Public Allies Arizona
2016 Presentation on Impact

“Creating a just and equitable society and the diverse leadership to sustain it.”
Public Allies mission

Celebrating 10 Years of leadership and engagement with diverse emerging leaders in Arizona.
impact

noun
noun: impact; plural noun: impacts

have a strong effect on someone or something.
“My participation in this program has impacted my trajectory in life.”

synonyms: affect, influence, have an effect on, make an impression on; hit, touch, change, alter, modify, transform, shape
Before I started my term as an Ally, I went to my first ramp build with Rebuilding Together Valley of the Sun. I had been asked to show up at a ramp build in Mesa to see what I would be doing and what I would be heading up during my term of service. I got there and even as an Ally I was put in charge of the landscaping portion of this specific ramp build. This ramp build was with Bank of America and there were about 25 of their employees that showed up for the build.

My team was in charge of laying pavers down so that the homeowner would be able to get out of her home and be able to get to her shed. I remember the homeowner’s name was Cathy, she was currently stuck in a wheelchair and was homebound because she couldn’t get in or out of her house with the stairs that were provided to her by the mobile park.

As the morning went on, and my team finished the laying of the pavers and the ramp team finished building the ramp, I felt very accomplished. No wonder they say volunteering is a selfish deed. At about one o’clock when everything was done, we had Cathy roll down her new ramp in her wheelchair. To me, the aha moment didn’t come until the picture did. The second I saw the smile on her face, I realized that what we did was not just impactful for her; I could see the bigger picture of how the Arizona Ramp Program could be a positive impact on the whole of Arizona.
The sound of frantic feet echoed in the empty leasing office. Around the corner I heard a soft voice call my name. I looked up and suddenly I was staring into a pair of wide, terrified, brown eyes. It was one of the younger residents, Sheleigh, who is 5 years old. She had been participating in a program when they began telling scary stories. They scared her so much that she wanted to leave. “Ally, can you walk me home? I am too scared to go by myself,” she explained. I was more than happy to walk her home, so I got up and we headed into the courtyard.

The courtyard was dark and quiet. On the way to her home she outlined her day for me and told me some of her favorite things. Our conversation echoed against the stone walls and made the place liven up. When we made it to the door she seemed hesitant. She looked up at me, with now hopeful brown eyes, and said, “Ally, I wish you could just be a part of our family.” My body was overcome with this heartwarming feeling. She slowly opened her door, looked inside, and realized no one was home. Once again, that terrified looked came across her face. She asked to sit with me in the office until someone came home.

On the way back to the office I ran into another resident. Laura, who is a mother of three, looked at me with the same hopeful eyes. “I wish you could be a part of our family, too.” This time the heartwarming feeling hit me like a freight train. This was a resident who I had rare conversations with. It was someone I had never expected to make a connection with. Yet, here she was telling me she wanted me to be a part of her family. Since that comment, I have begun to talk with her much more and she will occasionally check in on me.

Sheleigh is a resident I have had a connection with since my first day on the property. Anytime I am in the office I see her swinging open the door to come talk with me, or I hear her yelling my name across the courtyard to welcome me. I was the one to teach her how to tie her shoes and to not steal. I have thought of her as my younger sister. Moments like these are important because it shows impact is not just within numbers. I won’t be asked to join a family by every resident. However, two families thought of me highly enough to ask. I have made a clear imprint on these people, just like they have done to me.
It was just like every other United Way event. A start time of 6:00 am, volunteers arriving shortly, all hands on deck. Games need to be placed, signs need to be posted, tables and chairs put out, and most importantly our in-home library needs to be set up, complete with lamps, comfy pillows and LOTS of Books. This is our 4th year in a row in which we partner with Riverside School District to provide family-based literacy fairs. At these fairs, United Way creates and designs interactive games that families can all do together at their child’s school and at home.

One of United Ways’ objectives is to ensure children are ready to succeed and enter school ready. In order to ensure children are ready, at every single children’s event we distribute our school readiness kits. These kits include over 80 learning games and activities, 3 bilingual books, a writing journal and so much more. But one hidden gem, found within this kit is a url link to our free online developmental screening. While almost always overlooked and rarely completed, as an educator I know first hand the importance of identifying developmental delays. My job? Making sure every family that leaves the literacy fair knows about that link, but more importantly, WHY that link is much more than that.

Meet Micah, a rather tall 5 year old, beautiful brown eyes, in a red football champions t-shirt and shorts. I ask him, do you like football? He responds with a blank stare. I turn to his mom and she quickly tells me, “Oh he’s really shy, we think at least,” with a kind of nervous smile.

Immediately, I begin to probe for additional information. I ask if he’s enrolled in kinder and the mom tells me, with a deep sigh, “No, because he doesn’t talk but we’re working with him at home.”

I share with his mom how exciting kinder truly is and how it will help with his shyness, and also turn to page 26 of the kit to share with her the option of completing a free developmental screening. Immediately, her body language changes, tone changes, a very familiar sight. She proceeds to tell me nothing is wrong with him “but thank you for the help anyway.” The family goes on their way.

About 40 minutes go by and mom and baby are back at my table. To my excitement, she’s wanting to know more about the screening process and who would be able to see the results. When I explain that I would be the only person to see them, her shoulders relax, also a very familiar sight. In that moment, I realized I had made an impact. Regardless if she actually went home to do the screening, I am sure that she left there feeling more confident about taking the first step for her child to succeed. All we did was provide a link.
Over the last ten years, I have beaten myself up for the mistakes I’ve made. A college graduate at 26 years old, I thought I had wasted so much time, and I had regret for most of the choices I’d made. Because of that, every new experience that I’ve entered, I’ve gone in with increasing trepidation that I may fail again. As I reflect on my Public Allies experience today, I realize that it’s been a personal journey, one that has helped me to fight that fear. I came into this process unsure of who I would be at the end, but I knew I wanted to change. I wanted to become brave, find more focus in my career path, and become more active and involved in my community. I intended to give this process all that I had, but I never imagined how much I’d learn in return.

I sat one evening during our first retreat, listening to the life stories of strangers. A range of emotions were felt that evening as we cried together, as we celebrated each other. As I listened to their sufferings, and accomplishments, I began to see something in all of them—bravery and perseverance. It was an intimate experience listening to everyone’s stories, one that I look to when I need to be brave. It’s not easy to stand in front of strangers and share your darkest moments. And whenever I’m about to do something that scares me, I think about all of my allies, I think about how courageous they are, how they wake up with their past on their backs, not letting their mistakes hold them back, still wanting to do good in the world despite the bad the world has done to them.

Although I’ve worked hard to contribute at my placement, it seems that the communities I’ve served have made a greater impact on me than I could have had on them. I was placed at Boys Hope Girls Hope (BHGH), an awesome organization that opens doors of opportunity for low-income, minority youth. From 6th grade through college graduation, BHGH invests in these kids’ development by sending them to some of the best private schools in the Valley, and enriching their minds through various life-skill learning programs. Part of BHGH’s mission is to raise well-rounded individuals by focusing on education, service to others, and personal responsibility, in hopes that they will learn the skills necessary to pull themselves out of poverty.

I work with middle school scholars. These kids are bright beyond compare, they are hard-working, and down-to-earth. Out of the humble beginnings of West Phoenix neighborhoods, they understand how incredibly fortunate they are; still living at home though, they bear witness to what could have been their own fate had teachers not referred them to our program. I thought I understood my scholar’s lives. I thought that growing up in their neighborhoods just meant that they couldn’t play outside after dark, that churches would donate presents at Christmas time. Although they’ve proven themselves qualified for their spot at their schools, my kids face discrimination from teachers and other students who look down on them.
because of their skin. Then they go home and some can’t play outside at all because they’re too scared of the gunshots and gangs.

Through our cohort trainings and discussions, I developed a new lens to look through. We discuss uncomfortable issues surrounding race, identity, poverty, and systemic oppression, and how that all plays into the work we were doing at our placement organizations. In one of those trainings, Public Allies connected me to individuals like Heather Hamel, the Executive Director of Justice That Works. She came to talk to us about the criminal justice system. Her knowledge on the subject piqued my interest; I soon found myself training to be a community educator, learning how to organize communities to fight for their definition of safety. But on the weekdays that followed, as I helped my scholars with their homework, the statistics echoed in my head. As I passed my 6th grader Julie, knowing her dad sits in a cell, the phrase “1 of every 6 Latino men will go to prison” flashed in my head. Then, “Incarcerating individuals in Maryvale costs taxpayers $30 million per year.” Scrolled across my mind, “18,690 immigrants with no criminal record, are held in ICE detention centers, some for years at a time” as I listen to the guitar strumming of one our scholars whose family was deported. I saw our societal downfalls in the faces of my scholars. I was infuriated. They are children, they are supposed to be the living symbols of hope and progress. What are we doing wrong? BHGH was doing something right, they invest in our kids. But why is it necessary for BHGH to exist? These scholars can't get what they need from their own communities. What does that say of our public school system? Why aren’t our weakest communities a concern of our government? So what needs to change?

I’ve been grappling with the question “what can I do to bring about change?” Maybe I’ll go to law school and defend those that don’t have a voice, or run for office. But Ashlee, law school is really hard. I don’t know if you have what it takes? Maybe I’ll go into community organizing and help start a movement! What can you do as one person, anyway? These are some statements I’ve battered myself with every day, but not anymore. There’s a quote from Marianne Williamson that I want to live by from now on. “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant? Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” It was here in this space, with these allies, and my scholars, where I found the inspiration and bravery to push through my fear of failure.

I can now see that I was questioning my abilities because of self-doubt. Through this program, I’ve been aggravated, I’ve been heartbroken, I’ve been energized, and I’ve been activated. It is through this process that I truly learned that everything happens for a reason, that our choices lead us to where we are supposed to be no matter the challenge that follows. I leave this program braver than ever. I can now stand in front of you with a newfound belief in myself, no longer chained to my own self-doubt. I leave this program with new friends in my allies. I leave this program with the tools as a community organizer. I leave this program with an intense passion for equality, criminal justice reform, economic justice. I leave this program with a letter from Thunderbird School of Global Management offering me a giant scholarship, and with goals of running for office someday. I leave this program full of confidence in myself to go forward in the professional world with trust in myself. I started this program chained, but leave this program free.
As a first generation college student, there were many adversities I had to face. My parents did their best to guide and motivate me to pursue higher education. However, when it came down to the college application process or understanding what it meant to even go to college, it was a process my parents weren’t able to understand. Fortunately, I had a high school counselor named Mr. Hayden who became my mentor and guided me through the rest of my college journey. To this day I am very thankful that Mr. Hayden gave me advice during my college process. After months of gathering all the requirements I needed and with scholarships, I was admitted to Arizona State University.

I was not in the top 10 percent of my class, but I had motivation to better myself through higher education. It was a change of mentality and passion that kept me going and there were many students who were going through the same process as me. I knew that Mr. Hayden did his best with the students that he had, but there were always those kids who didn’t have the same opportunity for guidance or mentorship as I did.

So when I had the opportunity to serve youth through education with Public Allies, the organization called Be A Leader Foundation hit home to me. Be A Leader Foundation is a college access program with a vision to reduce the educational attainment gap for underserved students by providing workshops, leadership training, and mentorship. They believe that by inspiring and empowering all students, it will help change their mindset to be college bound, focused, and prepared for higher education.

Serving as the Volunteer Coordinator at Be A Leader Foundation, I’ve learned so much about the community I serve and the impact I create. When it comes to our youth, I have built a relationship by empowering them to be successful and motivated. For example, in our Youth Leadership Conferences, we served about 1,200 8th grade students annually by instilling a college-going mentality, that by making good decisions and fulfilling their requirements, they have access to higher education.

In our mentorship and volunteer program, it is amazing to see that at least 70% of our volunteers and mentors have been through the Be A Leader pipeline of programs from 7th to 12th grade. In a way, it goes to show that what we advocate not only grows back into our volunteer program, but creates new leaders who are ready for life long success. Mr. Hayden was one person who impacted me through my college journey and today, I stand as a first generation college graduate and a Public Ally/AmeriCorps member who also had the opportunity to give back, learn, and truly serve my community.
Every single day at my organization I communicate with individuals who are much, much, much more professionally qualified than I am. On a normal day I’m emailing or calling former deans of universities, retired corporate CEOs, and former financial firm partners. During my first week at placement my mind was regularly full of variations of, “They’re calling me about volunteering in Phoenix? I’ve only been here for like 12 days.” Even now, eight months later, it’s still mind blowing and totally intimidating. I feel like I’ve done so little compared to them.

What my organization does – working with other nonprofit organizations to create meaningful service opportunities for these ridiculously experienced individuals – is kind of a new concept. Long gone are the days in which volunteers show up to stuff envelopes, pack boxes, or sort donations. These volunteers, the ones that I engage with every day, are creating strategic plans. They’re developing programs and sustainable processes for startup nonprofits that wouldn’t have the resources to get it done any other way. They’re stepping into vacant (and pivotal) positions with underfunded organizations and putting their 20, 30, 40 years of professional experience to work for the benefit of others.

I was initially struggling to identify the impact that I’ve had this year, as I don’t really get to physically witness those groundbreaking, emotionally moving moments. In my AmeriCorps position last year, I experienced more of these moments than I can count on both hands. As a literacy tutor for 20-something 7-year-olds, every day offered some small degree of measurable change, even if it was as “simple” as a student finally remembering the difference between e and i. This year, however, I felt that being one-person removed from those groundbreaking moments led to a kind of ambiguity in the ability to measure my impact.

But then I’ll hear that through dedicated outreach and communication, my organization successful connected a retired fund developer with a tiny start-up nonprofit that barely has a strategic plan that lasted through the end of the year. Or the retired Intel engineer who used his project development and engineering knowledge to acquire and install a walk-in freezer for a food bank in Mesa, which provides meals to hundreds of families in that community. There are countless more stories like these that come together to highlight the tremendous impact my organization has been able to have on the community.
Over the past eight months, I’ve helped connect highly skilled and passionate individuals with opportunities that allow them to make, or to help entire organizations develop the capacity to make, those groundbreaking moments each and every day. When I finally sat down to really think about it, I realized that those connections and opportunities have created rippling effects of impact that have yet to even fully be realized.

When I think about the word “impact” in the past year, I also consider the incredible effects my position has had on me in terms of mentorship. As a relative newcomer to career paths in general, not only have my coworkers been inspiring and helpful, but I’ve had an incredible ongoing opportunity to speak with and hear from these incredibly skilled individuals who have had a lifetime of meaningful experiences. Hearing that they’ve enjoyed every minute of their careers but now, at the end, hope to turn their attention to service, reaffirms my belief that I’ve made the right decision to seek-out service from the get-go. Engaging with those passionate, caring individuals – helping them connect and find meaning and purpose – has been an incredibly rewarding experience.

As I now turn my attention to grad school and the continuation of my professional development, I feel extraordinarily fortunate to take with me the knowledge that hundreds of nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and schools throughout Maricopa County have increased their capacity and ability to serve the community via the passionate and dedicated volunteers I have, in part, helped identify and place in impactful positions. I like to think that my position as a Public Ally not only increased the capacity of my partner organization, but that through my position I was able to help increase the capacity of countless others.
I’m guessing in most fields related to serving, it’s natural to question if your services and practices really work. The mission of Central Arizona Shelter Services, my nonprofit placement, is to empower men, women, and children with diverse needs, to end their homelessness by providing shelter and supportive services.

Working with Central Arizona Shelter Services at Vista Colina Family Shelter, I’ve had the opportunity to connect with so many families. I have met individuals encountering all types of barriers to enter housing programs or barriers to obtaining housing on their own. Unfortunately, not every family that I encountered had the opportunity to successfully transition into a sustainable lifestyle.

It was surprising to see how many people were so resistant to accept assistance and use the additional resources we have to offer. You would actually be surprised by the amount of families that have been to multiple shelters in the valley. There are families who have been recycled in the shelter life over and over again. On many occasions, our families felt discouraged during their stay and I started to feel discouraged as well. I began to wonder if our mission and vision was being fulfilled, or if they were pretty words put on paper for the public to support in various different ways.

While drowning in discouragement about my organization and the services we offered, a family moved into Unit 28. This family totally changed my way of thinking. Upon entry, this family was skeptical about the program, like most families in homelessness. They kept to themselves and followed all the rules. They created a case plan with their case manager and followed it to a T. Whenever offered additional opportunities for growth, they took them and were very appreciative. When it came time for the family to exit the shelter, they were again skeptical, but this time it was because they were sad to go. They valued what they had learned and the accomplishments they had made with us. We provided the family with the tools to plan a positive transition out of homelessness.

Upon their exit I quickly began to realize something: WE CANT HELP EVERYONE PERFECTLY! And just because we can’t, doesn’t mean that our services don’t work. Making a difference in the life of one is better than not making a difference at all. Never underestimate the difference YOU can make in the lives of others. Step forward, reach out, and help.

Ayana Rainey
Central Arizona Shelter Services
Vista Colina Family Shelter
About a month ago, I encountered a question: how much dancing, is too much dancing during tutoring? It’s the problem I had with a flamboyant first grader named Ulises. One Tuesday afternoon, probably fed up with learning about short vowel sounds and words that rhyme with log, he stood up and began wildly flailing his arms and legs, moving through the aisles of the tiny desks packed with children, like a dancing machine. He didn’t even wait for me to have my back turned. He just stood up, looked me dead in the eye, and danced. It wasn’t even out of disrespect, or protest, it was necessity. It was the need to expend his energy by dancing. He had had a full day of school, and yet he still had so much pent up energy. And that was the whole first grade tutoring experience in a nutshell: fifteen kids all needing to dance in their own way.

My first reaction was: stop him from dancing now, he needs to be working quietly. But what good would that have done? He’d still be wiggling in his seat, and two seconds later he’d be back at it like a tiny jazz dancer. So instead, I just asked him, half annoyed, half amused, “Ulises, what are you doing?” And he replied, “Dancing,” his face changing from focus to grin back to focus. Conceding that nothing I could have done would have stopped him, I let him dance himself out for a few moments. Then as quickly as the spell had come, he was done and back to working quietly.

I took that concept of letting him dance, and applied it to the other students in the class. One boy, Darriel, wanted only to sit quietly and not do anything, including work. So when I sent another student to his own desk to work by himself because he was yelping like a hyena, or poking another kid in the ear with a pencil for some reason, he would want to be in time out too. So instead of making him sit back at his desk, I had him follow me around the room. Whenever I helped another kid, I would ask Darriel to help too. It worked like a charm, and by having him work with another student, he was doing all his work, and doing it well. Soon I was able to let him work with one on one with the other students without my supervision.

I applied this to all of the other kids as best I could. The two troublemakers of the class always wanted to sit next to each other, and I kept them apart because I thought two troublemakers together could only cause double the trouble. One day they decided to ignore their seating,
as troublemakers do, and sat next to each other. Like magic, they began working like a well-oiled machine, and I realized that it was because they thought they were being defiant by changing seats. With each instance of conceding some of the control, I realized more and more that these tiny humans each had a learning style that fit them. They each had different ways to expend energy, and consequently, different ways of learning. Some of them needed to dance, some to help, and others to fight back. Had I made Ulises stop dancing, I might have closed off that realization before my six weeks as a tutor were up.

By the end of the tutoring for reading and math, both Ulises and Darriel were able to improve their scores from the pre-test. As an added bonus each of them did exceptionally well rhyming words with log. While I can’t take all of the credit, because they have wonderful teachers, parents and interventionists, I would like to think that letting them dance played a part in their success too. I learned from this that as a teacher, I need to listen to the kids I am teaching. I mean really listen, to what they are saying not just with their words, but their movements and actions. They give me, in the most obvious way they can, insight into the best way for them to learn and grow. It’s plain and simple as day if you only pay attention. I hope to use this information as I look towards becoming a teacher myself. Success comes from focusing on the individual, and giving them breathing room to be themselves.
When I received notification of my placement at Civitan Foundation, my excitement mingled with apprehension and a degree of uncertainty about how my new employer’s work would fit into the mission of the Public Allies movement. Undoubtedly, providing meaningful experiences for individuals with developmental disabilities is important and challenging work. But where does social justice fit into that picture?

I found my answer when I moved into the Employment Services Department and began learning about vocational opportunities for this population. What I learned was disheartening. Currently only about one-third of adults with developmental disabilities are employed. And those who are employed continue to experience significant gaps in pay when compared to their neurotypical peers. While there are countless recreational programs for adults with developmental disabilities, the ability and desire of many to join the workforce is too often ignored.

Employment programs were initially provided in the 1970s for individuals who had experienced prior institutionalization as an attempt to expedite their community reintegration. Fortunately, these programs have become more widely available and are continuing to grow. But there is still a significant amount of work to be done. There is a high need for properly trained staff to run employment programs, a great deal of uncertainty among caregivers being faced with the employment option and a needed attitudinal shift throughout the business community.

Had I not been matched with Civitan Foundation, I would have continued to count myself among those who remain ignorant to the vast potential that is being overlooked in our communities. However, through my work as a Public Ally, I have been able to take part in community outreach and employment trainings and have even worked as a Job Coach alongside our supported employees.

As I near the end of my Ally experience, it couldn’t be clearer that the work I am doing is directly related to the creation of a more just society. I intend to continue with outreach efforts and to advocate for more equitable wages for this population as I transition from the Ally experience to obtaining my master’s degree in social service administration. Because of my placement, I have developed a new research interest and the necessary skills to pursue it. I am thankful for the challenges this work has presented and the opportunities it will continue to provide.
When I think back to large projects that I managed at my placement organization, our Christmas program Operation Santa was an enormous project that took over my life for two months, to the point where most of the Allies thought I wasn’t in the program anymore. But when I think back to packing Christmas bags and getting ready for the big day, one of my best memories was when my fellow Ally, Star, came out all day Saturday to help me sort through the mountain of Christmas toys. She came out to volunteer the two weeks leading up to the kick-off and stayed with me until like 10 at night.

One of my favorite organizations that we worked with was LUCHA. I would love to work with them or for an organization that focuses on the same causes of building power with working families to advance social, racial, and economic justice for all. I really loved knocking on doors and getting to know the residents, but I loved it because I got to knock on doors with Phil, another Ally. Phil and his car salesman like speech that he sold to everyone who opened their door that day, was one of the more entertaining things I had ever heard. Phil and I pretending to speak Spanish and sneaking past the management staff is what I will remember most from that service day.

Managing the Public Allies demands along with a full time work schedule was a big learning curve for me and I was able to and forced to manage my time and become organized. This was important in my development, but it was really stressful at times. Being in school was a point of concern way back in the interview stage, so I wanted to be able to prove that you can handle the balance and not let either of the two priorities effect one another. Sitting through a somewhat meaningless lecture while you have fifty things to do at placement can be rather frustrating. Luckily, I got to sit next to Ally, a fellow Ally, during those lectures and know that we had the same frustrations. Being able to relate with someone, or even just complain with them, who was also a part of Public Allies and knew the process, helped get me through the past two semesters. Having Ally in my class was a huge relief and a great support for me through the process.

Public Allies was a new beginning for me; a time to meet new people and connect with peers that have the same interest as I do. I was excited to meet all of the fellow Allies and...
just start over. I quite literally got to start over a friendship when Zak and I both showed up at orientation for the program. The two of us grew up across the street from each other and were good friends through grade school. It was really interesting and nice to come back into each other’s lives as two completely different people. Reconnecting with Zak was one of the most impactful parts of my whole Public Allies process.

So looking back at impact, I have done a lot of work both at placement and through the process that I am proud of, but boiling down each moment it was all about the people that were supporting me and serving with me. My most important takeaways and moments all had in common the friends I have made during this process. We truly need people by our side through our different journeys in life, and I am grateful to have made so many lifelong allies through this one of mine.
While placed at the Central Arizona Shelter Services Single Adult Shelter as a Housing Liaison in the Case Management and Supportive Services office, there were only a few clients that I would keep on my regular ‘case load’ - really just those that seemed like they were close to obtaining housing and only needed minimal support in moving-out. One particular client seemed to fit that bill, in that when I first met with him he had moved to Arizona with his wife less than a week before, had already found work, and was planning to start saving for a place and get out quickly. It was a little rockier at first than expected; he thought he was hired full-time, but found out everyone started at part-time, and that he would be able to move up to full-time if he worked hard and “proved himself”. Over the coming weeks that I met with him, it seemed like he was working hard, taking whatever shifts he could regardless of when they were, but would consistently end up having most of his shifts cut short when the restaurant was slow. All the while on his off-time, he was continuing to look for more stable and guaranteed full-time work.

This struggle to find consistent work continued on for a little while, which he felt was due in large part to a felony drug charge from over 5 years ago, and I could see that every time we met, the pressure seemed to be building. He let me know that his wife, who was also in shelter, was pregnant, and he wanted to do whatever he could to get them into a home before she was due. She was also looking for work but had so far been unsuccessful, and feared it would only become more difficult as she started to show more. At one point I ran into him out in shelter, and he told me that he had been struggling to sleep because of a pain in his abdomen that had been getting worse over the past couple of days. He said that he was scared of going to the clinic because he was worried that he might have to miss work, and that it would only be pushing him and his wife further from being able to move into an apartment.

Our regular meetings continued, and each time we met he seemed a bit more discouraged, and beaten-down. We went through the normal routines of checking that he was saving and still looking for more work, and discussed some of the potential housing programs we were trying to refer either him or his wife to. While we talked, I would give him a space to vent his frustrations, as well as talk about his successes and what things were actually going well,
and he always seemed very appreciative. He told me he would typically leave feeling much better, and ready to keep pushing forward.

And then I come into the office one morning, start going through papers and files, and see that he is gone. His wife had received a housing voucher, and they had moved into an apartment a couple days prior. And with that, they were just onto the next phase of their life, wherein myself, and hopefully the shelter as a whole, are just a distant memory. And this moment, one, that when taken at face value, isn’t really very dramatic or even uncommon, ended up sticking out to me. It seemed to really exemplify a notion that may come up often in this type of work; that I don’t need to get too caught up in looking for some big heartwarming moment where I can easily see what my efforts have been building up to. But rather, I can find contentment in the knowledge that I made a difference of some kind along the way. And whether it was those more standardized functions of my role, or just being there as a listening and encouraging ear, I can’t really say which ended up being more impactful. But I can just hope that for whatever difference I did make, it will be positive, and lasting.
What I learned about myself this year as an Ally is that in the long run, coming out of my shell and trying new things, meeting new people, and communicating with individuals on a daily basis has changed my way of thinking. I can honestly say that this experience and my work at the Food Bank of Chandler Christian Community Center has taught me well to appreciate what I have.

My aha moment I would have say is when my supervisor took the time to step out of his office to speak and relate to the volunteers and personnel that we were giving out food to. As I listened to the conversations that he was having with people, I could hear a lot of grief and sadness in what they were saying. He really got in depth to understanding their situations and being able to relate to a lot of the things they kept bringing up. I think that stayed with me because it made me appreciate working for someone like him and knowing that he understood what it meant to need that type of help.

I have learned and listened to a lot of people who are in poverty and welfare. In hearing their stories, I have related to them because their situations remind me of where I grew up. It feels good everyday helping those in need knowing that in the long run, I am somehow making a difference in others' lives.
Applying to Public Allies Arizona not only felt like a safe move to ensure a job in the nonprofit sector after graduating from Arizona State University, but it also created a path for me to fulfill a calling to be of service to community.

During my first year of service I was placed at Native American Connections as a program coordinator for a brand new Community Development and Engagement (CDE) certificate program at a local community college. As someone with a passion for housing, working in the area of higher education was not something I had given much thought to. However, as I worked with steering members and partners on visioning and implementing this program, I came to realize that with my experiences, and challenges, as a first generation Indigenous college student, I was in a fortuitous place of leadership to help create a program with the potential to impact our communities exponentially with each enrolled student. I was also in a position to create an academic pathway to service and advocacy for students of color, something I would have benefitted from when I was a young student looking for a profession. Lastly, I was over the moon about being able to serve with an organization whose mission focused on the local Native community, but also served the whole community (including non-Native individuals and families) with housing, behavioral health, and community development services.

As a second year Public Ally placed at Center for Neighborhood Leadership, I am still working with the CDE program and its partners: Native American Connections, Vitalyst Health Foundation (formerly St. Luke’s Health Initiatives), Maricopa Community Colleges, and Community Learning Partnership. Initially the CDE program started with its first cohort at Phoenix College, and this year continued with a shared second cohort between Phoenix College and South Mountain Community College, looking to expand into a full 60 credit hour Associate’s Degree with a pipeline to Arizona State University for students looking towards a four year degree. As with my first year placement, I am in an absolutely exceptional position to be placed at a dynamic organization that works on empowering high school students, women, and community members through leadership engagement programs.
Reflecting on my two years as a Public Ally and AmeriCorps member, I can wholeheartedly say that this program has enriched me professionally and personally. Professionally, I have been given the numerous opportunities to attend conferences focused on local American Indian issues as well as community health; I have travelled to Detroit (twice) and Minneapolis to observe the amazing work being done by local change agents; I have been sponsored by our steering committee and partners to further develop my skills by being a part of the first CDE cohort and this year learning the principles and implementation of Emergent Learning. Personally, my growth has been impacted by orbiting around leaders who are people of action, and who have ignited a spark of confidence and paved a way for me to think of my impact in ways that are not limited to a career in the nonprofit sector.
In my experience, you never know what a smile will unlock within its recipient. Because of that, I smile. I smile big, and I smile often. While this often brings about some suspect encounters, more often than not, it attracts moments to connect with the world around me.

It all started with a light rail trip to Phoenix, a smile, and Vernon. I vowed I would never forget his name. Vernon sat across the aisle of the light rail, facing me and a friend of mine. Perhaps enticed by my pearly whites and overly exposed gums, he began to strike up conversation. What at first seemed like prodding turned into a lengthy conversation that carried on until we approached Vernon’s stop. That conversation forever transformed the way that I viewed my journey towards a life of service and solidified the decision I had made to pack my entire life into a suitcase and head across the country to Arizona a few months prior, with a mere $100 to my name. This all in the hopes of being accepted into the AmeriCorps Public Allies program.

“When are you from?” Vernon asked me. “Columbia, Maryland,” I shared, half expecting to quickly move on to the next question I could see formulating in his head. “No way! I’m from Maryland!” he responded. “Do you know where Dobbin Road is? Near the Target?!”

Now, anyone who knows the exact location of the Target that is singlehandedly responsible for my poor spending habits is a kindred spirit for sure. Naturally, I just had to learn more about my new pal, and, luckily, he was dying to know more about me. I learned a lot about Vernon that evening; like how he moved to Arizona shortly after I did to be closer to his son and how he was doing his best to find work and get back on his feet. It was my mention of my service with AmeriCorps, however, that really seemed to connect us.

“You’re from AmeriCorps?” he asked with wide eyes. I replied with a yes and a few more details about my service and placement objectives. I was taken aback when he expressed his love for those who served with AmeriCorps. He went on to tell me that AmeriCorps members had helped him and his family during a very difficult time in their lives and that he was forever grateful. The emotion he was radiating instantly transferred to me and it was at that moment that I knew I had made the right choice for my life. He then expressed how he wished he could be a part of something like that, but, being that he never went to college, he assumed it wasn’t a possibility. I took great pride in telling him that his background didn’t matter and that AmeriCorps was looking for diverse members with all types of experiences. What he did with that knowledge, I have no idea, but that night I saw a light ignite in a man who was seemingly searching for purpose and change.

I have since moved on from Arizona’s wonderful public transportation system however, the testimonies of those I have encountered along with my own personal account of growth has shown me just how much opportunity can transcend an individual. I see just how much the opportunity to earn money while doing work that matters (however little those earnings might be) and the opportunity to inspire and be inspired, can transform someone’s life. It surely has transformed mine. In a world where face to face communication is becoming a thing of the past, I am humbled. Because of Vernon, I will forever continue to smile.
I feel like the biggest impact I've seen all year is how being placed at the YMCA has changed my life in ways I couldn't even imagine. When I first started working at the Y, I just viewed it as another job. But not for long.

Meeting the staff at the Y, I didn’t think I was going to get so attached to the people I work with, but each in their own way has influenced me. The person who impacted me the most was my supervisor, Ryan. The Y was my first real job, and Ryan showed me how to be a hard worker. Being around Ryan and watching what he does showed me how I want to be in a leadership role. He gets to know his staff on a personal level, and it seems like it makes it easier to lead them because they have that bond and he knows their strengths and weaknesses. I've never had a boss who is easy to talk to and ask questions of, and if I'm having trouble with something he never denies his advice to me. It's a very open atmosphere around him. I've learned from watching him, and believe that I'm growing as I walk around the Y and get to know people, giving me those social skills that I need in the future.

I learned so much from Ryan, and I'm glad that I got to meet him and the whole YMCA staff. The YMCA has impacted me in ways I'll never forget.
Something that I learned about myself is the ability to be able to work in a schedule every day. This year I wanted to challenge myself to be in a professional environment. After being in school and doing full time art for a few years it was a big change for myself. I had to commit to something and learn to have a pretty solid schedule for almost a year. I know it may sound very easy to have a schedule every day, like a routine for some people, but it isn’t the case for me. I don’t like routines, I have a 4-year old daughter, other jobs, and I am a bit of a rebel. With the position that I have, it has been a learning process for me. I had to learn to be ready to work in the AM, wake up extra early, plan ahead, prepare, and go to sleep early. This was one of the biggest changes this year for me, being a night owl that stays up all night working on projects. It has made me more frugal with my time and more responsible with my resources.

This year, I was surprised to know of a program that existed such as Casa De Sueños. This program is wonderful for so many reasons. The purpose of the program is to have a temporary home for the youth that are migrating from Latin America. They allow them to go to school and learn English and other skills that they can use in life. Casa helps them to develop life skills that maybe they didn’t know they had and empowers the youth and gives them confidence. For some of the youth, it is a beacon of light and hope. Many youth don’t have support or family, especially in the United States.

There were many moments when my heart was touched by the stories I heard from the youth and the youth care workers about their experiences migrating from their countries. I heard stories of oppression, poverty, and lack of resources; somewhere down the line they spoke about hope and wanting to see a brighter future for themselves and their families. One of the most memorable moments for me was when we sat down to eating during a Halloween celebration with all the youth. We had about 30 youth that day and we were going to begin to eat; the youth had their moment of silence similar to a prayer. Then one of the youth said, “I will never forget this moment,” and I said, “Why is that?” He responded, “I have never had dinner with a family like this before in my life.” I wanted to cry at that moment, because I know that the youth come from some heavy backgrounds and some don’t have family. I felt honored to have been sitting with all the youth at that moment because to me they brought me hope, inspiration, and many indescribable emotions.
When my co-workers shared their stories from their past I was engaged, entertained, shocked, and learned so much about different countries in Latin America. I saw many differences and similarities between cultures and race. There were many stories that moved me hearing how many of my coworkers suffered through poverty and hunger and how they survived in a country that persecutes you for your beliefs. Many of the stories are unbelievable and I can see them being written in books or movies.

Looking back at my time at Casa De Sueños, sometimes I feel like I didn’t do enough. I know that our time is limited and we are always learning as well. Overall, I helped with some celebrations and acculturation, arts, tutoring, and computer skills activities. I helped coordinate and support the Christmas event for the youth and it felt good to pick up the presents from the organizations, prepare the food, and work with my team and volunteers form the community. We’ve created 3 little libraries that will hold hundreds of books for underprivileged communities. We are painting small murals that will express each home’s theme. Sometimes I’ll cook for the youth; one time I cooked for over 30 people. Sometimes I’ll help support youth care workers and take them to outings and events that they enjoy such as hiking, baseball games, or working out. Recently, I realized that I got out of my comfort zone and started being more active because of them; they are my motivation. I am currently working with many other volunteers and coordinating programs such as dance, music, and sexual education workshops.

I believe Public Allies and the staff deserve much of the credit for this program because they work a lot, have passion, and share knowledge with us. They are cutting edge leaders and role models. Some people may downplay Public Allies, but this is one of the best national programs in the country and we serve under amazing leaders. They are patient with us, caring, knowledgeable, resourceful, uplifting, and have the best interest in our dreams and careers. I believe that I am more prepared to keep following my goals in the non-profit sector, and in pursuing work in social entrepreneurship, education and policy.
For thousands of years, storytelling has been an important part of our humanity. Even in our digital age, stories continue to appeal to us just as much as they did to our ancient ancestors. As the data analyst fellow at Maricopa County Education Service Agency (or MCESA), I learned how to visualize stories and uncover insights through data and maps, although I am still very much an amateur. But I know that data is very powerful; it has the power to influence the policies and decisions that affect us all. It also helps us to see the reality of things, no matter how grim they may be. This is where data storytelling comes in. When a narrative is coupled with data, it helps to explain to your audience what’s happening in the data. When visuals are applied to data, they can enlighten the audience to insights they wouldn’t see otherwise. But then when you combine the right visuals and narrative with the right data, you hit a sweet spot that can potentially influence and drive change. When data and stories are used together, they resonate with audiences on both an intellectual and emotional level.

But I will be honest with you; I had a hard time making an emotional connection to my work and I wasn’t sure at all how effectively I was serving my community. After my first few months of toiling away in my desk job, I became restless. I thought to myself, this isn’t what I really wanted to do. But then a spark lit up, I realized that the connection had always been there after all. I just forgot my story, where I came from, and the stories of other people. That spark was a woman named Brigid, or BJ, as she likes to be called. She worked in the Juvenile Transition department at MCESA and she was an extremely intelligent woman. She was an expert in the topic of adverse childhood experiences, or childhood trauma. This was a terminology that I really haven’t heard of until now, but I was really interested because right there and then, I realized that I was a product of adverse childhood experience. I could’ve been a dropout and that really hit close to home for me, especially when I think about my 18-year old little brother. One of the questions I had asked BJ was why some children thrive despite having adverse childhood experiences, while others are left behind. I was specifically comparing myself, a college graduate who was also deaf (and I’ve had my fair share of battling my inner demons), to my little brother whose childhood trauma has left him so mentally ill that he had to drop out at 6th grade. BJ explained that even though our circumstances seemed the same, they were in fact different: I simply received more attention because I went to the right educational institute that specialized in special education and I was able to get all of my needs met.
My little brother unfortunately got the short end of the straw. And that's when I saw the inequality of how the system fails our youth. It also lifted a burden of guilt that I've held so long, now that I am a little more knowledgeable of my little brother’s situation and that of others like him.

After that very important insight, I self-evaluated and made an effort to look deeper into MCESA's mission and their initiative. My desk job became much more personal, so my grumble and moans became insignificant. Along with the shift of my mindset, I've also noticed that I'm much more likely to feel more empathetic when stories are shared. There's a limit to how closely we can work with other people if we are oblivious to “what's going on for them” and “where they're coming from”. By sharing stories, it seems, we invite each other into our worlds. This enhances our interconnectedness, shared awareness, and possibilities for collaborations. That is what I aim to do with my goal as a budding data storyteller and to work behind the scenes, helping disadvantaged groups and the unheard to gain representation, and to not allow their stories to be forgotten.
My main question for Dr. Ashcraft during the Public Allies initial retreat was, “How do you measure impact?” He responded by simply asserting that you measure impact by assessing how well you are accomplishing your mission. This has become my quest over the past 8 months, and I have found that there are many ways to measure impact. I could tell you how many teens have come through the Safe Place program in the past 7 months. I could tell you how many kids were able to return to a safe home after coming through the Tumbleweed Safe Place program, or, I could tell you stories. Stories have impacted the youth of Tumbleweed and influenced the way I view impact.

Stories of a short Native American boy with the largest brown eyes you’ve ever seen who pulled me aside to ask if he and his brother could stay in the program for a little while longer. Ty and his brother Damion had come into the Tumbleweed program through Safe Place because his parents were living on the streets. Since our program works towards family reunification, the case manager met with the parents to find out their story. By their own admission, they loved their kids very much, but were heavily addicted to methamphetamines and couldn’t care for them at the moment. As the time for the boys to leave the program was coming close, this tear-filled question of staying came with an explanation of why he could not go back to his parents who were still living on the streets. Their case underwent investigation and it was decided that the Department of Child Safety would take custody. Ty and Damion are now staying at a group home down the street and call the house to say hello daily. Without services like Safe Place going to pick up these boys and without programs like Tumbleweed, they would still be with their parents looking for shelter.

Stories of girls like Carissa, who I picked up as a Safe Place client from a local school. When I met her, this 14 year old Latino girl was in the counselor’s office and would barely looked up at me through her long red hair. She gently nodded at my questions and sat quietly as we slowly rode back to Tumbleweed. I soon came to find out that this is not her personality at all. Carissa had a gorgeous smile that could change the world, and two large dimples to match. With dreams of becoming a fashion designer, this extremely creative young lady had a contagious personality causing all around to smile and laugh with her. Within days after
being in our program, Carissa sadly learned of her father's passing. The case manager and I attended the funeral with her. We were able to encourage and console her as she bravely stood up before 150 people to deliver her beautifully written condolences. Even in the midst of grief, she took time to create a paper Christmas tree and write personalized notes to her friends and the staff. She continued to smile and make others laugh.

Following this, I wrote in my December report to Public Allies, “My heart is broken by the continual realization that there are many things that I am powerless to change. The brokenness that the young people I work with experience, I cannot change. Their past background or mistakes, I cannot change. The abuse or neglect they’ve experienced, I cannot change. As I pray for them often, my faith has been stretched with the question of ‘Why?’ I am also reminded that prayer still works and I see them answered almost daily. Witnessing these young people’s strength and resilience reminds me that in the face of all adversity dreams still exist. A former sex trafficking victim shared her story when introducing a presentation on Streetlight at the Summit for Volunteerism. She stated that if she had a mentor in her life when she was young, she would have avoided a lot of pain. When I see the smile of these young people I know there is always hope for a better future, and I can be a part of that by influencing positive change.”

Sometimes impact is measurable by numbers, and other times it isn’t quite that simple. I have been able to offer a listening ear and walk alongside these young adults through life’s best and worst moments. Numbers can display how Safe Place was able to meet the urgent need of a youth in crisis but being able to experience and encourage them through their journey has had a personal and intangible impact on both them and myself.
Coming into Public Allies, I was completely unaware of who, what, when, where, and why I was here or how I was going to have an effect on the community. I wondered if I would be a strong candidate, or if my personality would fit in with the organization. Most of all, I worried about my appearance. Sometimes, appearance can make or break your first impression. I noticed the future allies around me had definitely been introduced to the business professional world, as I had not been. I quickly deemed myself underdressed and unfit for the partner organizations until, luckily, I was hired by Maricopa County Regional School District, in which the interviews were conducted by individuals in suits and ties, whereas I wore one of my three button-up shirts, my only pair of slacks, and my hand-me-down dress shoes.

My first couple of weeks at my placement went ok. I realized that I really needed to develop myself professionally because I had never worked in an environment as this one before. Over the next couple of months, I developed pretty smoothly in terms of my actions and personality within the workplace. I fit in well, except for the fact that, due to life circumstances, I was still unable to buy new clothes or shoes. The students started noticing that I would wear a lot of the same clothes and that the soles of my shoes were, literally, ripping off. It was embarrassing and very discouraging for me, as I didn’t want something like that to reflect on my work.

Little did I know, the teacher kept an eye out for me and one day, on our way home, said she needed to stop by Dillard’s for her granddaughter. When we got inside, she had me pick out four shirts and three pairs of slacks and told me “Merry Christmas”. It was extremely hard for me to accept this kind of gift because it meant so much to me. I expressed my deep appreciation and fought back tears of joy on our ride home. I felt ecstatic at the fact that I could finally “look” the part. When I went to school the next day, the Assistant Superintendent complimented me on my professional look. I felt extremely confident in myself knowing that I was visually representing the school in a professional manner. I felt respected and accepted in this world of business, and this moment really has changed the way I view the workplace, and more importantly, myself.

This really helped me realize that people can positively acknowledge you, whether you expect them to or not. It helped me realize that how you present yourself to other people might reflect on how you feel about yourself and to always respect your appearance. It helped me realize how much society will focus on the outside, before they reach the inside. Finally, it helped me realize the positive influence that people can have on each other’s lives, and the importance of paying that forward to someone else. I want to live my life extending my hand to anyone wherever I can.
My name is Jehryn Plunkett and I am a Second Year Public Ally. Life has come full circle for me in the role I have with Valley of the Sun United Way. As the Community Impact Coordinator for Data and Analysis in the Ending Homelessness Initiative, I organize and develop an understanding of the population served at Project Connect events. Sometime before my first year with Public Allies, in which I served at Phoenix Day working with low-income families in south central Phoenix, I was once a guest at this very event that I now help to plan and execute. It’s motivating to know how the impact of having various basic needs services available all in one place really can be pivotal in jumpstarting someone’s path to self-sufficiency.

This fiscal year to date, FY2015-2016, Project Connect events have served a total of 1,829 guests! This would not be possible without the dedication of 1,184 volunteers. This collaborative community effort bringing together agencies from both nonprofit and governmental sectors have collectively made over 4,000 service connections. It’s inspiring to read surveys from guests after they have gone through the event from start to finish, accessing services and enjoying freshly prepared meals. Whether it was their first time visiting, or they have participated upwards of ten times, the amount of gratitude expressed makes it all worthwhile, feeding my drive to continuously improve upon our platform to ensure we meet guests’ needs.

Walking around assessing the flow of everything, it’s hard not to overhear conversations between the guests and their volunteer guest guides who work one on one to help ensure all needs are met within availability, easing stress of trying to navigate the event on their own. They share personal stories with one another and develop relationships of trust. These can be very sensitive times for many, and far away from a life they are familiar with, one often filled with violence and fear. Believing everyone present is there to help them, not judge them, is an idea they must warm up to in order to take full advantage of the opportunity. This is not the extent of my story, but I can sympathize because it could have easily been me.
At the beginning, I did not know much about my organization and I am still learning. At ACYR, I work with many youth and young adults who have trouble staying in school and work, and my job is to help them maintain that.

Out of all the youth and young adults I work with, one stays with me. I met this girl, we had a small chat and she told me that she was not only balancing school and work, she was also about to move in with a friend’s family, because she was rejected by her own. As she was telling me about all her life struggles and how she felt that if she worked hard enough that she could achieve anything, she had no one to impress but herself. She had the biggest smile on her face that could light up the darkest of rooms. She reminded me of myself, of how I used to be, like looking at my own reflection. Then her ride was there to pick her up. Before she left, I instantly had a reaction and I went to tell her to not let things get in her way; to never give up and to not lose her motivation. She was never told that people don’t need an “S” attached to their chest to change the world. Then she was gone, my farewell smile collapsed.

Later at my apartment, I sat down and asked myself “Is this it for you?” and “Is this all you’ll ever do?” as I was thinking about what I am going to do in my future. I lost my motivation, my enthusiasm, and my inspiration. I lost my way and I wasn’t to be found. As tears rolled down my face, I got up and looked into the mirror, and I asked myself if today was my last day here on Earth would I be happy with everything I did in my life? As my tears dried, I had to stop dwelling and I told myself one last thing, and it’s also one of my favorite quotes from Randy Pausch – “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.” I just wish I could cheat a little at this card game. So I left my room with my backpack in hand and headphones fully cranked. I had a whole evening to look forward to, I got on the light rail and headed towards Tempe Town Lake and there I wrote down my goal for the next 6 months.

I have not seen her as of late, I hope all is well. I think meeting her was a wakeup call for me; I needed to see the mirror image of myself. Generally, I am a happy person, I smile a lot and that’s all I have to offer, my smile. As of now, I have two months left with my organization and I feel I am still starting the race but everyone else is ready to hit the finish line. Currently, I am working on a video with my organization, explaining different ways that youth are disconnected from work and school. As for me, I am cementing my goals and plans; my Program Manager has been pushing to make sure I graduate; I have a supervisor who is probably going to be the greatest mentor in my life. Lastly, I am pushing myself as hard as possible to make sure I am accountable and I hope to continue to gain knowledge. I know I am going to struggle; we all are, but it’s how I deal with it that will show my willingness to learn and grow.
It was a typical lazy Saturday— or was it a Tuesday? Not completely sure, I was unemployed and most of the week, I spent it on the couch I heard the door knock and I went over to open it. It was a young man, no more than 15, dressed in all black clothing, and a backpack. “I’m homeless,” he said “I need 10 dollars to take the bus.”

Then all these thoughts rushed into my head: There aren’t any homeless, let alone homeless children in my neighborhood. His clothes are clean; I guess he hasn’t been homeless very long if he is homeless. Why would he come and knock directly on my house if he was? Everyone knows the business is in the freeway exits. Then I couldn’t remember where my wallet was, did I leave it in the kitchen?

So ultimately I just said, “I don’t have any.” He walked away and I never saw him again. Homelessness among young people is a problem I hadn’t even thought of. How could I have helped? Should I have given him money? His memory stayed with me and eventually inspired me to do the work I am doing now.

A few months later, I join Public Allies where I made the following request, “I want to work with homelessness or with youth.” I was assigned to Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development, an organization that works with homeless and displaced youth, just what I was looking for. Quickly, I became more and more familiar with the problem of the homelessness among young people and familiar with the individual faces and stories of the youth that were part of this system. My job was primarily to work on something called “engagement” in group settings. I was supposed to teach them life skills and motivate them to attain and maintain work and/or an education. Well, I had life skills and had gone to school, so simple enough? It was then that I realized the difficulty of it. I was working with people that had a past that was subject to trauma and a system that motivated them to stay where they were instead of pushing forward toward better futures. There was one youth in particular that I recall working with. We will call him Ben.

Ben was often in trouble. He was placed in an apartment directly across from the office in order to keep a close eye on him. He was always in everyone’s face. Sometimes, he would
barge into the office unannounced without knocking, ranting about this or that that he was angry about or something that he needed, and then when he was given what he wanted, he would pounce out, slamming the door behind him. Then after 10 minutes, he would return and apologize to everyone.

One day during the group that I ran, I decided that I wanted to talk about art. My thinking was simple: if I talk about how artists express themselves through art, maybe this could help some of them to open up more about their problems and their needs. I started by explaining a Picasso. Not exactly something thrilling for them, it seemed like. Then I gave them a chance to draw.

They had to split up a piece of paper into 4 boxes and I would ask a question and they had to draw the answer. I decided that the first question be, “What is your greatest fear?” Everyone made their drawings and asked if they would like to share what they drew. Ben participated. He showed the picture and immediately said, “Let me explain it ‘cus you won’t know what it is.” Let’s just say his artistry was “Picasso-like”. “I drew rape,” he said. “I was raped by people close to me and fear it happening again.”

I had opened Pandora’s Box and had no idea what to say. As smoothly as I could, I moved on to the other drawings. Group must have lasted another 15 minutes and I couldn’t figure what to say or even if I should. But he was the one that followed up.

Once group ended and I was cleaning up, he walked with me towards the office and said, “Hey I’m really interested in art; if you ever do something like this let me know.” I had made a connection with him. When talking to the rest of the staff I realized that he didn’t talk about his past ever; it was too hard for him. Ben eventually exited the program, and not for any good reasons. I never saw him again.

A few months later, I was assigned a different office in a different location. I was assigned to run a Youth Art event in my building. Youth from the different programs my organization offers had been working on art throughout the year and were going to get to display them in the event.

The youth that arrived to the event really liked the hors d’oeuvres and showed of their art to their friends. A couple of hours later, and my team and I stayed to clean-up. The art was either given back to the author or kept by us. My supervisor decided that we could each keep one. In the pile was some photography by none other than Ben. He was no longer there but had left a mark.

That is what I have learned during placement, how to leave behind a part of me and how to make connections. Remember the first kid? The one that knocked on my door? I always thought that if I had given him those 10 dollars, told him a kind word, maybe his life would have been changed. And maybe so, but ultimately what did happen is that he changed mine. His knock set me on a path from the couch to something greater. I came into placement thinking that I was going to knock on a lot of doors for these kids; doors of opportunity, doors of success. But ultimately, it was them that knocked on my door. I was just sitting on my couch.
Kids that are in adult situations.  
Defending themselves, their life, their stories.  
Not having the luxury of not having a plan.  
They’re responsible for themselves and others.  
All under the age of 18.

There is a fine line between asking them to be responsible and having them be kids. They are constantly being reminded that they need to be an adult. The reality is that they do know.  
So the opportunities where they can be kids is RARE.

There are examples,

Moments where they play, laugh, teach and support each other.

A kid learning to ice skate falling but getting back up, other kids trying to help them but laughing the entire time. They always get back up.

A chore of cleaning a van turned into a water fight.  
A kid learning about organic chemistry and having their mind blown. Yes! You are made out of tiny atoms!

A kid being asked to decorate a house for Halloween and going from 0 to 100 creativity.  
They may have actually gone too far.

These are just some of the groups and events I planned. Some were meant to educate, inspire and enjoy, others just happened.  
The opportunity to forget the situation they are in without reflecting and thinking about it.  
Kid just enjoying the moment.

niños siendo niños
Four women sit on a couple of couches rooting and heckling the American Idol contestants on TV. It’s around 8pm and we’re all sitting in a warehouse that’s in industrial south Phoenix and has been converted to a homeless shelter for women. They are probably homeless just because they don’t have the family and community supports that would have kept them off the streets in their time of crisis, but they’ve found their new community here.

I finish asking the client I’m with, “Marcy,” probing personal questions that I really hope will get her into the housing program I’m working with. She’s had a hard life dealing with developmental disabilities, being diagnosed SMI (with a Serious Mental Illness), walking with a limp, blind in one eye, few teeth left, and a frequent meth user.

My organization and I have been searching for the right clients to match to the right housing for a while. But only now, traveling to the other organization’s space and meeting them where they can be found, did we have the chance to meet Marcy and connect her with the program that’s been there all along looking for people in her situation.

Working in the Lodestar Day Resource Center Housing office, I’ve been connecting organizations like UMOM New Day Centers, The City of Phoenix, the VA, ABC Housing, Central Arizona Shelter Services, Community Bridges, our own Lodestar Day Resource Center, One n Ten and Terros Safe Havens to our system and I expect many more to join as we expand. My goal is to pool our resources in one information system to end homelessness by quickly referring our homeless clients, starting with the most vulnerable among them, to appropriate housing options.

We can only do this by fostering a community of organizations where we respect each other, take each other as we are, and contribute what we can. Only then will we be successful.
Most days I keep to myself messing around with Excel spreadsheets until they look pretty. My supervisor likes it when data “looks pretty.” I am the Performance and Quality Improvement (PQI) Coordinator; meaning I am the quality assurance lady that busy program managers actively avoid in the hallways. It’s not easy being the one to constantly point out flaws, even if they are presented in handcrafted, “pretty” Excel spreadsheets.

Let me give you some brief background information on Tumbleweed, and why I promise the program managers that PQI is their friend. Tumbleweed serves homeless youth in the valley. That’s pretty simple, right? Wrong. We serve community kids, kids from the foster care system, from the court system, minors and young adults, and refugees from Central America, and we provide crisis response, emergency housing, long-term independent living, group living, clinical counseling, education resources, street outreach, and an incredible list of other drop-in resources. Did I mention that each program receives funding from a unique list of grants and contracts that all require specific metrics and outcomes to be met?

Until this year, program managers often were blissfully unaware of the required metrics their program needed to achieve to receive each of their grants. The bliss always morphs into anxiety when the grants department comes asking for those metrics of which the program managers were so pleasantly unaware. Sometimes they get their continued funding, sometimes we did not come through, but almost every time service quality dips in these moments of high anxiety.

Now, I promised PQI would become everybody’s friend. This year, as part of my capacity building work at Tumbleweed, I have had the opportunity to develop a central metrics database with program specific detail to share with every Tumbleweed program manager. This database quickly informs all managers what metrics they need to measure and what outcomes they need to achieve to receive that grant that lets them do the work they do.

My work with PQI ensures our doors stay open for all the youth we serve. It ensures the Emergency Housing Program remains open to offer a bed to the client struggling to find a job, with a criminal record, who fled domestic violence at her housing situation, leaving her on the street. It ensures the Safe Place program remains funded to offer a safe shelter with understanding staff to the LBGTQ youth who just came out to his family and was disowned. It ensures that the Young Adult Program continues to offer a second chance and a place to grow for those teens who have been rejected and excluded from society. Who knew some pretty spreadsheets could accomplish so much?
Being a Second Year Ally has had its challenges, but most importantly it has given me a chance for personal and professional growth. Doing a second year of Public Allies has allowed me to make an impact in the community much bigger than I could have hoped for. During this year of service, I have also learned more about myself and I have learned that I am capable of making a difference. There are many social justice issues that I am passionate about, one of them being food insecurity, because it hits close to home.

Being placed at VSUW has truly been a privilege because I have been given the opportunity to transform individual lives and entire communities. During my first year as a Public Ally, I was able to help at risk youth in Phoenix break the cycle of poverty and achieve a higher education by doing community outreach and assisting with classes that taught children about leadership, art, music, and important job skills. This year of service has been different because I have been able to interact with people of all ages, backgrounds, and from different communities in Arizona. Before I began this year of service I knew that food insecurity was a big problem in our country, but I was not aware of how many people, especially children, are affected by it on a daily basis. Growing up I knew what it felt like to go to bed hungry and not know where my next meal will come from, and that is why eliminating chronic hunger is extremely important to me.

Hunger comes in many different forms and it can affect someone close to you without you knowing it. As the Community Impact Coordinator for the Ending Hunger Team at VSUW I have been able to listen to personal stories from people who are suffering from food insecurity during community conversations that I have facilitated. They have all been hardworking people who have had to deal with many hardships in their life, which has made it very difficult for them to prosper. Many parents go hungry so their children won’t. Some have to decide if paying the bills or buying food is more important; buying fast food and junk food is often more affordable than buying good healthy food, and many do not want to depend on food banks or government assistance because they want to get back the dignity they feel they have lost. Helping with the WeekEnd Hunger Backpack program has also made me more passionate about helping children to not feel hungry and to focus on school instead of worrying about where their next meal will come from.

When you hear personal stories, such as of a little boy not drinking his milk and not eating half of his lunch at school because he would rather take it home so his baby brother can have something to eat, it is heart breaking. We live in a country where so much food gets thrown away every day, but millions of people are still suffering from chronic hunger, and this should not be happening. The work I have done at VSUUV to help reduce chronic hunger in Maricopa County by 2/3 by 2020 has been a life changing experience. Community conversations, partnerships, assessments, action plans for each limited supermarket area, vetting, building taskforces in each community, putting together works groups to create different plans to reduce hunger, and more, have all been crucial in helping reduce hunger and I am thankful that I have been able to be part of this great experience.
The Opportunity Fair was a great experience. Thousands of youth attended a one day event which hosted employers eager to hire, colleges eager to enroll, and nonprofit organizations promoting their services. I directed countless people to build resumes, get outfitted by Dress for Success, apply for jobs, and work on their interview skills. I made a flat white at the Starbucks booth.

I saw young adults with stars in their eyes experiencing this smorgasbord of opportunity. I felt very proud about myself.

The weeks prior were filled with researching, locating, and calling businesses, faith communities, and organizations in some of the most economically disadvantaged zip codes in Phoenix to ask for permission to pass out flyers. I would rather perform data entry than call people on the phone and I HATE data entry. I was hung up on, avoided, and once even yelled at when I asked a worker at Subway for her manager’s name and email. I could not blame her. I would be suspicious of me too. I stayed late and worked one 12 hour shift on a Saturday helping my fellow Public Ally, Elija, prepare an asset map which pin-pointed each location I indicated. It was painstaking work and I would have traded my placement for another more direct service related one at this point. Before it ended, we performed a street outreach effort in these zip codes. Again, I found myself in a situation where I would rather not have been, as a pale skinned individual who dismissed high school Spanish because “it’s a skill I’m never gonna use.” We went to the target locations indicated on the map but also door-to-door in neighborhoods where residents appeared only to speak Spanish. I stayed behind my partner the whole time wanting nothing more than to take my sixteen year old self into an alley and give that irresponsible lout a good tongue thrashing- in really bad English.

The efforts and sacrifices appeared to have paid off. The next day, it was reported that we received as many sign-ups for the fair as the people we visited, over 200. It taught me that maybe what I do here, no matter how I feel about it- discomfort, boredom, and uselessness- has merit. I never questioned, or met a task with reluctance at MCESA again.
I met Heather at a Community Space Day. She came to give Public Allies an introduction to something she called “The Web” which was her metaphor for the predatory nature of the United States Criminal Justice system. I had been interested in criminal justice and law for the past few years, as I slowly realized the impact I wanted to have in the areas I wanted to work, were areas most brutalized by the state’s policing and most stripped of vital social services. While I don’t have the desire to go into public policy or do academic research on the topics, I was left with a few choices: become a therapist or become a lawyer. At this moment, I’m considering family law, so I guess I chose both. For now.

While Heather was giving her pitch, I was mentally taking notes. I made sure I gave her my card and emailed her after about a week. I was hungry for just this thing. The way she sold Justice That Works made it seem like it was an organization that was already firmly rooted in our community. I asked her about it and I was told that they were less than a month old. She knew her stuff and she was passionate as hell.

This became even more clear when we were finally able to meet and I happily realized her vision for change was more refined and far more radical than mine. I believe in full legalization of all controlled substances and abolishing the death penalty, as well as hoping for a heck of a lot of people to be released from prison and have their full legal citizenship restored. I was happy to know that my beliefs were more than welcome at Justice That Works.

Once she invited me to the Community Educator workshop that she was teaching, I knew I was in. The workshop was 2 weeks of intensive education and preparation for our future community meetings. We learned about racial profiling, countless city blocks that the state pays millions of dollars towards incarceration instead of community building, the bail trap, prosecutorial misconduct that will never come to justice, police officers stealing civilian property to meet their budget quotas, and how our current system is a continuation of Jim Crow and slavery, just by a different name. There were tears, laughter, anger, and comfort in those 2 weeks as we committed ourselves to what we slowly came to realize is the civil rights issue of our lifetime.

Going forward, we were sent out to do meetings in our community to educate, and more importantly, inspire conversations about alternatives to traditional courts, policing, and punishment. As of today, I’ve given a few community lectures & told countless more people about the ways the criminal justice system has impacted their lives whether they think it has or not. The response from communities is overwhelmingly positive and I’m looking forward to my future with Justice That Works. I recently had an ASU student ask me what alternatives we were proposing. I told him we didn't have those answers and the last thing I wanted to do was to be a part of an organization that goes into neighborhoods to tell strangers what will solve their criminal justice issue. That attitude helped to get us in this position in the first place. So I don't have all the answers, but I know that working together, we can probably find them.
I will have to admit that it took me some time to think about the impact I have made on my hosting organization as well as my community as a whole. Like...is the impact I’m making meaningful, informative, and seen in a positive way? So I started with really studying the word. I know this may seem funny because we should have all learned the definition of it in elementary school, but I wanted to make sure that whatever story I told would fall under the definition and be accurate.

Here are the definitions as follows:

1. the striking of one thing against another; forceful contact; collision
   (Well, no...I haven’t punched anyone in the face since I was 19 so that can’t describe my impact- just kidding!)
2. influence; effect:  **(OKAY THAT’S MORE UP MY ALLEY)**
3. the force exerted by a new idea, concept, technology, or ideology

Okay, so that’s simple enough, right? Wrong. I mean seriously, how does one measure their own impact? I definitely don’t want it to sound as if I am tooting my own horn. So what I eventually decided to do was to question those who I work with on a daily basis, and here are some of their thoughts:

RUTH (SENIOR GARDEN VOLUNTEER) - “Chanika has impacted the garden and St. Vincent de Paul in the following ways: she has helped bring awareness to the garden and what we are trying to accomplish here as an organization and has brought fresh ideas and a new perspective on how we can better reach the homeless population and the community as a whole. Her vision to transform the Human Services Campus Garden into a classroom for the community, where all can come to learn how to grow their own food, serve, and heal, not only benefits the community itself but the clients that visit this location every day.”

STEPHANIE (CAMPUS CLIENT AND GARDEN VOLUNTEER) - “I love helping in the garden; it is my place of serenity. I can get away from the chaos and various temptations that go on just on the other side these gates and just focus on me. It also gives me purpose and I
feel like the work we do here is something everyone should get involved in. Nika is always so welcoming and she makes me feel good about myself and you can tell that she really does care about us clients here at St. Vincent and CASS."

These two women are definitely gracious in their assessment on my impact but I want them to know that they inspire me. I admire the sheer motivation and determination of the client volunteers I work with on a daily basis; who are giving their all to change their lives for the better and to get up every day to serve others when so many in their position may give up.

With my certifications in Life Coaching, Nutrition and Urban Farming I have the opportunity to impact the community by providing them with fresh and nutritious food and a place to learn about gardening. But it’s not just that, I also provide a place for healing, connections, learning, as well as spiritual and personal growth.

Just in the little time I have spent at my placement (in comparison to my 38 years of life), I have made more than friends, I have made family. I have spent so much of my life trying to find my purpose and St. Vincent and Public Allies have provided me with the opportunity to find it. I get to go to work every day and do something that I love. When I first started this program I was a little nervous and leery about what lay ahead but now I know that it was the best decision I could have ever made for myself and my family. By being a part of Public Allies I have become a leader, a motivator, a teacher, an ALLY.

So I will say this: I wanted a space where I could grow into a better and more productive person. (CHECK.) I wanted a place where I could touch a wide range of people and teach the things I love. (Check.) I wanted a place that would challenge me to step outside of my comfort zone and find my voice. (Check.) I wanted a place that would give me the room to evolve into a leader and motivator. (Check.) So when you ask me how I have impacted my placement organization I say to you: **my placement has impacted my life more than I could have ever hoped to have impacted it!**
Before I started my term as an Ally, I went to my first ramp build with Rebuilding Together Valley of the Sun. I had been asked to show up at a ramp build in Mesa to see what I would be doing and what I would be heading up during my term of service. I got there and even as an Ally I was put in charge of the landscaping portion of this specific ramp build. This ramp build was with Bank of America and there were about 25 of their employees that showed up for the build.

My team was in charge of laying pavers down so that the homeowner would be able to get out of her home and be able to get to her shed. I remember the homeowner’s name was Cathy, she was currently stuck in a wheelchair and was homebound because she couldn’t get in or out of her house with the stairs that were provided to her by the mobile park.

As the morning went on, and my team finished the laying of the pavers and the ramp team finished building the ramp, I felt very accomplished. No wonder they say volunteering is a selfish deed. At about one o’clock when everything was done, we had Cathy roll down her new ramp in her wheelchair. To me, the aha moment didn’t come until the picture did. The second I saw the smile on her face, I realized that what we did was not just impactful for her; I could see the bigger picture of how the Arizona Ramp Program could be a positive impact on the whole of Arizona.
Hi, I'm Phil, a first year Public Ally placed at Be A Leader Foundation, a college access program for students in high school. Honestly, in joining Public Allies, I wasn’t sure what to expect. I knew I wanted to try and do something for other people, instead of just talking about it. I found Public Allies by chance, I don’t recall how, and found it fit the intersection of my desire for public service as well as receiving a paycheck.

Be A Leader Foundation is located in a much smaller office space than I’d ever been a party too, which threw me off at first. However, I’d measure the total work per square footage at that location the equal of any business in the world. My duties at Be A Leader are essentially preparing the organization’s migration to Salesforce, a web based database and customer relationship manager, from an antiquated paper based filling system. Most of the time during my first few months at the organization involved heavy periods of data entry, transcribing data from student membership forms, surveys, and more in paper form, into Google Sheets. Google Sheets was a middle-man of sorts, holding all of the student data in preparation for import into Salesforce,

Be A Leader uses this data in order to fine tune its programs, as ammunition when applying for grants and donations, and to show how effective the organization is for its stated impact on college hopeful high school students. Moving all this information to a digital based medium resulted in beneficial changes right away. Student check-ins for events were instantly updated and viewable by all staff members, data from surveys was instantly available to run queries against to discover trends, and data validation such as verifying DOB, student ID, etc., was carried out in real time as each student checked in. Switching to Google Sheets reduced the time from getting student data to visualizing it. Once the switch to Salesforce is complete, the period of time between getting data and using the data will grow even shorter.

The “ah ha” moment for me happened the moment I realized the monotonous page after page entry of student information was important. Much in the same way digitizing medical records helped to better serve patients with a centralized repository of searchable data, Salesforce will allow Be A Leader to quickly, and accurately, see how effective their various programs are and give them the flexibility and nimbleness to meet any unforeseen changes in their work.
At the Lodestar Day Resource Center (LDRC), we have so many different resources that impact our clients’ lives. On campus they have access to 3 meals a day, a safe place to sleep, medical and dental attention, and so much more. And I have so many ex-clients that come back and ask for certain staff members to tell them how much their efforts mattered to them. Although the person they are usually looking for has already moved on to another job, their glow and appreciation stick with me. It makes me think about how much my efforts will go without me realizing it. It also makes me realize what it is that keeps this place going.

Although we have a lot of great organizations that bring a bigger sense of control to our clients, what really encourages our clients to better their life is the love that all of our staff bring to the table. Everyone here really cares, it isn’t just that they do their jobs great, but they love doing their job great. At the LDRC we look at each other more as family than coworkers, and that is what I believe has been holding this organization up. With love as our foundation, we create an environment for growth, which is the weapon to destroy homelessness.
As a Public Ally and the Engagement Programs Coordinator at the Lodestar Day Resource Center (LDRC), I was charged with the responsibility of engaging the community and clients in volunteering and programs. In the short time that I have been at the LDRC I have recruited 56 volunteers. They have served 809 hours. Most importantly they have provided services to 424 clients. That, of course, is just a small portion of about 10,000 clients the Welcome Center has seen over the last year. So what does that number mean? That large number represents the number of lives we have changed, the number of people we have helped to take the first steps in ending their homelessness.

One of the goals of my term of service was to create or implement programs that would provide our clients with the tools and skills they need to end their homelessness. I took a day to walk around the day room and the lawn to interview clients about the types of programs they would like to see at the LDRC. I was able to gather a lot of great information from clients and they had some great ideas for classes we should offer. They mentioned music, budgeting, anger management, and many others. However, the most striking piece of information that I gathered from my surveys was that clients just wanted someone to talk to, someone that would listen. There was one man in particular that really made an impact on me. From the beginning he was quite friendly and gave me great feedback about programming. Throughout the survey we engaged in small talk and I got to learn a little bit about him. However, after I thanked him for his time and input, he stopped me from getting up. He looked at me and thanked me for talking to him. He explained that he had been very frustrated all morning and generally had a bad attitude about the day. Getting to talk with me and having someone actually take the time of day to listen to him and acknowledge that what he had to say was valuable, changed his mood. He felt better and he was sincerely grateful that I had a conversation with him. It was then, in that moment, when I realized that I had seen this scenario so many times. This is the impact the LDRC makes on clients and why I had grown so fond of this organization.

The staff at the LDRC treat each and every client they encounter like a person. Clients are not just an HMIS (Homeless Management Information System) number to us. They are not just a VI-SPDAT (Vulnerability Index- Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) score. They are people and they all have stories that are much more similar to our own than you might think. We strive to treat people with the respect and dignity they deserve. Part of the LDRC's philosophy is that, “We meet clients where they are when they come through three stages, moving at their own pace, from crisis to stability and sufficiency. We welcome and engage people into a safe, accepting environment; inform and connect people to holistic services and programs; inspire and empower people to end their homelessness; and create positive, long-term life changes.” We connect people to the resources and tools they need to make a change. We respect them and support them through their journey. From the moment they walk into the Welcome Center they are engaged free of judgement and preconceptions. They are not their homelessness. They are people that need support and we are here to provide that support.
During my first week at the American Lung Association, I learned about Lung Force, a fight against lung cancer and lung health. Did you know that lung cancer is the number one cancer killer in the United States? That every 5 minutes a woman in the US is diagnosed with lung cancer? Wait what?! Lung cancer?! Really?! As a girl, I knew about breast cancer, because that is what is drilled into our heads by our doctors, the “how to test” posters are practically in every bathroom stall, along with pink ribbons that you see everywhere. But women are at a greater risk of dying from lung cancer than breast cancer. Wow! But why do I need to worry about it? I don’t smoke, I am hardly around people that smoke, other than the fact that I love the smell of hookah and will occasionally be at places where I am surrounded by hookah smoke. I don’t really need to worry about it, right? WRONG! Each year more than 28,000 people that have never smoked are diagnosed with lung cancer. Wow! But even then, I do this occasionally. In an hour-long hookah smoking session, users inhale 100-200 times the amount of smoke inhaled from one regular cigarette. Wow; that is definitely something that caught my attention. But then again, these are facts that may shock us, can leave us scarred for a few minutes, hours, or even days, and then we seem to ignore them. Like, what are the chances I am going to be the one in 34,000 deaths per year that are caused from second hand smoking, right?! Exactly.

But what if one day your whole life just changed, and something as simple as getting dressed, putting a t-shirt and jeans on, took 30 minutes? Forget about going to barbecues, having fireplaces lit, even sometimes cooking a meal. But, I love doing these things. “It’s like somebody put duct tape over your mouth and nose, and just cut a little hole; like you are breathing from a straw. All you wanted was to breathe.” This is what one of the patient advocate for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary disease (COPD) has to go through. “The greatest cruelty is our casual blindness to the despair of others.”

Never did I think that something as simple as breathing is what a lot of people wish for. And never ever did I think that by me being around hookah smoke, and encouraging this, am I making it harder for people already suffering to breathe, or even worse, exposing so many other lives to lung disease. Also, I don’t want to have to worry about having a good time, laughing so much that it gives me a cough attack, putting on perfume, thinking twice before visiting a sick friend/family member. This is the reason I don’t go near hookah anymore or any place that exposes me to smoke. This is why the American Lung Association advocates for lung health education, smoke free living, for better quality of air: because smoking is bad for everyone’s health, even non-smokers, and people don’t even know.
Growing up LGBT has given me a sense of community and empowerment, teaching me to be proud of the person I am today. Per my personal ties to the movement, it has always been a strong passion of mine to advocate for equality and provide support to other youth who need positive queer role models in their life. Without a doubt, being placed at one·n·ten has given me the necessary tools to do so. one·n·ten’s mission is to serve LGBTQ youth and young adults by providing empowering programs that promote self-expression, self-acceptance, leadership development, and healthy life choices. Some of the biggest challenges LGBTQ youth face are homelessness, violence, thoughts of suicide, and self-harm. At my placement, we make it a priority to ensure that we are always providing services for youth exposed to these risk factors.

As a Public Ally for the organization, my role is to lead groups at our Youth Center, set up outreach events, and be an overall support system for the youth we serve. I travel to high schools around Maricopa County and visit their GSAs (Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation Alliance or Gay-Straight Alliance) to have conversations with the students about their goals and experiences growing up as part of the queer community. I also conduct presentations on LGBTQ topics for school administrators, social workers, and social service agencies. Our main purpose for these discussions with both the students and staff are to highlight the importance of safe spaces, where anyone can freely express themselves without fear of being made uncomfortable, unwanted, or unsafe on account of their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity expression, race/ethnicity, culture, age, or physical and mental ability. I truly have enjoyed taking over such a valuable outreach role, and I take pride in being able to educate individuals on these LGBTQ topics that are so near and dear to my heart.

Early this year, a high school in the city of Glendale suffered through a traumatic situation between two female students, which resulted in their deaths. The two girls were known to be romantically involved. Because of their personal identities, negative publicity followed, and anti-gay protesters showed up to harass students. In need for respite, teachers reached out to one·n·ten in hopes of finding strategies for providing a safe space for their students to express themselves. They took our organization’s advice and formulated their first ever GSA, creating an open space for youth in the LGBTQ & straight ally community to come together.
A week after the tragedy, I had the chance to visit and speak to the students and GSA sponsors about their feelings towards the situation. This particular high school was one of the first schools I experienced doing outreach at in the beginning of my Public Allies term, so I felt a strong emotional connection upon returning. I was both nervous but determined to help them take a step forward and take pride in their community. I took the lead in the discussion and opened up their classroom to our Safe Space Guidelines. Giving the students an established list of rules that guarded each person’s self-respect (while encouraging the respect of others) gave them the freedom to express their feelings and concerns in a non-judgment zone. We collectively shared stories, and the students found comfort in asking us questions. Both teachers leading the GSA were able to vent their thoughts as well. It was a couple hours of candid, honest conversation. After explaining our services and the many ways they can benefit from the resources we provide, I was also able to offer advice and team building strategies on how to maintain solid connections among the members. Establishing these kind of positive relationships within a team helps to ensure success. It was enlightening to witness them opening up to each other and cultivating relationships within their new group.

As the club officers listened intently and jotted down notes, I could feel that they had developed a trust for me. It was in that moment that I knew the words I was saying posed a much deeper importance to them. Not only was I giving them tools to help form their new GSA, but I gave them the freedom to embrace their uniqueness. I wanted them to know that there are people and places out there that will proudly welcome their diversities, and it was remarkable to know that my presence that day made that possible. Every moment I spend mentoring youth reminds me of my own personal growth as a confident queer woman, and gives me the motivation to do my job every day so that they too can learn to love themselves. I look forward to continuing my engagement with this school and all the other youth that cross my path, to remind them that there is hope and happiness waiting for them too.
Sometimes sharing the most intimate moments that has brought you so much hurt, is the first step to freedom. At GoPurple.org, I am known as a BLOOM Educator, the person that goes into schools and talks about preventing teen dating abuse and domestic violence. Serving at GoPurple.org, I’ve found myself realizing that many students have suffered or been exposed to horrific, heartbreaking experiences. Not only did they experience unimaginable things, but they have carried these memories throughout the years. Yes, I believe in the work that we do and I believe it is making a difference. But I also believe that BLOOM has brought a different perspective, a perspective of hope and freedom to this generation. I know the work that I do is so much more than my title position; I figured this out with personal interactions with students. I have been more than a BLOOM Educator to them, I am a person they can confide in, a person that will listen without judgment. I was just that, a person, a person willing to love and serve them anyway I could.

Unfortunately, I had an unforgettable experience with a student sometime late fall of 2015. Throughout our BLOOM program, every student was assigned to do a BLOOM Project, which meant making a project of what they had learned throughout the week or anything related to the topic that was discussed. This particular student did not go up to present. However, this student still had a longing to share their story. They were a senior and waited until everyone had left the lecture hall. This student told me that they had done their project, but they did not feel comfortable sharing something so personal in front of their peers. The student’s BLOOM project was a poem. They had written it down, on the cover of their BLOOM book, and it was filled with so much anger and hurt. I was able to see the student couldn’t bear to keep it in any longer because while they were reading it to me, tears began to fall down from their face. At that moment, I dared to ask if this was what had happened to them. They replied with a yes and began to explain. Tears slowly continued going down their face, and in respectful way, I held this student. It was release for this student. This student had said they were raped at age 13, by one of their guy friend’s dad. They hadn’t told anyone, other than their current partner and maybe their mom, but that was it. As precaution, I took down information, I asked further questions about this matter, and did what I needed to do to help this student. Overall, this student is now 17 years old, said that they were currently in a healthy relationship. I know we are not able to change the past, but I know for a fact this student knows their worth and knows they deserved and deserve to be respected and loved.

My heart never desires any evil acts upon anyone. It is something definitely, you are never prepared for. Even though this student had experienced this, they had no choice but to continue to live and move forward. I can see that BLOOM has been a light to darkness, that it has allowed students to come forward and get help, either to express their current situation or their past experiences. It’s more than bringing awareness, it’s bringing hope where they believe there wasn’t any. BLOOM is building a generation that shows it is stronger to love, respect, be fair, and be honest with each other. BLOOM is showing that each human being deserves to be living a life full of love and freedom.
It was an uncharacteristically chilly morning as I walked into work at St. Vincent de Paul. I prepared for the home makeover until the group of college volunteers arrived an hour later. They came all the way from Boston to serve during their Spring Break. As I explained to them about the family we would be helping, I was secretly praying that I didn’t forget anything. There are a lot of details that are easy to overlook. We loaded the truck with mattresses, tables, decorations, and supplies, and headed over to the apartment of our client. When we arrived, we sent the family of six off to the zoo and began cleaning the two-bedroom apartment and furniture. I hung up the design plan for each room and we got to work. There were a few hiccups here and there, which aren’t unusual, but we finally finished the makeover. It was time for the family to return.

First, they walked through the front door and were overwhelmed with change. A new kitchen table that could seat up to 8 people sat in place of the borrowed plastic one previously residing in the space. The top had been custom-made to fit the old legs and the chairs had soft cushioned seats covered in faded green and red ornamental fabric. The table was set with red and white dishes, candles, and a vase of white flowers. Red curtains adorned the window and red towels, pans, and a rug finished the room.

The boy looked back and forth until he paused as he realized that he now had a bed. It was a black futon with red, black, gray, and white chevron bedding that sat against the wall to replace the loveseat previously used by the 13-year-old. He now also had a chest of drawers and would no longer have to share with his two younger sisters. A black leather loveseat was placed opposite the futon, a red lattice rug was spread in the middle of the room, and red curtains framed the large window. A custom police badge painted on cardboard hung above the boy’s bed with his name across it and an art gallery wall of string and binder clips spread across the main wall. A small chest of drawers that had been painted to look like a toy stove sat against the wall between the kitchen and the living room for the 2-year-old girl. Silver metal toy pans were sitting on top until she carried them away.

As the family walked into the girls’ room, there were two white beds, two white desks with chairs, pink curtains, custom pink cardboard wall art, and cardboard wall art that depicted...
the six different Warrior Cats book series clans. When the older girl saw it, her face lit up in surprise and she said “That looks beautiful” while giving a thumbs up. It was her favorite thing in the whole room. We showed them the bathroom next with its powder blue shower curtain and gray and white rugs. Then they walked into the parents’ room, discovering a beautiful wooden bed set, a queen bed with red, black, and gold comforter, a cherry blossom painting hanging over the bed, gold curtains, and paper flower wall art. The father sat down on the bed, to rest, finally in his oasis.

After, the mother tried to talk but she started to cry instead. Her gratitude could not be missed. After all of the struggles her family has had, she could finally breathe. The father had a group hug with many of the volunteers and then we took a group photo. The impact on the family is evident, but the impact also affects the volunteers. They see what they have been able to do in just 5 or 6 hours for a family who has just had some hard times. We had listened to their likes and their story and customized their makeover for them. In the end, even though there is always something that goes wrong, it is worth the hard work and stress to make a difference in people’s lives. What once had been just a shelter is now a home for memories to be made.
The Dalai Lama once said, “Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects.”

Far-reaching effects; much like leaving behind a legacy. At least, that’s what you hope will happen when you commit yourself to serve at a nonprofit organization for ten months. You hope that all those 1700+ hours have in some way made a positive, lasting impact on not only the organization, but more importantly, the individuals you’ve interacted with.

Like showing a group of kids all the neat things that can be learned from water. Introducing those same kids to the binary language of computers, and that anyone, at any age, can have the ability to be a computer programmer.

Something as simple as changing the color of some text on a flyer, to scheduling ten weeks’ worth of fields trips for the 120+ kids coming to summer day camp. From facilitating group games in the after-school program, to compiling 100+ photos into nine different presentations in hopes of renewing a $10,000 grant.

Whether it’s showing a kid how awesome science, technology, engineering, and math are, or taking on more responsibilities because two coworkers went on maternity leave at the same time. You hope that because you were there, that you made a difference. The ripples that you created will continue on for years to come, maybe transforming into waves of change for the better.

That’s my hope at least.
The sun is just starting to rise as I walk up to the Human Services Campus. It’s the first time I’m going to be doing direct service work with the Arizona Coalition to End Homelessness. You see, sometimes we go to Central Arizona Shelter Services to help veterans experiencing homelessness get connected to the resources they need in order to gain housing. We walk around asking hundreds of men and women if they are veterans, searching for anyone we can help. Once we find some veterans, we bring them to a room in the back and assess how chronically homeless they are. We ask them things like how long they’ve been homeless, how often they’ve been homeless in the past 3 years, if they have any mental disorders or physical problems. All of these questions help us understand what housing would give them the best shot at getting off the street and into their own place. Then, we take them to their next stop on their journey to gain housing, and after that they visit about 3 more places, but have to get there on their own. We’re basically the base of a 5 tier cake.

Once it’s about 6:30, I find myself talking with an older man who is a double amputee staying at the shelter. After speaking for a while, a lady with the Maricopa County Human Services Department comes in, pretty shocked that this man was back. I soon found out that this man had been through most of this process 3 previous times and, after questioning him for a few minutes, we found out that he had been turned away due to being 5 minutes late to his appointment.

We are letting people turn a double amputee away? How are we ever going to even aspire to end homelessness if we turn someone away after 5 minutes? Especially someone who can’t get around that easily. But wait, there’s more. When he asked what program he should do, they suggested sleeping in the parking lot to get a better chance at receiving services, since he’ll be closer. This is when the woman went off. “We need to start giving second chances, making resources more accessible. We are all here every day to help people. What good is that, if we can’t even wait five minutes for someone? How is this constant cycle ever going to end?” As the woman went on, I could hear the passion, rage and frustration in her voice. The years of hard work in the homeless services sector just to be shot down in this moment by the lack of communication and humanity. These are people’s LIVES we are helping. How can we just walk away from that so easily?

As I listened to her rant, I knew why I was here. I knew that no matter what, I have to help in some way. I have to help provide proper help, or else there’s one more person being denied the services they desperately need.