

TRANSFORMATION 1: DEFINING TRANSFORMATION

Transformation; a noun, meaning a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance if you simply Google it. Similar words include change, alteration, modification, variation...the list goes on. There are even specific meanings of the word derived from mathematics and the sciences but let us not dive too deeply into that; I was never good at those subjects anyway. I think the point I am trying to make here is that even after all the definitions and synonyms I still find myself contemplating what transformation means in my own words and how it is applied in my everyday lived experiences. What experiences have shaped me into the person I am today, instilling me with a sense of personal identity? Well, if I am being honest, I feel like I am constantly learning new things about myself to the point of annoyance. You see other 20-somethings my age seem to have it all figured out, and life is good, and I mean— really good— I am talking their career paths chosen and already making six-figures kind of good. Yet, I still have to rehearse calling in a pizza order to Dominos. How are these people unlocking the cheat codes to life, and can I please have access too?

Unfortunately, I am constantly asking myself, do I know what I want? Am I making the right choices? Do I know the kind of person I want to be when I finally leave this earth? All questions that I think about, constantly poking and prodding at the furthest depths of my mind like an itch you cannot quite scratch. I am in this rumination stage in life where I am currently battling the potential issues and challenges, I have not even faced yet, as if that will do me any good. It is about time that I stopped and realized that transformation for me might not be that one experience, and it might not even be the second or third experience either. Transformation is in fact an amalgamation or intertwining fragments of events, no

matter how big or small, they are all significant experiences that have taken place over the course of not just my time here at Fontbonne, but my life in general. Additionally, these transformative experiences will continue to happen until I am no longer here. The things I have accomplished through my transformations will simply become the memories of others through the things I left behind in the work and service I achieved.

So, what are some of those transformative events, experiences, and or happenings that have shaped my character and the person I am today? First, I would say my high school graduation was a transformative experience. I worked incredibly hard in my studies and extracurricular activities and clubs, earning my spot as salutatorian of my 2018 graduating class. High school was not easy by any means, but I guess you could say I had it easier than some kids when it came down to the grades. My mental health? Absolutely horrible, and probably the lowest it had ever been in my life especially junior and senior year, but grades were all that mattered. I had this false sense of success and had my priorities all screwed up. I thought as long as I had those straight A's and my 4.0, I would be set, so I pushed down my true feelings. That feeling of helplessness that no one wants to address.

There at my graduation I gave a speech that probably no one really cared about, but I was known as the "quiet kid" so let me tell you, I was very proud of myself for standing in front of hundreds of people sharing my high school experience and wishing everyone well. It was extremely cheesy, and probably a little too short, but I don't think I stuttered once. This experience gave me the confidence to walk into college knowing I was a hard-working student who was ready to learn, grow, and adapt to any challenge that came my way; or at least that is what I thought. These college years became some of the hardest years of my life and presented a new low point for me numerous times, low point number one was passing a

math class, statistics. Who knew one of the first courses of my college career would give me such a hard time, but the lessons I learned from this experience made it all worth it.

TRANSFORMATION 2: SUCCESS AND FAILURE, TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

My second transformative experience was failing my first ever college course. Statistics. Well, not all transformative experiences have to be positive because best believe I was a wreck when this all went down. If you recall from a previous statement, I mentioned that I kind of suck at math. What is worse is that this is not even the “hard” math, who fails statistics? Spoiler, it’s me. I spent days beating myself up, dreading having to tell my grandparents that I am no longer their straight-A-high-school-salutatorian-star. In fact, I am their no-good-worthless granddaughter who is already starting her first semester in college off on a slippery slope to failure. Now I know what you may be thinking...dramatic much? And yes, you are completely correct, and I am so embarrassed about all this now and wished I had handled this situation much better than my younger and more anxious self did at the time, but you must understand I had never failed a class in my life, and I thought college gen-eds would be a breeze. My self-esteem and mental health at this time were still horrible, and I tried therapy once, but it did not go as planned so I gave up, thinking it was just not for me. Spoiler alert number two, I would come back to getting therapy because it is definitely for me, I just needed the right therapist.

I was coming down from this victorious and triumphant high school “high,” if you will, and thought I was unstoppable, only to be humbled quickly by my unsuccessful attempts at reading and interpreting data from charts and graphs. After talking with my academic advisor, it was determined that I would need to retake the course, oh the agony. Do not worry though, this story has a happy ending. I took statistics again the following fall semester. I went into it nervous, dreading my impending doom, wondering if this is going to

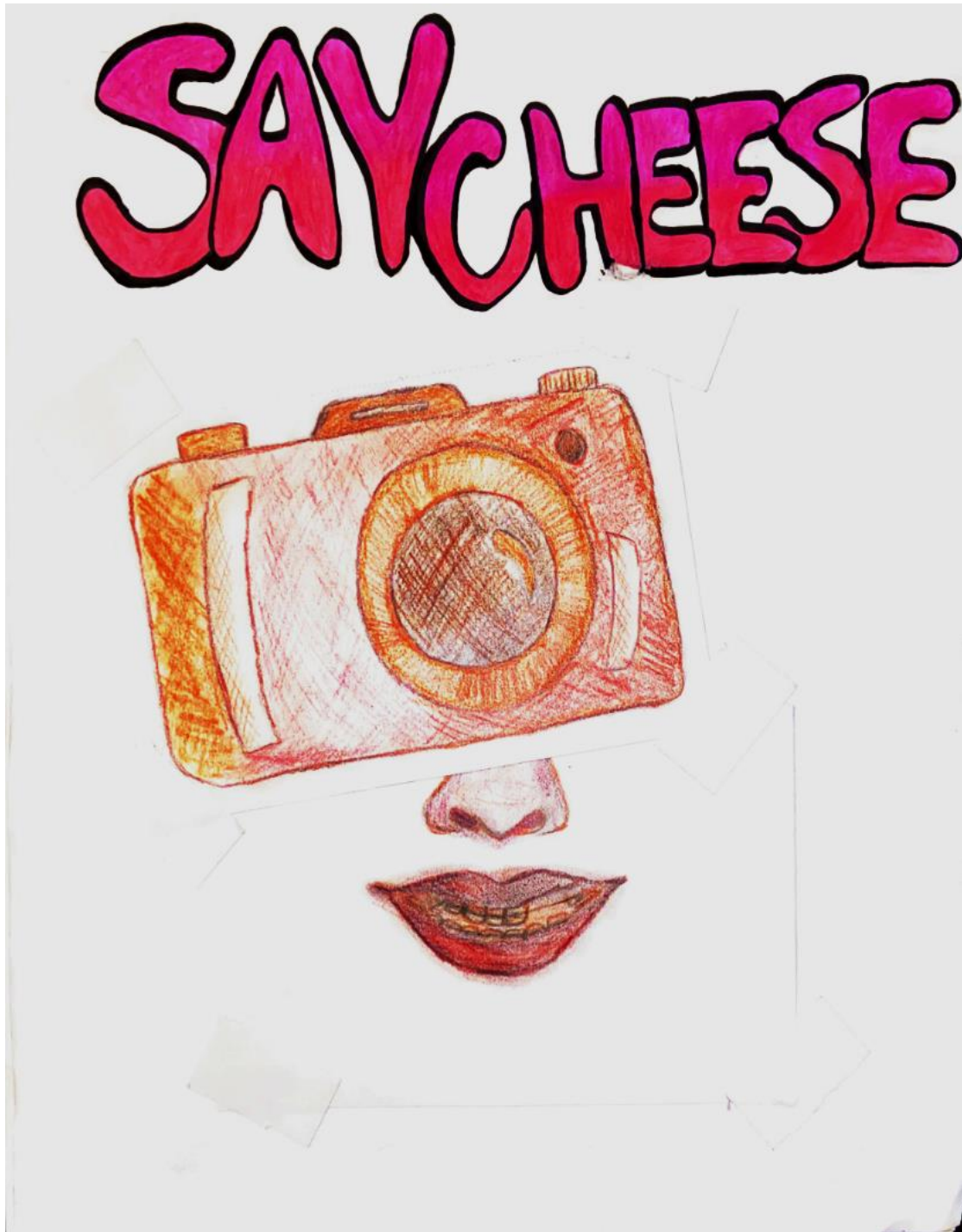
be just as difficult as last time. The thing that was different though was that I had a new instructor, an instructor that took her time, wrote on the board, and actually went out of her way to teach the material instead of just handing us a book and telling us to get to work. She encouraged us to ask questions, allowed us to take our time, and emphasized the importance of utilizing her office hours as a tool to learn more. I did just that, just about every chance I got I was in her office, asking those questions I thought were “dumb” and she would politely encourage me, push me in the right direction, and ask me to try again. It was surprising how much I was able to pick up this time, it was like my brain was rewired. I learned that my learning style required me to be able to write things out, and have the topic or problem broken down to me piece by piece. I cannot have someone stand in front of a class and simply lecture to me without any sort of visuals and be expected to know all there is to know about it at the end of the hour. My brain just does not pick up information that way and that is perfectly ok! I am not someone who does not know how to grasp the concept of math, I am someone who needs to grasp the concept just a little bit differently than others.

I am not dumb, worthless, uneducated, or lazy. All these misconceptions I had about myself when I failed the first time are far from the truth. I should not be afraid to ask for help and actively pursue guidance because at the end of the day I am spending time and money to oversee and control my educational experience. Failure is not something we should be afraid of because failure creates opportunities for growth. I know I will experience many more failures, that is simply how life works; but instead of going back into the task doubting myself I now know that, with the right people supporting me and utilizing all the available resources, I can overcome any obstacle. There you have it, my two

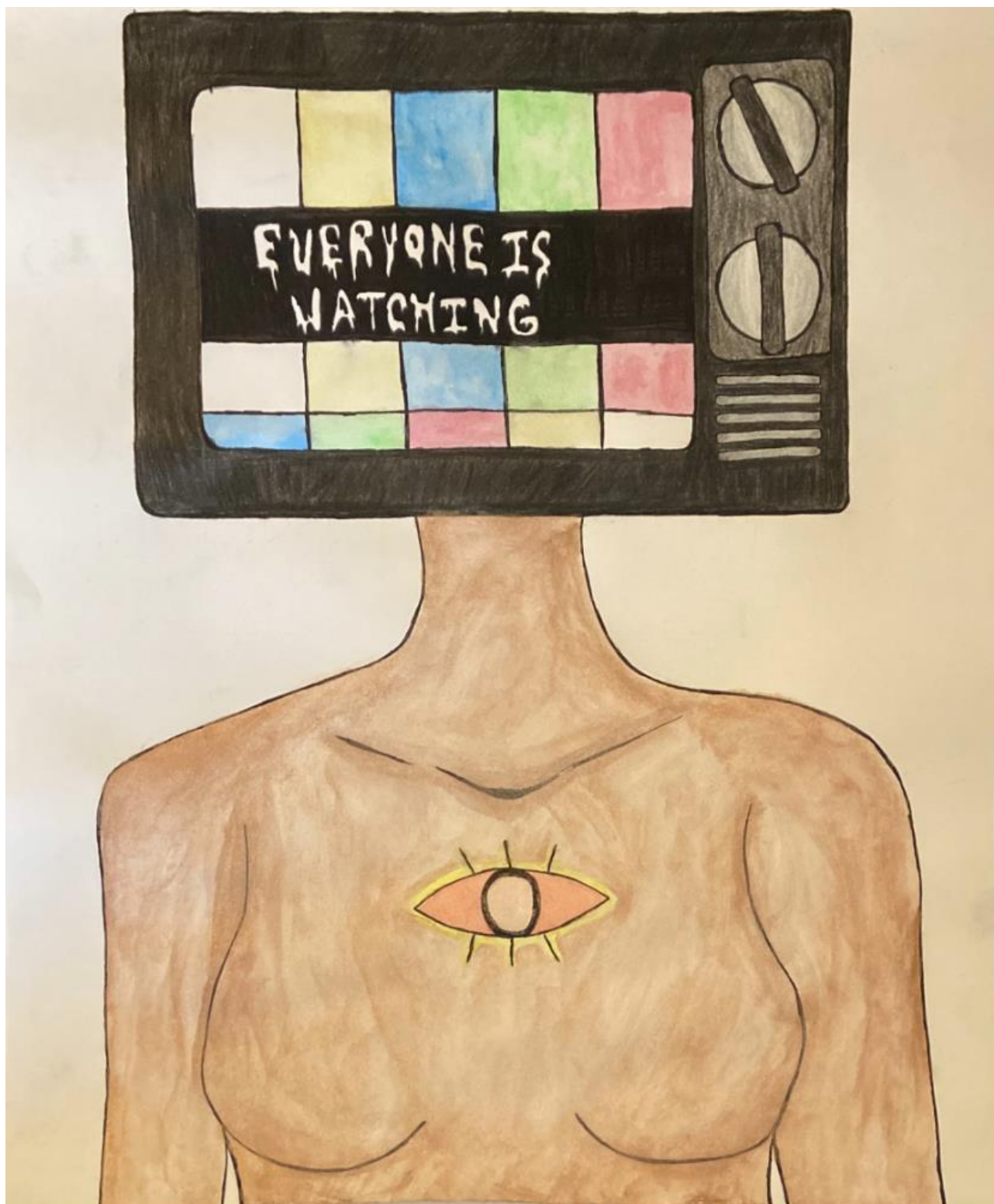
experiences of success and failure back-to-back, the end of my high school education and the beginning of my higher education journey. Both experiences were needed to prove to myself that success and failure are two sides of the same coin; nothing presents moments of vulnerability and self-discovery quite like success and failure, and I look forward to more transformative experiences.



Representations of self (1/3) produced in the Borders and Borderlands Honors course
(Spring 2020).



Representations of self (2/3) produced in the Borders and Borderlands Honors course
(Spring 2020).



Representations of self (3/3) produced in the Borders and Borderlands Honors course
(Spring 2020).

EXPLORATION 1: HOW EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY INSPIRED ME TO BE A SOCIAL WORKER

Throughout a person's college journey, I believe they are faced with many new, unique, and eye-opening opportunities and experiences. From my own experience, I am constantly sorting through and exploring my values, morals, and motivations behind why I am pursuing the degree of social work. It's a field that is scrutinized in the eyes of many because of the misconceptions about what our true purpose is. In films, media, and news we are portrayed as the villain, a profession that purposefully splits families apart. It is hard to find positive viewpoints and representations of social workers, let alone people who understand what we do for the greater good of society. A social worker's goal is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, especially the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed populations. We wear many different hats within all micro, mezzo, and macro systems. Social workers are in your schools, churches, banks, local businesses, community centers, and hospitals. Even your neighbors, coworkers, and friends might be social workers. I am a strong believer that the world needs social workers even though we are undervalued and underpaid. We still put our best foot forward to uplift and provide resources and advocacy to those who need it most. #

One of the first instances that made me realize that social work was the field for me was when I was still a psychology major, taking a class called Fundamentals of Expressive Arts Therapies. I was always a creative person and as a kid and throughout some of my teenage years I would draw, create graphic designs, make collages and more. The last couple of years in high school I began to lose my passion for arts and crafts mostly because I criticized and compared my artwork to others. I saw all the amazing artists out there who were much younger than me creating works of art that I thought I could never do. Art was no longer fun, but once I started

taking this expressive arts therapy class, I was able to fully engage in a creative space again. On the first day of class the instructor made it clear that this was not your average art class, and that we did not have to be an artist to be there. This space was meant to be a therapeutic way to unleash our thoughts, worries, and fears through creative mediums to better process the challenges we all go through. I was excited to go on this self-discovery journey with my peers, but more importantly I wanted to rekindle some of the fire I lost in my own creative process.

Throughout the course, we were given prompts to either journal about or create some piece of art, whether that be making mandalas, masks, clay sculptures, collages, paintings, and drawings too. After each session, we would come together as a larger group and provide more context for our piece. It was a lot of listening and positive feedback shared amongst everyone and that really boosted my morale and appreciation for art. Additionally, this course helped me realize that engaging in a creative space is a good outlet for someone like me who has trouble expressing myself through words. Getting those ruminating thoughts out of my head and transforming it into a work of art really helped me express myself in new and exciting ways. Additionally, it is amazing to see how others interpreted the same issues I had but in a completely different creative method. Overall, from this experience, I got much better at appreciating the creative process of art rather than hyper-focusing on the art itself. Although I still have a long way to go until I fully embrace my creative side again, I want to be able to share art that can inspire others to construct their own narratives of their past, present, and future selves as a reminder that the story of their lives is in their control. I truly believe everyone can get something out of expressive arts therapy especially when there are so many mediums to explore like music and dance which can be just as healing and enjoyable as other expressive art

mediums. Becoming an expressive arts therapist is now something I am considering pursuing as a career so I can help others begin their self-discovery journey.



Mask making activity, Expressive Arts Therapies (Spring, 2019).

LEADERSHIP 1: HOW I LEAD AT FONTBONNE UNIVERSITY

Often when people think of the word “leader” labels such as being charismatic, tactical, head-strong, and outspoken come to mind first, but over time I learned that everyone can be a leader in their own way. There is no right and set and stone way of being a leader, and as I developed my own leadership skills over the last few years, I feel more confident in the way I lead others around me. In my experiences here at Fontbonne I challenged myself to take those leaps of faith, push past my boundaries, and guide conversations on important issues amongst my fellow peers. The leadership positions I have on campus are making a difference, and it took a lot of work and validation from other great leaders, members, and supporters of the organizations I am a part of to see the fruits of all my labor. We all have a voice and a purpose that can truly transform the outdated generalization of what leaders are supposed to look and act like. When you see leaders broadcasted and praised on the news, social media, radio, and articles, you see white and wealthy cisgender men. Growing up it was rare to see leaders who look like me and shared similar experiences. Therefore, I want to be an example of how those individuals can be more involved in leading no matter how small the cause. I do not think a lot of my leadership will create long-lasting or systemic change, but someone must get involved in the small efforts to eventually shake the foundation of big ones.

One of the leadership experiences that I found to be beneficial in gaining the confidence needed to be more involved on campus is becoming the Fontbonne Student Government (FSG) representative for Black Student Union (BSU). In this role, not only did I become an executive member of BSU and help create fun and memorable events, but also be a voice in Fontbonne’s student government where we engage in numerous important conversations regarding school-wide initiatives, policy, and proposals for a more diverse and inclusive community among

students, faculty, and staff alike. Being the FSG representative of BSU has presented me with many opportunities to spread a welcoming atmosphere that gives students on campus, especially students of color, a safe space to be unapologetically themselves. We provided a wide variety of events and activities, from more serious meetings that focus on important social justice issues, to more social gathering-based events that fostered fellowship amongst us. In this position, I learned a lot about time management, recruitment, marketing, delegation to tasks, and strengthened my own creative skills to make sure the events and meetings we held were successful.

Even before I stepped into the leadership position at BSU I was actively involved in the club. I attended most meetings and events that were hosted because just like most of the other members, I felt like BSU was a place I could be myself, build friendships, and speak my truth. I think that is the true goal of being a leader, being able to build upon the idea of a community that fosters a passion for addressing the needs and concerns of the members. Being a leader of anything should not feel like a liability or a senseless chore. Instead, a leader should feel naturally curious and drawn to the endless possibilities of how to reach their goals and find like-minded people to join them on the way. In the end, being a leader is challenging because they are seen as the backbone of a group or organization and if something goes wrong, they are the first ones to be blamed. Leaders endure ridicule, slander, disbelief, assumptions, stereotypes, and just about every nasty generalization you can think of, yet they choose to be leaders. Why is that the case? I think being able to see the results of all their hard work and passing along their legacy to the next leaders is all it takes to keep going. A leader's sole focus is getting to their end goal, and they understand that there are countless bumps and bruises along the way but their desire to

persevere withstands any obstacles. Plus, a leader is never alone. All it takes is more and more people to see the truth and passion behind their motives, and in return a movement is born.



Black Student Union Christmas Ornament created by BSU members (Fall, 2021).



Black Lives Matter Mural created by Fontbonne Students; My piece is the bottom left sun (Fall, 2020).

LEADERSHIP 2: LEADING IN MY OWN WAY

As I mentioned before, the word “leader” should not have these strict labels attached to it that generalize what leaders act, think, and feel like. Throughout my time here at Fontbonne, I have adopted my own ways of leadership that most people would consider nonstandard, but I am proud to still call myself a leader in my own right. My style of leadership consists of leading behind the scenes. I may not be as outspoken as other leaders, but when I do speak, I speak with a purpose to ensure that I speak things to fruition. When I lead, I am a listener, an icebreaker, and a dreamer. While some of these may become double-edged swords in certain situations, a leader should always have a team that balances them out and meet criteria that the leader may not possess. That is why I am not ashamed of my leadership style, and I will be sure to expand upon why I feel this way. #

One of the ways I lead is by being a listener. I think some of the best ideas are brought to the table when leaders learn the skill of active listening. A leader needs their team, and not just their physical presence, but their skills, ideas, and solutions to tackle challenges and reach team goals. You may see tons of charismatic leaders who also have big egos, and there is certainly nothing wrong with that, the problem is when their ego turns into egoism and pretentiousness. There is a fine line between ego and egoism, and having an ego means you understand your worth and sense of self in the greater scheme of things, but egoism opens the door for self-interest that ultimately puts yourself and your words as the only means of accomplishing something. To put it succinctly, egoism is stubborn and self-serving. That way of leading is the exact opposite of how I make decisions. I encourage healthy disagreement, and even when my team agrees with me, I challenge them to think outside my proposals. Of course, there are times

when I feel like my way is the “right way,” but I know there are always more possibilities that can still lead to the end goal that I could have never discovered on my own.

Another one of my leading styles is being able to break the ice. I may be a person of few words in certain situations, but I can get the conversation started. This usually happens in group projects or in-class group activities I am in. We all start off a little quiet and hesitant to speak or put our ideas out on the table because in some cases people are still comprehending what needs to be done, and in other cases they are worried their idea may be disliked by other group members. Therefore, I make it my duty to assure other group members that this is a nonjudgmental space and to take things one step at a time. I prompt them with questions, especially more open-ended ones in the beginning to gauge how everyone is feeling about the tasks just to get the conversation going. From there, I make sure everyone has a chance to contribute on the matter at hand, even if it is just to confirm if they agree or disagree with whatever was proposed. In the end, the goal is for everyone to be on the same page, and if we are not, then we can start the compromising process and discuss further courses of action. Once everyone has given their input and agreed to proceed with an idea to reach our result, we can begin to delegate tasks so that we each get a chance to participate in making the project a success.

My last leading strategy is utilizing my creativity and curiosity for learning, or in my own words, leading with a dream. I would certainly call myself a dreamer and with an overactive imagination like mine, I try to put it to good use. As a child, I was constantly reminded by my grandfather that I could achieve great things if I put my mind and soul into it. At first, I did not want to listen to him, it just sounded like senseless optimism and seemed completely unrealistic. However, gradually over time I thought why not give it a try and see what happens. Why not put

my all into the work I am passionate about and see where it takes me. This is a skill I am still working on, but I will say when I am successful at doing it, I feel proud, courageous, confident, and content with the work I produce. Being able to share my dreams no matter how small or big with others, especially people who think like me, gives me the hope to keep pushing to make those dreams a reality. These dreams may not happen overnight, it may not happen in a year, and it may not even happen in my lifetime. Even so, I will not keep my dreams to myself, and I will continue to speak out in hopes that my dreams can be passed on to others who will work passionately and diligently to keep my dreams alive.

OCCUPATION 1: A NOT-SO-CLEAR PATH THAT I AM WILLING TO TAKE

As I am writing this, I am wrapping up the final weeks of my undergraduate college career, thinking back to all my growth, success, failure, and challenges I have encountered along the way. When I leave here, I will officially be a generalist practice social worker out in the field making a change in my own unique way. It is certainly a big step and responsibility that I will tread carefully, and fully give myself some time to think about since I decided to take a break from school. Before getting my master's I still think I have some exploring to do, and more importantly, I want to gain the experience I need to be confident enough to take that final leap into a career path I know I will enjoy and fully immerse myself in.

Truthfully, I have always been an indecisive person in my actions and words. I would not say this is necessarily a bad thing, but tiresome nonetheless to be so in my head wondering where I am best needed in this world. I have a hard time committing because I want to accomplish so many things and feel the need to gain a little bit of everything to be seen and heard. When I think back to where this is rooted it is most likely from the high hopes and expectations that were expected of me starting at a very young age. I was raised by my grandparents, and they would always push me to explore new challenges and be the absolute best I can be even when my best did not feel enough. At the same time though, that pressure of always succeeding felt stifling, like I never had the option to fail and learn from my mistakes. I would beat myself up over any missed deadlines, not understanding the material or not picking it up fast enough, and unsatisfactory grades which in my case were anything less than an A.

You can imagine how detrimental this was to my confidence, sense of self-worth, and mental health in general, and it took a very long time for me to shake the fear behind failure. I

have not completely embraced making mistakes and this skill is still something I am working on but compared to where I was a couple of years ago, I have come a long way. Bringing it back to my original point, I feel like I need to explore all my options because I cannot settle peacefully into a career until I know exactly what I want to do. I know I am not alone in feeling this way either, but somehow it feels appropriate to know what I want to do at this point in my life even if that is not the case. American values have always highlighted this “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality that I never understood. The belief that anyone can achieve freedom, prosperity, and success if they simply try hard enough is to put it bluntly, a fallacy. That is why being unsure of yourself in this society is so looked down upon, and when I see people my age who have their whole lives planned out it really scares me because I feel like I am falling behind.

I stated in previous reflections, I know I want to help others, especially vulnerable and underserved populations because caring for those lives will benefit everyone in return. I truly believe being in the field of social work gives me the opportunity to serve without distinction because social work is such a broad field that enables us to address social justice issues, faulty systems, and the good, bad, and ugly sides of the human experience. They say social workers wear many hats, and social workers who dip their spoon in a little bit of everything are considered unicorns, and so now I am contemplating if I should just embrace wearing all these hats. I am still young, I am still learning, and I should take as much time as I need to begin the transition to the work world. I’m learning to be comfortable with not knowing how that world will transpire and I may have ideas here and there, but not having those ideas finalized will not make or break me. Life is unpredictable, so it is best to take everything one step at a time and try not to compare my way of living life to others. We each have our purpose and calling in life, and I feel that my purpose will naturally come to me with time and patience.

OCCUPATION 2: AS ONE STORY ENDS, ANOTHER BEGINS

While I may be undecided on what I want to do exactly in the social work field, I still have ideas on careers that best align with my interests and strengths. These career paths were discovered with the help of specific courses I have taken at Fontbonne, along with the help of my peers, faculty, and individual interest within the field. It has taken a lot of time to realize the true values and talents I can bring to the table in whatever organization I will soon be a part of. The occupations or lines of work that stand out to me the most include expressive arts therapy, crisis intervention work, communication management, graphic design and media production, and fundraising. These are all very different fields but can easily be incorporated into one single organization if they have enough people willing to take on these sorts of jobs.

Starting with my interest in expressive arts therapy, I have always felt passionate about art and its ability to heal and express emotions better than words given the circumstances. Not everyone is an artist, sure, but art presents itself in many different forms which makes me feel confident enough to say that everyone can achieve something out of embracing art and creativity. My interest in expressive arts therapy spiked, even more, when I took an introductory class for the field and rediscovered my love for creation; additionally, being able to share those feelings with all my classmates made the class worthwhile. We laughed together, cried together, and most importantly, our creativity helped us better understand how to solve our problems. While expressive arts therapy may not be the path I take in my professional career, I will continue to use my art as an outlet for expression, peace, and healing in my personal life.

Over the last couple of years, I became more interested in the field of graphic design and media production after I started my work-study jobs on campus and joined school clubs. I had

the opportunity to create fun and exciting visual flyers, posters, and media for the organizations I was a part of as well as different departments on campus. This included creating flyers for Black Student Union (BSU), the Kinkel Center, Academic Affairs, LACE Center, and the Social Work Department so they can advertise their information, events, activities, and goals throughout the school year. To give specific examples, I would volunteer or be tasked with creating flyers regarding procrastination or study tips for resources on campus such as the Kinkel Center. Additionally, I would also develop something more on the recreational side to inform others about get-togethers BSU would host that fostered a sense of fellowship and a break from academics.

Lastly, my interest in crisis intervention work, communications, and fundraising became more serious in the experiences I had during my internship. Working with St. Louis Crisis Nursery (SLCN) opened the door to many unique opportunities that other practicum students did not get to experience according to my academic advisor and peers. From the beginning, SLCN expressed to its practicum students that we were more than welcome to become involved in all areas of the agency. I wanted to work closely with the children who entered our respite care program which challenged my crisis intervention and therapeutic treatment skills. Of course, I received adequate training during the first few weeks so that I could approach and interact with the children in meaningful ways that challenged some problem behaviors displayed in the children and remedy any concerns they had during their stay. It has been a difficult and eye-opening journey these last few months working with kids who have experienced unprecedented traumas and crises, and I continue to learn more every day about crisis intervention from my fellow peers and coworkers at the Nursery. Additionally, more so in the second semester of my practicum experience, I wanted to take a closer look at the behind-the-scenes work that went into

the communications and fundraising department. There is so much that goes into the various outreach, fundraising, and community-centered events, and to my surprise, there was only a small group of people behind these very large projects. It was fascinating and admirable to see all the hard work and dedication they put into disseminating the resources St. Louis Crisis Nursery has to offer. That being said, I was more than happy to help them relay the Nursery's purpose to the community by volunteering at their fundraisers, creating resources guides for parents, and developing my very own blog post to share my experience working with them thus far.

With just a couple more weeks left of my practicum experience and undergraduate degree program I happily expressed my interest in working for the Nursery after graduation. The lessons and experiences I have had thus far proved to me that I still want to learn much more about the field of crisis work and child abuse prevention. My field instructor and task instructor at the Nursery were delighted to hear about my interest in returning as a part-time or full-time employee and expressed their support in helping me pursue my future career goals, whatever it may be. As the chapter of my undergraduate college career ends, a new chapter in my life is beginning, and with me I channel the ongoing support I have received from the Nursery staff, mentors, peers, and family that will guide me to new heights in my professional and personal life.



Wall mural at St. Louis Crisis Nursery's Razzle Dazzle Ball (Spring, 2022).



Social media flyer I created for Child Abuse Prevention Month (Spring, 2022).

SERVICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE 1: SERVICE MAKES THE WORLD GO ROUND

Service and social justice have always been a significant part of my life whether I liked it or not. Not that getting myself involved in this space was a negative thing, but it almost felt mandatory to advocate for those who look like me and share similar experiences. I did not have the choice to remain ignorant of social justice movements developing within the communities I was a part of because they would affect me directly and the people I love the most. The deep struggles deriving from poverty, gun violence, broken homes, racism, homophobia, and transphobia were all around me and I would either let it consume me to the point where I became just another silent bystander as I let the system continue its usual routine. Or I could do something, anything, to prove to myself and my community that I am not backing down without a fight. A fight for equity, inclusion, freedom, and union. From a very young age, my heart guided me toward the helping professions, this was because I saw the injustices around me every day and the generational trauma and poverty that affected my family on a personal level. I was not allowed to be a “normal” kid because the neighborhood we lived in was dangerous, and the gunshots would keep me up at night. Every couple of months people I grew up with, people who took care of me, would either end up in a casket from senseless acts of violence or illness, or they would be sentenced to life behind bars. In many ways, a life of incarceration is not a life worth living, your freedom and human rights are stripped from you. I grew sick and tired of seeing the people I hold dear struggle in the systems that deem them unworthy of belonging and success. Therefore, once my higher education journey started here at Fontbonne, my sense of service and social justice was solidified. Social work called out to me, I learned to surround

myself with like-minded individuals who have a passion for uplifting and nurturing human life and all the challenges it brings.

In my junior year, I engaged in an outside fellowship organization called Aspen Young Leaders Fellowship (AYLF) under the Aspen Institute. AYLF is a paid internship program that engages youth 18-22 to embrace leadership and address the social, political, and economic issues facing their communities. I was recommended to join this program by a person I really look up to, and they felt like I had the dedication and drive for social action and change to be a great asset to their overall mission. The fact that they believed I could do something like this inspired me to give it a shot, and thus I went through a process of updating my resume, providing a personal statement, and working my way through the interviewing process. The program was a year-long journey of compelling seminar discussions and literature, a cabin retreat that presented both fun and thought-provoking activities and challenges, and lastly the big goal of creating our own community impact project. This community impact project could be anything we wanted as long as it addressed the needs of a local issue that we all cared about. We were split up into several teams, each tasked with making the project as successful as possible. I was a part of the communication and technology team, where we worked to oversee our social media presence, the creation of all physical or digital advertisement and media, and be the liaison of communication with the population we wanted to work with. It was beautiful, messy, and frustrating but I loved every second of it.

Our mission was to help the St. Louis public school system strive for equity and success whilst navigating a global pandemic, thus we partnered with Mullanphy Elementary school by providing their third graders with carefully targeted resources. We wanted to ensure students had suitable learning environments from both a physical and mental standpoint at a critical time in

their learning careers. By the end of the project we budgeted, ordered, packaged, and delivered 86 resource kits each containing various school supplies, books, arts and crafts, a backpack, headphones, and a virtual zine library and resource guide that was distributed to all third-grade families. The dialogue, reflection, skill-building, partnership, and trust that was established with my cohort helped me develop my own voice and solidified my leadership capabilities. Since AYLF I am much more outspoken on social issues and injustices that I witness not just in my life, but the lives of others and the communities I am a part of and passionate about. I speak with vigor and a newfound sense of personal identity, and I am aware that my voice, thoughts, and ideas are important and can provide valuable information for restorative change. I am no longer afraid to step outside of my comfort zone to embrace leadership, especially when I feel as if I do have the knowledge and skill to lead a group of people. AYLF has given me greater gratitude and respect for managing an organized collective of people working to achieve one common goal. To my mentors and fellow peers of the AYLF St. Louis 2020 cohort, you are forever in my thoughts, giving me words of encouragement; a constant reminder to never stop dreaming.



Resource kits created for Mullanphy third-grade students (Fall, 2020).



Me and my cohort peers packaging resource kits (Fall, 2020).

SERVICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE 2: HEADING TO THE STREETS

When it comes to standing up for what you believe in, getting on your feet, using your voice, and heading to the streets is one of the most effective ways to get your message across. I have seen videos, live streams, and photos of protests for quite some time as the murder of unarmed Black men and women became more televised and talked about on social media platforms. However, I had yet to witness and participate first-hand in these demonstrations; that was all about to change when the murder of George Floyd happened. The chilling video captured police officers pinning him down, one officer in particular Derek Chauvin had his knee on Floyd's neck, restricting his airway for a little over 8 minutes. Chauvin would not release his knee from his neck even as several bystanders urged and pleaded with him to stop, resulting in Floyd's death. The community was enraged, I was enraged, and eventually, the world. George Floyd's death took the world by storm. It was as if an old, cracked, and leaky dam had finally reached its limit and burst with fury. It was the final straw for millions who have witnessed the murder of Black people at the hands of police for far too long; a shift in the paradigm was unraveling right in front of our eyes.

Within a week of Floyd's death protests erupted all over the country, the solidarity was astounding. I discovered St. Louis had a protest planned through a good friend of mine, a recent graduate from Fontbonne. She shared the news on social media, encouraging people to show up and march for all the Black lives we have lost over the recent years. I desperately wanted to go, but it would also be my first protest so, of course, I felt anxious and uncertain about how things might go. After all, looting and rioting was always a possibility usually after the peaceful demonstrations were over and nightfall began. I knew it could get dangerous, and that people were angry, people were desperate, and the police would certainly retaliate if things got out of

hand. Nevertheless, I wanted to go, even amidst a global pandemic, standing up for injustice should not be put on the backburner. I needed to prove to myself that I could take this first step outside of my comfort zone so that I could contribute to my greater goal of actively eradicating racism, sexism, discrimination, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and any other forms of oppression in marginalized, poor, and underrepresented communities.

Once the day arrived, my friend and I drove downtown and joined the protest with our signs in hand. The organizers who created the event rounded us up and told us we were here to take a stand against the lack of action that has been taken to convict and indict the officer who murdered George Floyd and countless other police officers who have killed Black women, children, and men throughout our country. We demanded justice and if that required some disruption, we were going to do that. Starting from the Arch we made our way through the streets of Downtown St. Louis, waving our signs and fists in the air proudly. Our voices carried for miles uttering chants like “Say her name...Sandra Bland! Say her name...Breonna Taylor!” and “Convict, indict, send those killer cops to jail, the whole damn system is guilty as hell!” It was powerful and liberating. Even as we blocked traffic, many people in their cars cheered us on in a series of honks and hurrahs to commend us for our bravery. We even shut down the highway, which was already clear for us already, most likely to ensure the safety of the protesters.

There are many forms of advocacy, and yes, I have volunteered for many places including food pantries, soup kitchens, and fundraisers but this was an entirely different method of mobilizing for systemic action and change that I had never experienced before. Since this experience, I have only been more present in supporting my peers as they bring attention to the implicit bias, microaggressions, and ignorance here at Fontbonne from their fellow peers, staff,

and faculty. More than anything I want Fontbonne's campus to be a welcoming environment for all races, cultures, genders, gender identities, sexual orientations, and so much more. All these characteristics that make a person who they are serve as an important reminder to continuously live their truth despite adversity. Attending this protest was a very important step for me to make in strengthening my activism because I was able to fight for a cause I believe is truly worth fighting for, and that is the right for Black people to live freely without the fear of being murdered by police. Through these protests, even though the journey was long and taxing, supporters of Black Lives Matter now know that change is possible, and justice can be achieved if we continue to radically mobilize in the push for true social injustice. To those who attempt to spread hate through divisive language and actions, I must face them and educate them on their ignorance with respect and dignity, to the best of my ability.