

Mission and Ministry Grant impact: Ernie's Story

Kitchen Apprenticeship Program at Sanctuary Cafe
for Opportunity Youth, Chicago, IL

September 2018



"Ernie may or may not show up," was what one friend of his told us. She – the leader of a local restorative justice hub (a group that emphasizes direct contact and reconciliation as part of relationship building, as opposed to the punitive world these high-risk youth live in) – had worked with Ernie in the past, and she knew better than any of us that these young people thrive on instinct: even if they've been planning on doing something for weeks, if it doesn't feel right that morning, they won't do it. These "street smarts" are how

They have survived this far, and it means that even organizations with the best intent must also create a sense of trust and care from Day 1. She told us this so that we could prepare our space to receive him and prepare ourselves for the fluidity of emotions and behavior that Ernie would bring into his new kitchen apprenticeship.

At first, there were no-shows. Some were because Ernie did not know his schedule and did not know where to find it (restaurant work environments can be notoriously competitive and unforgiving). Other times, Ernie was simply asleep. There was one time Ernie's brother was shot, and we were not sure whether he had died or not, or whether it was truly his brother or one of his friends, but Ernie was on time that day, and did not want to talk about it. He was tight-lipped because *vulnerability will get you hurt* is how he and his peers were socialized. How do you break that?

When the six weeks of the program were up, it was time for Ernie to be placed at a job. We had secured two possibilities for him: to bag groceries at a local grocery store, and to work at an ice-cream parlor. Neither was appealing for Ernie. He wanted to stay here, with us, at University Church and in the Sanctuary Café. But it was time for another young person to begin. *One at a time...* was our lesson. And when Ernie left, he gave me a big hug and said, "Thank you. I'ma be good."

Weeks later, I had been wondering what happened to Ernie, and other organizations had warned me to do the hard work of following up with these high risk youth, because of how easy it is to go back to a life in the streets. I wanted to know if Ernie was OK; I wanted him to know that we were redesigning the program based on his experience. He had a food service certificate now. He had something to put on a resume. He must have found something, right? I was hoping. Praying. Wondering.

A couple of days later, she - the lady from the restorative justice hub - left me a voicemail. Yes, Ernie was fine. He was trying hard to do better. His closest friends and family - the people he loved - were not. "It's up to him," she said. But she wanted me to know something: Ernie had told her that he appreciated the job, but more than that, how much he loved our space, how welcomed he felt, and how clear it was that he did not need to be anyone but himself while he was at the church. He did not feel "policed" there, but was able to move at a pace that worked for him (and us too). He told her how he needed to know that places like this existed. He was hungry for more.

She told me all this because she wanted me to know, and because she was advocating for me to find another position for him in the café. It is not impossible; it is just not designed that way right now, which is why we are redesigning. It is clear our program meets a need for the Ernies of the southside of Chicago, and it is clear that we can serve more Ernies long into the future. We are committed to this work and thankful that Ernie decided to show up. We all are because of it.

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