



SMALL DEED BIG IMPACT PROPOSITION

COMN Capstone- Communicating Compassion through Empathy

Identify the individual who is suffering as well as provide intensive research of the experiences of those with similar experiences and the challenges they face. Provide a dual perspective of empathy and discuss the situation as if it was you in their position. Propose an act of compassion that is elaborate and organized and meets Underwood's definition of compassion and the five qualities.

How does it meet the capstone object of "Present in-depth academic engagement with a communication issue to a public audience?" Finally, how will you remain reflexive and mindful as you carry out your act?

Tess Styler

INTRODUCTION

For my Small Deed Big ImpAct of Compassion Proposal, I decided to focus my attention and truly shine light on my older sister, Hannah.

She, and 15.49 million other women in the US, are the true superheroes amongst us, single mothers (Statistica 2021). Part of a larger group of individuals, mothers, that are our, “maternal tenderness or affection”, they can be “an exercising control, influence, or authority like that of a mother”, “something or someone that gives rise to or excises protecting care over something else; origin of source”, and simply they “...treat a person with great kindness and love to try and protect them from anything dangerous or difficult” (Merriam-Webster, Collins English Dictionary, and Cambridge Dictionary).

Single mothers don’t apply to those seemingly concrete definitions.

Instead, we see a group of strong, independent women who are constantly being stereotyped and mistreated. Not only by their peers and social perception and norms but also through government reform/aid and lack thereof. Policy that is being based on stereotypes rather than the lived experiences of single women and their families. With viewpoints going so far to claim them as “passive objects of intervention”, instead of “active subjects”, who are not only involved in their experiences but should have control over them (Haleman 2006).

Making them even larger outsiders to a world that seems to have no place for them in the first place.

This however is a world that is somewhat unfamiliar to my sister Hannah, as well.

Hannah, currently 25 and finishing up her third year at law school, is fortunate enough to be surrounded by a more than generous amount of support; physically, emotionally, and

financially. But by no means does that belittle the struggles she faces, due to the unexpectedness of it all, the outside circumstances (COVID), and timing.

Both timing of her own life and goals, and that of the world we found ourselves in.

It is through the Small Deed Big ImpAct of Compassion Proposal, that I can provide an exposure of ongoing research of an issue that is relevant to many of us. Whether that be because of the upbringing by a single mother or simply knowing one, it is a known experience amongst our society, yet it is being blatantly ignored.

And the most important part of this experience, in my opinion, is the woman the mother was before it, and how to preserve, support, and strengthen her. Not only through attempts of trying to bring bits and pieces of that woman back but most importantly to make sure she is reminded of her worth.

By acts of compassion, we can test one's own self-reflection and doubt. To show the power of both the mother and the woman, and to never let her feel alone or casted aside.

RESEARCH

Before even beginning my research on this subject, I knew that the statistics and the stories that I will come across will not be comforting nor at all surprising.

And this isn't a recent problem either.

Back in 2003, Harvard graduate student Marcia Ellison, can provide a fairly accurate reason as to why this be: these pregnancies, by single women are not deemed "socially prescribed" (Ellison 2003). This is a conclusion made regardless of one's circumstances, whether that be by choice, unexpectedness, or loss of a spouse.

Single mothers continue to be ostracized by society. And are, “blamed for social ills ranging from growing inner-city drug use to nothing less than the demise of the American family” (Haleman).

This blame is placed on them for a variety of reasons. Whether that be influenced by one’s race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, religion, or level of education; all can then be deciding factors of the ‘prosperity’ for these families.

“The economic difficulties experienced by many single mothers are compounded by a lack of education that virtually guarantees the continuing poverty of single-mother-headed families” (Haleman 2006).

In Diana L. Halemans piece, “Great Expectation: Single Mothers in Higher Education”, she focuses on single mothers who are both recipients of social services as well as higher education students. Through this analysis she can show the evident issues within social security and welfare reform that limit single mothers’ and their children’s social mobility. We see this cripple these families, especially with the ‘Motherhood Penalty’, mothers with one child receive 16% less in benefits at age 62 than non-mothers do (Kelligrant 2017). Leaving the already ‘inadequate’ and vulnerable individual, now punished for being financially responsible.

From a 2006 study by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northern University in Boston, many of all births to women under 30, 50.4% were pregnancies out of wedlock (Herbert 2008). And of that, nearly 80% of all births amongst black woman were out of wedlock, making it about 4.25 out of the 15.49 million families being raised by single mothers (Herbert 2008, Statistica 2021). Many of these women, especially black women, find themselves constantly resisting the laws and individuals who create and perpetuate this reality. The interaction of

agency and the social forces show us that these women are, “neither free agents nor passive victims” (Beauchamp 2018).

Single mothers lie outside the framework of what our society deem as ‘acceptable. They are far from the traditional ‘nuclear family’; they are left to be their own cleanup crew, biggest fan, hardest critic and above all, make up for the absence of a father figure.

While I was researching, I came across an NPR podcast, “For Single Mothers, Stigma Difficult to Shake”, led by late journalist Neal Conan, he explores the reality of single motherhood while accompanied by author of ‘Accidentally on Purpose: The True Tale of a Happy Single Mother’, Mary F. Pols. And similar to the my other findings, I was just reminded of other aspects of this unfortunate reality. With one caller reflecting on her own son and the struggles she sees him encounter because of having a single mom, that,

“...a child without a father...it’s such an anomaly that it just doesn’t even figure...”

We see this anomaly play out in the children’s lives, whether that be with exclusion from groups and activities, or in the mother’s lives with mistreatment from other parents or in government legislation because of preconceived ideals of the situation.

It is an anomaly before the child is even brought into the world. Single women only have three options: abortion, adoption, or becoming a single mother. It is a choice that will alter this woman’s life no matter what she chooses.

When one choses abortion, it is usually out of own needs that are influenced by social expectations and family shame, while adoption is highly influenced by social workers and the circumstances (“It’d be selfish to keep your child”). Both being motivated by self-knowledge; they fail to include internal knowledge (Ellison). And when it comes to those who chose to be

single mothers, they trust their instinct, they are influenced by religious beliefs or ones morals, and think of what's best for **their** child.

The research I found has made me more aware of the ongoing and purposeful mistreatment of single mothers, and in no way are can their experiences solely be captured by statistics or solved by overgeneralized reform. But also through the appreciation and acknowledgment of these mothers overcoming the odds and producing “high-quality” children on their own, without the support of a father (Beauchamp 2018).

PROPOSED ACT / REFLEXIVITY ENGAGEMENT

So much of my research focused on single mothers who are left with little resources, encouragement, and hope. And after going through my sources, I found that there's little conversation on those single mothers who do have support, which adds up because many of the reasons single mothers suffer so much is the overall lack of any support. But these women face the struggles any individual faces when being a single parent: expectations, societal pressure, own goals, and future, etc.

And it wasn't until taking this course and being assigned this project, that I realized my sister too, experiences them.

My sister, Hannah, attends John Marshall Law School at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and will be graduating May 6th. On top of that she is a clerk at a firm downtown and has begun prep for the Bar Exam that she'll take this August. She is intelligent, resilient, kindhearted, soft-spoken, the stern and responsible older sister, and single handily the bravest person I know. And the mother to one of the most special people in my life, my nephew Benjamin.

Ben was born on May 28th, 2020, the last day of state mandated lockdown in Illinois, and came as, to this day, the biggest surprise yet blessing of all our lives.

Hannah had what is known as a ‘cryptic pregnancy’, a “lack of subjective awareness of pregnancy until the end of gestation and pregnancy” (Del Giudice 2006).

She had no idea she was pregnant until she was brought into the E.R, with what my parents and her believed to be kidney stones, but in fact was her body telling her she’s 4cm dilated.

What would come to be the biggest blessing in disguise, started off as one of the most unbelievable, stressful moments in one’s life that demanded everyone be on the same page. And at the time, no one even knew what that was.

With it still being COVID and all the precautions, Hannah was left alone in the E.R. for what felt like hours waiting for test results, that it wasn’t until they called my mom back to the hospital that it all set in with Hannah. And it seems like a day doesn’t go by that I don’t think of how fast her mind must’ve been racing. She’s 23, a freshman in law school, recently broke up with short term boyfriend, and must decide, in a matter of hours if she wants to give her unborn baby up for adoption or keep him. Not even 10 hours later, Benjamin David Styler joined us.

“It didn’t need to a second thought. He was mine.”

A mother’s instinct, or a mother’s touch, or whatever it may be, came naturally and without question for Hannah once she held Ben for the first time.

And it seems to keep coming naturally for her, with both her and Ben living back at my parents, I can see my sister be the best mother to her son. She is fortunate enough to be living under my parents’ roof, free of expense, and still a dependent financially, making Ben as well.

My parents didn't hesitate for a moment to do anything and all they could, made it easier with the lack of action on Ben's dad side.

Feeling little to no responsibility to financially help his son's life, Ben's dad goes out of his way to make that known while failing to thank Hannah. This is just one aspect of Hannah's world that we see in the lives of single mothers across the country, and it is one that continues to complicate her life.

Never being one to be open when it comes to relationships or emotional struggles growing up, Hannah always opted for the 'smile and wave'.

And that is no longer an option for her. Having to talk to court-ordered mediators and therapists, regarding both her and Ben's dad's relationship, as well as her and Bens, she is rarely being asked about just Hannah. Or given the time to digest and process with just Hannah in mind.

That's exactly what I hope this gift will be for Hannah, moments to remind herself to think of herself and the woman she was before motherhood. The dreams and hobbies that are left in her past life that could inspire her and Ben's lives to come.

Hannah is always putting together these videos for our family Christmas parties, a collage and sort of summary of the year through pictures and videos of each of the cousins, aunts, and uncles. It is such a special moment and one that everyone looks forward to and is something I want Hannah to have.

I went ahead and asked some of my family members a series of questions, about them and Hannah's relationship, the whole fiasco that was the arrival of Benjamin, and finally to leave Hannah and Ben some advice. I asked them to prerecord their answers and once I receive all of them, which hopefully will be by the end of this week, will start putting together the video.

Through this act, while aware her circumstance is much different than that of my findings and possibly skewing one's perception of 'struggling', I aim to comfort her in her own battles and offer a support that is universal.

CONCLUSION

One part of this whole project that has been so challenging has been with "understanding or accepting the receiver", something that I try to do every day (Fehr 2009). My sister was the first of my siblings to have kids, even though both my older brothers are married, she was the first. And she had the least planning, least amount of time to come to terms with it all, and yet she never let the fear of the unknown slow her down.

She gave up a life that hadn't even begun yet, dreams of living abroad had to be reconsidered and 'practicalized' for the sake of Bens education, and so much more. But by showing Hannah a, "caring love that has weight, that is nourishing", and through compassion with the "intentions of giving full life to the other", will Hannah be reminded of the worth of the life she lives now and the importance of the life she lived.

Although Hannah is just one amongst the 15.49 million individuals who are single mothers in the U.S., and with circumstances far from the normal case study, we should be able to approach anyone who identifies as a single mother with the same reflexivity and compassion. Not because we might not know the exact full story, but because we don't know the story at all. Hannah is proof that one can't look at the statistics and stop there. But instead should be what calls others to understand them and the clear differing challenges that single mother's encounter.

CITATIONS

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