

It was one of those freezing January mornings in Chicago when the grey outside the window makes getting out of bed daunting, but I was determined. I had promised my students at the Blue Gargoyle Adult Learning Program that they could always expect me to arrive on time, if they could find a way to make it to the classroom by nine. I was not going to let them down. After all, I had the easy end of the deal, really – my commute was less than a mile on a University bus. Some of my students were traveling from more than an hour away. Many of them lacked adequate winter clothing, or were faced with the difficulties of transporting small children. Every day I ‘taught’ my classes at the Blue Gargoyle, I felt like I learned more from my students than I could ever hope to have imparted to them. I was awestruck by their insightfulness, amazed by their intelligence, and overcome by their perseverance; every day was an experience. That day in particular will stay with me for the rest of my life.

As usual, I taught three classes: a reading and writing class to emergent readers, a GED-level math class, and a computer class. This day, we read about the controversy over plans to develop a new airport in the city of Chicago. We wrote to the mayor with our suggestions for airport location, size, and usage. In math class, I talked with a different group of students about special right triangles. Computer class was always more free-form. Students of all levels were in the computer lab at the same time, and I assigned tasks on an individual basis. Attendance in computer class varied on a daily basis; that day, computer class was less popular than the free food at the Reynolds Club.

That day, two women in their mid-fifties were sitting at adjacent computers. A gregarious woman who I knew from the housing movement, who we will call Mary, talked with a friend, who we will call Ann. They were pretending to play crossword games, but were in fact gossiping. I often allowed myself to listen to my students’ conversations in the computer classroom. I wanted them to feel at home with the technology, and I was interested in the problems, concerns, and celebrations of ‘real life’ inherent in my students’ discussions. I feel like my life is fuller when I am a part of my community; talking with and listening to my students

made me feel alive. The beginning of this particular conversation was fairly routine, covering the morning's lessons, news of kids and grandkids, the difficulties of public transportation, and the week's church activities. Nothing could have prepared me for the rest of the conversation, however. I have transcribed it as well as I can remember:

“One of those mens got me last night on the way home,” Mary commented casually.

“Again?” Ann responded, nonchalantly.

“I’ve come to shrug it off – stranger men taking me. I just wish they would use protection – so we didn’t get sick.”

“You think we can ask?”

“Ask what?”

“If the men would use condoms.”

“I don’t think so. If you can’t ask them not to fuck you, I don’t think you can have say about how.”

“Damn men. Wish they’d just leave us alone. How many times have they got you this month?”

“Ten. Ten different mens. Didn’t know a one of them, but my super. You?”

“Six.”

To say that I was blown away would be an understatement – I had seen rape as an aberration, a trauma, an event outside of daily life. For these wymyn I had come to know and love, this horror was not only a *normal* part of life but a topic for *casual* conversation. I felt powerless to help, but that I needed to do *something*, even if I had very little to contribute. I developed a curriculum on sexual violence prevention for the Blue Gargoyle. Around the University Church community, I started a program to recycle cellular telephones for female students. The desire to get involved to improve the lives of those in my community has always been fundamental to who I am.

I will be a law student next year, and a lawyer three years from now. Wherever I am, the people whom I come to know through community service will remain etched in my heart. I will continue to look for new opportunities to bring vitality to my surroundings; both inside and outside of the University.