**Student’s thoughts ‘forever changed’ after social justice project with Hopeworx**

**By:** Kathie Mitchell, Advocate/Writer

Sometimes an experience just gives you a whole new perspective on life.

For John, a criminology major at Cabrini College, it happened in his Social Justice course during an in-the-field project with Hopeworx.

He and his classmates spent an entire semester learning about mental health and how to advocate for it and during the process, he realized that mental health is a serious social problem that affects many, many people. By listening to stories from Hopeworx staff about their struggles and successes in living with mental illness, one thing became crystal clear: advocacy was for anyone who had compassion, a sincere desire to understand what another person was experiencing, and the drive to make change.

“Knowing what I learned through the semester will make it easier for me to help others deal with their mental health problems or easier for me to help advocate for it,” John wrote in his class reflections.

John also learned that he didn’t need a connection to a social problem to be able to advocate for it. He had believed that advocates for social problems should have a connection in some way with the problem.

“Knowing what I know now, that thought in my head is forever changed and helps me look at those social problems differently,” John said.

He added that information and insight he gleaned from Hopeworx staff would be valuable to him when he begins his law enforcement career someday. He said he will have a better understanding of what some individuals are going through and what they are dealing with when the situations arise. And hopefully, he will be able to get them the help they need.

John was pared with Hopeworx staff member Julie to do his video project and he said it was his favorite part of the class. He said it was fun and “eye opening” to hear her describe how she dealt with depression and anxiety throughout her life and how she used DBT to help cope with her problems. The videos were created to share staff stories with others to provide a better understanding of mental health and the people whose lives it affects.

“It was also rewarding to see Julie give her feedback on the video saying she thought it was great and was exactly the way she would have wanted her story to be told if she were to make a video about herself,” John wrote. “All of it was rewarding to my projects partners and me.”

Many of the students involved in the project wrote similar reflections about the experience. Some students admitted that they really hadn’t given mental health that much thought before. But all came away with the belief that mental health is serious and a global social issue – one that needs a lot more attention.

“I am a business major, but mental health illnesses are all around us,” Chris wrote. “I know that everyday people around me, such as my coworkers, friends, and family may be going through something with their mental health that I do not understand or do not know about. The main insight that I took away is that you never know what someone is going through; everyone deserves to be treated equally and fairly.”

Her new perspective was to try to put herself in the other person’s shoes. In her project, Chris got to learn about Lisa who is affected by Asperger syndrome and was so struck by her story that she became an advocate for Lisa and her syndrome. Chris said she not only learned about different conditions but how people coped and recovered and lived their lives. Lisa explained that staying organized helped her deal with her symptoms and she enjoyed making lists so she could stay on top of her mental health.

Each student’s reflections emphasized the importance of storytelling and learning from real life situations outside of the classroom.

“It is always challenging to go in and meet someone for the first time,” Chris said. “It is very hard to always find that connection with the person the first time you meet them. It was a very successful encounter that I enjoyed.”

Students were also inspired by the stories of self-advocacy and the many different ways advocates help and support others. Gail pointed to Vernon whose job it is to advocate and provide peer support for incarcerated individuals and to Bryan, who has personally used Hopeworx as a place to gain real world skills and to earn income at a job that he enjoys. She added that the Hope Market was another way the organization helped the community.

Lauren learned how language helps to destigmatize mental illness as part of mental health advocacy. A psychology major, she was also moved by the power of art therapy. Her project partner was Anja, who has a powerful personal history of using art to aid recovery from lived experience with mental illness.

“Anja spoke openly about her own experience and about community art projects she has led,” Lauren wrote. “Her mosaics are breathtaking as is her metaphorical connection to making art out of broken pieces when you feel broken.”

Lauren added that the project enhanced her understanding of the role that nonprofits such as Hopeworx play in social justice. Digital story telling helped to promote social justice by educating the public on the power of art in recovery from mental illness.

For Beth, a psychology major, the Hopeworx Project helped her understand the stigma associated with mental illness and how Hopeworx is addressing this issue.

“Hopeworx and the work being done there has opened doors for many individuals,” Beth wrote. “It shows that mental illness does not mean life is over. It has shown me mental illness from a completely different lens.”

*Note: The students’ names were changed to protect their privacy.*