botsford, Rachelle Barina, Suzan Odabasi and Tony Shimek walked the streets of the Tenderloin, we were overwhelmed by the number of hotels converted to apartments. We saw individuals digging through the garbage and sitting along buildings. The scents were nothing like the tropical flowers we had just previously encountered.

By our first day of service at the Tenderloin Health Community Center, we began interacting with many of the individuals we saw lining the streets. At the community center (an organization that provided a multitude of services, from public restrooms to support groups) we handed out snacks, monitored the phone and bathroom, and packaged hygiene kits. We heard and witnessed the rough life on the streets, but we also saw individuals trying to access shelter and clinics in the area. Many of the patrons were most likely HIV positive, as the majority of their lifestyles put them at high risk.

Other service work that week included working at the various SRO hotels. SRO stands for Single-Room Occupancy, which is basically glorified dorm living (with a single room and a community bathroom) but dirtier-as the locals said. As a group we helped organize a food pantry as well as the files the organizations kept on each patron. One especially challenging experience for the group included cleaning out a room of an individual who had committed suicide days after his partner died of AIDS.

Other organizations of service included Project Openhand, a project that delivers hot meals to those too ill to prepare their own meals. Originally the program was designed for those suffering from HIV/AIDS, but now, only 20 years later, it serves any disabled member in the San Francisco community. As a group we sorted food and delivered food for this organization. Another day of service included placing latex warning labels on donated condoms for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation (they would later be distributed on the streets for free).

While it is hard to encapsulate our whole week of service in a short newsletter, our trip saw many stages and angles of HIV/AIDS and poverty in San Francisco. We worked at a community shelter that catered to the homeless but also had the resources for housing, health care, and employment. We organized files in a clinic and saw the need for medical social work. We worked in SRO's for the previously homeless as well as post-incarcerated individuals. All in all, we saw that HIV/AIDS cannot simply be attended to through medication, but through food, shelter, and many other forms of support.

Of course, our trip also focused on the arts. We visited the AIDS Interfaith Chapel in Grace Cathedral and we were able to see a piece of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which attempts to commemorate each life lost to AIDS. As a group we created our own AIDS quilt based on impressions from our trip as our own tribute and memorial. We also visited the New Conservatory Theater where we learned about their theater and especially their

education program that performed plays about HIV/AIDS for students from elementary school through high school. With our service and our artistic inspirations in our minds, our TRIP members created their own artistic responses (poetry, prose, painting, etc.) to his or her own experiences. We all continue to carry the spirit of our San Francisco service trip.

