



## **SOCIAL ACTION 164**

### SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENT REFLECTIONS

**ROCHELLE JACKSON-SMARR**, enrolled in Social Action in 2006, graduated BA English in 2008; Masters' Degree in Educational Leadership, Politics and Advocacy from New York University in 2011. Currently, Rochelle is an Ed.D. student in Educational Leadership at UC San Diego/CSU San Marcos (joint program).

**Student Campaign:** *Student Homeless Alliance*

**Occupation:** Currently, Director of Service Learning and Civic Engagement, CSU San Marcos. Previously, Rochelle worked as Associate Director, PENNCAP and Director, Pre-Freshman Program (PFP) at University of Pennsylvania, Assistant Director for Student Leadership and Program Manager for Community Engagement and Social Justice at Cornell University, AmeriCorps Team Leader, and SEIU labor organizer.

**Impact of Social Action:** "I still smile to this day when I recall how taking Social Action as a sophomore changed my career trajectory. When I enrolled in Soci. 164: Social Action, I had planned to become a high school English teacher. However, over the semester, I was convinced that I could do more with my life beyond teaching high school English. Since that course, I have become invested in serving the community in many capacities. In that spring semester of 2006 in Duncan Hall, my life changed for the better.

My career has come full circle. I am now in a position similar to, Dr. Myers-Lipton where I foster transformational learning experiences for students by providing them the opportunities to learn with community how they can be active citizens. Daily, I pay it forward with every student I assist with finding a community-based project and faculty member I convince to not just add a volunteer component to their course, but to partner with a community organization to identify a meaningful direct-service project for their students. I am still advocating for student engagement beyond the classroom through direct-service projects that complement their in-class learning, develop their critical thinking skills, and foster their civic duties.

The social action course allowed me to be a more active, aware, and informed citizen that reassured me that my career and passion can be more than a paycheck."

**Soci. 164: Social Action Alumni Questions:**

**1. What were the overall takeaways that you learned from working on your campaign? What did you learn about social change? about power? leadership? yourself? community? etc.**

Leading both the *Student Homeless Alliance* and the *Gulf Coast Civic Works Project* revealed to me how deeply intertwined poverty, hunger and homeless are all a result of government disinvestment in low-income communities of color. The lack of government disinvestment places the burden of social change too greatly on nonprofits and community organizations to address the social, economic and emotional needs of individuals and families experiencing social inequalities. As students we aimed to use our voices for the voiceless by making demands on behalf of our constituents and taking actions to highlight the injustice. However, while only a few of us had a direct experience connected to the issues we advocated against, we still were full- and part-time students that had limitations to our own time of being able to take action, raise awareness, and stand in solidarity with our constituents.

In regard to social change, I learned that it is possible to create change; it just takes an extended amount of time and dedication. Also, that one person cannot be responsible for addressing an injustice, it has to be a collaborative effort of time and money invested. I also learned that social change is possible. Social service agents, government officials and community leaders have to all be held accountable to rectifying social disparities. However, the social constructs of policy hinder progress for certain groups.

There are not enough structural policies and social service agencies to prevent and support individuals and families who find their selves homeless. Elected and government officials are far removed from the realities of social inequities and economic hardships that are affecting those they were put in office to help. I also learned that people can become homeless from a wide variety of things such as mental instability, job loss, loss of a home, and domestic violence. However regardless of their being numerous social service and community based agencies offering support to individuals in need, there is not enough money or “time” placed into really creating sustained change in those affected by homelessness.

**2. What did you learn about issue development? (i.e, making demands, finding the target, desire to fight for an issue)? Has this learning had any impact on you since you have graduated?**

Issue development on social change revealed to me that in history there has been an end to homelessness. I vaguely recall that during one of our class discussions it was brought to our attention in SML's book that during the 1970's that hunger and homelessness was at an all-time low and nearly non-existence. From there I was obsessed with trying to figure out how to we get our society back to that point. However, once I was in the community I quickly understood that the economy, political stance, and social culture had all changed and it was going to be difficult to end homelessness. But I was not deterred in my work. I still continued to research how different communities were tackling their homeless population and began to see if their programs could be replicated in San Jose. The research gave me context to understand what homelessness was in a general sense that it can result from job loss and the economy. Yet it was not until I began to have conversations with individuals at the shelter that I learned that homelessness can happen as a result of a variety of things: domestic violence and patients with mental illnesses being released from treatment with no home to return to after treatment.

This issue development process has led me to see the great value in demystifying the single story myth that novelist Chimamanda Adichie speaks about in her TedEx Talk: The Danger of a Single Story. There are a variety of reasons one might experience homelessness, poverty, or hunger. Instead of assuming the stereotypical reasons, we should examine our own implicit bias and strive to get to know the person individually to learn their story and the impact of an inequality society has on their lives. Currently, I use Chimamanda's TedEx Talk in my service learning during-engagement reflections as a prompt to challenge student individual and communal assumptions as they complete service in the community. The prompt helps them to see their role in meeting the community where it is and relaying that to their peers to challenge any negative stereotypes or assumptions they may encounter in debriefing their service experience. The prompt challenges them to share the assets and positive insights of the community.

**3. How did your research (e.g., Historical Analysis, Target Analysis, and Power Map) help you in your campaign? Has this learning had any impact on you since you have graduated?**

Research was definitely essential to my work in two ways: understanding the social injustice of homelessness and discovering programs and resources that address homelessness. The research gave me context to understand what homelessness was in a general sense that it can result from job loss and the economy. Yet it was not until I began to have conversations with individuals at the shelter that I learned that homelessness can happen because of domestic violence and patients with mental illnesses being released from treatment with no place to return to. Research was definitely essential to my work in two ways: understanding the social injustice of homelessness and discovering programs and resources that address homelessness.

Understanding the population, we are hoping to serve has been central to my work in community engagement. I have adopted practices where students examine the intersectionality of their own identity and inviting community members to share about their community demographics before engaging in service projects. I have learned it is best to contextualize service both through research and through lived testimonials from the community. These practices allow for them to be aware of their own biases and assumptions as they start their service hours, but also provide space and reflection for them to challenge their assumptions and opt to have a more inclusive and open attitude toward diversity in community and on-campus.

**4. How did you recruit students and allies for your campaign? What worked? What didn't work? Has this learning had any impact on you since you have graduated?**

I recruited some of my classmates and friends at first, then I expanded to tabling in the student union, passed out small postcard flyers in between classes and wrote on the white boards of empty classrooms. We did a lot of word of mouth campaigning, tabling at campus events and reaching out to student groups doing similar social justice work. What worked mainly was the tabling in the student union and partnering with civic engagement centers on campus to get the word out to students in all departments. My vice president was an engineering major, so we had a plan to have our group be as interdisciplinary as possible. Our "old school" tactics worked to an extent. We did have up to 20 members at some point with about 5 active members attending meetings and events consistently.

Given the rise of social media in our lives, I have certainly learned to leverage organization Instagram accounts, Facebook pages and student newsletter to promote event and outreach about issues on my campus for their engagement. Additionally, requesting two minutes of class time to

make an announcement continues to be a great opportunity for recruitment and promotion.

**5. How was your group dynamic? Did your group work well together? If yes, what contributed to your positive group process. If not, what contributed to that? Has this learning had any impact on you since you have graduated**

For both organizations, SHA and GCCWP, we worked very much democratically. We all had to agree on a decision before moving forward. Once we established that our group mission was “Advocacy, Service and Awareness” about homelessness we utilized those three values to guide our actions and decisions. We always had lively discussions when it came to making decisions, planning events and recruitment efforts. However, since we were all passionate about the GCCWP and our different causes we were very open to hearing one another’s position and coming to a majority vote on any matter. We did a lot of compromising so that no one’s opinion was left out.

**6. Who was your target, and what strategies and tactics did you use to get them to meet your demands? Were you successful in meeting your demands? If so, why? If not, why not? What was your favorite “action” that your group did?**

For the *Student Homeless Alliance* (SHA) our target was the San Jose City Council. We demanded for them to review and approve our Housing First proposal to create more affordable housing in San Jose. No, our demands were not met. I can not recall their reasoning, but for about five months we attended their public meetings and made public comments on the lack of affordable housing for students and community members that is resulting in increased poverty and homeless 100 feet from their chambers.

One of my favorite actions for SHA was the march around City Hall after a Poverty Under the Stars event. We had about 40 marchers of students, faculty and community member march with us from campus to the City Hall rotunda. Members of City Council and employees came out to the rotunda to see our signs and hear our chants. From there they started to take us a bit more seriously by asking us to come to a meeting, but they eventually, took no long-term action to address our demand.

For the *Gulf Coast Civic Works Project* (GCCWP) our target were state congressional legislatures to implement a modern Works Public Administration to recover and rebuild New Orleans by residents and not outside contractors. California Representative Zoe Lofgren introduced the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act (HR4048) to Congress in January 2007, but the bill died in committee. She reintroduced the bill in March 2009 as HR 2269 but it has not progressed outside of the House Subcommittee on Workforce Protections.

My favorite action of GCCWP is when we brought a FEMA trailer to campus in spring 2007, placed it outside the amphitheater to allow students to see and tour the cramped temporary housing that were provided to New Orleans residents whose homes were destroyed. We also staged a “die-in” where we all laid on the ground for about 30-minutes to represent the mass number of people that died as a result of, poor environmental and governmental infrastructure in New Orleans. Sometimes being dramatic is well worth it! It’s memorable and educative at the same time!

**7. Did your group get press? If so, how?**

Yes, we had press with the Spartan Daly, local news channels in San Jose and New Orleans. Dr. Scott ML helped us write fantastic press releases. Additionally, for our events he helped us prepare talking points that allowed us to be experts on the topic with his guidance in the background.

**8. Did your group use social media? If so, please explain.**

Nope! We were pre-Instagram and in the era of Facebook being only for college students to connect.

**9. What advice would you give current Soci. 164 Social Action students?**

Reach out to the Soci 164 alumni! Don't hesitate to reach out to us. We may be busy with our careers, but for many of us, myself included, this course was a transformational learning experience that I love to relive by connecting with the current students. I love to hear how you are brainstorming how to approach the issue differently and provide insight on my experience.

As you do research on your topic, schedule informational interviews with constituents, volunteer side by side with the population you are seeking to advocate for during the semester. This way you will have a personalized voice that will keep you motivated to be authentic and genuine in your work, along with a name, face and story of why you are advocating for social change. I still remember Coco from CHAM. She was my inspiration to reconsider why I was involved in community and how much more I could be contributing by actively listening and engaging beyond my studies by connecting to the local community.

Most importantly, reflect on every interaction, class discussion and conversation you have with a community member. Reflection is crucial to fully engaging in service-learning and being able to track your own socio-emotional development. It is something that I believe would have elevated my experience even more. It would have helped me savor so many life changing memories.