I Am Glad I Was Here

The Nashville Housing Trust

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The first meeting that I had in regards to setting up a Nashville Housing Trust (HTF) was with a kindred spirit named Emily Rowell. At the time of our meeting, Emily’s husband was only days away from being transferred to a theatre in Afghanistan. Suffice it to say, she had many more important priorities than our first HTF meeting. Nevertheless, she was there…with a caveat. She wanted “action;” she did not want to be a part of an organization that would make ambitious plans during innumerable and superfluous meetings, when ultimately nothing of substance would ever materialize. She wanted concrete change. When the year ended, she wanted something material to point to that illustrated how our team helped the less fortunate of Nashville. So did I.

**Reflection One: Freud and the Theory of Transference**

Although both Emily, myself and the rest of the HTF team began with a large degree of passion and energy, life intervened to dampen all of our resolves. Whether it was academics, jobs, or family, we all could not simultaneously exhibit the same type of passion that we illustrated in the beginning of the term. Once this realization sunk in and I began to contemplate that our project was dead before it began, something interesting happened. A leader emerged and somehow we all experienced Freud’s Theory of Transference in regards to our passion and energy for setting up a HTF.

Transference is a phenomenon in psychoanalysis characterized by unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another or “the redirection of feelings and desires and especially of those unconsciously retained toward a new object.” Before exploring how Freud’s Transference concept made its way throughout our team, I need to discuss who was and still is our de facto leader. Karishma Merchant has been the driving force between establishing a plan and soliciting information from the remaining team members. It was obvious that she had an extreme passion in helping those that do not have adequate housing. Her passion was palpable.

In the beginning of our report, Karishma acted as the nucleus of our team with the most active quarks being Billy Sullivan and Emily Rowell. They set up meetings with all of the most influential Nashville housing authorities, which set the stage for people like myself and Todd Lagus to begin collecting statistical data that would help us construct more compelling arguments of when we met with
Nashville housing authorities. This represents the first instance of transference among our group. For example, Karishma, Billy, and Emily provided amazing contacts that were open to meeting with us and developing a plan that was supported by relevant data. Being an engineer and a business student respectfully, Todd and I couldn’t wait to parse data and present it. Simply put, Karishma’s passion for galvanizing interest in the Nashville community eventually transferred itself to Todd and me when it came to providing relevant data that other Nashville community members would agree with. Our effort culminated in a lot of statistical and census research papers (please see Exhibit A and B). Our passion for the subject was just as evident as Karishma’s, Billy’s and Emily’s by the number of revisions we presented to our group. However, it could be viewed as a simple happenstance that a group of likeminded graduate students would coalesce over a worthy cause and work diligently towards completing our goals. We thought so as well. However, in the second example of Freud’s Transference, we found that our passion could engage even the most indifferent individual.

**Reflection Two: The Conversion of John Roberts**

John Roberts is the acting CFO of Habitat for Humanity of Greater Nashville. He has an MBA from Ross School of Business in Finance and is also studying currently to be a lawyer. Admittedly, John is a man who lives in either black or white space: there is rarely grey and if there is, it should be viewed with suspicion. His background and personality traits are important in the context of the HTF because he was a skeptic of whether or not we’d be able to raise enough money (legally or otherwise) for a consultant to lobby the state assembly to partition funds for a housing trust. Simply, he did not find the idea realistic or feasible.

Interestingly, he attended four consecutive meetings with the Cal Turner Fellows and the HTF advisory board and eventually caught the passion that Karishma transferred to Todd and I. Rather than acting as a Devil’s Advocate, he put forth intelligent questions to the group about, amongst other things, the legality of having a “lobbyist” work in the state capital. Not only did he raise these Germain questions, he provided quasi-solutions or at least beginning steps towards resolving a potential problem ahead of the time. After speaking with several members of the Nashville housing community before and
after these meetings, they were “amazed” at his desire to move beyond simply being the “devil’s advocate guy.” He was finally becoming a productive member of the organization.

It is pure speculation to think that our diligent work in resolving details and answering questions from the HTF advisory group “transferred” legitimate passion to John in order to see this project through, I do believe it is an apt metaphor for how one group of pure strangers with a coherent vision and plan (the Cal Turner Fellows in this case) were able to mitigate former team inefficiencies. Nevertheless, John is a figurehead for how a person who previously put up roadblocks in former years actually helped overcome them when presented with people who genuinely wanted to affect change.

**Reflection Three: The Importance of Doing the Boring Stuff**

Throughout each meeting with the Advisory Committee, it was obvious that each one of the CTFs would be responsible for some number of mundane tasks so as to move the dialogue along in future meetings. In this situation, we had a choice whether to pursue this work and provide everything the Advisory Committee asked for (directly or indirectly) or attend the next meeting and hope these issues would disappear. We chose to tirelessly to provide all of the information the Advisory Committee wanted, which forced them to make another round of substantive decisions at next meetings rather than having to rehash old arguments.

This made a significant difference in our ability to raise money for our housing trust fund consultant. Rather than spending time on answering asinine questions about immaterial topics (“I think that we should all vote to change job requirements so that anyone with Tennessee political backgrounds could apply, rather than just those who have state capital and Nashville political backgrounds…”) we could focus on what really mattered: how to fund the Housing Trust. Although we as a group were not there yet in terms of establishing an actual housing trust per se, we were in the process of raising money for a lobbyist to further our cause in the state capital. To date, we have risen over $11,000 to fund the lobbyist’s salary; just recently, he said that he would begin working on soliciting HTF support on the capital simply due to the aforementioned pledge. In other words, we were able to take one concrete step forward in setting up a Housing Trust Fund. We had did the boring stuff that no one wanted to do, and
succeeded in the areas that Emily hoped we would when we first met: we engaged in action and did something to benefit the community.

Best Regards,
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