

Jack McGavick and AYW – by Lauren Schneider

It's a cold, gloomy, grey day and the rain coming down is more like a mist hanging in the air. A passenger van makes the 4.3-mile journey from E. Ben White Blvd. to downtown Austin at the corner of 7th and Neches Street; the trip takes a staggering 55 minutes.

Once inside the building, on the second floor, a line of 14 people fills in along the northern wall in the nearly empty pale yellow and green painted room, usually used as the cafeteria. A wall of windows faces toward the gloomy day and the sight of the Frost Bank building can be seen. The line slowly disintegrates against the wall as everyone cautiously makes their way into the room, pairing off and sitting one pair per each long lunch table.

A plethora of small black Sony voice recorders are sprawled across the tables, with the appropriate microphones to go with them. The first to be interviewed is Anthony Ortega, a smaller man with a quiet, yet steady and confident voice. He has been sitting in the room for 45 minutes patiently waiting for their arrival and this moment; he is homeless and he is here to share his story.

On the other side of the table sit two teenagers, Erik and Maira, students from American Youth Works Service Learning Academy (AYW), and today they've travelled, along with 10 other students, to the ARCH for a day of "Stories Corps." Soon more homeless men begin to enter the room and sit one per lunch table with the students, and they each share their story of who they are and how they ended up on the streets.

This corps program is the concept of Jack McGavick, Lead Humanities teacher at AYW, and today he's seeing his vision, one he has had for a while of traveling to the ARCH to hear the stories from those who are homeless, come to fruition.

“For us it's all about interacting with people's stories, and getting them to tell stories, and going out and seeking out people who don't usually get to tell their stories, or whose voices are not really heard much.” says McGavick.

American YouthWorks is a drop out recovery charter school for at-risk youth who have either dropped out of high school, or have chosen to leave behind the typical public school route in search of an alternate way to earn their high school diploma. The school's three main focuses, which set it apart from your typical public high school, are it's individualized curriculum, green jobs training programs, and most uniquely, it's service corps program.

The curriculum is individual-based rather than group so that the school can have a rolling enrollment process in place. A significant factor in high school dropouts is the structure of classes themselves, the school year has a beginning and an ending every year, and if a student misses several classes, he/she begins to fall behind. By eliminating the group or typical classroom structure, it helps to break down this significant obstacle; all classes are computerized at AYW and operate at the students' own pace.

AYW also offers several job-training programs such as Casa Verde builders, who build affordable housing in Austin, or AmeriCorps, which manages numerous

programs. But beyond these two focuses, it is the third aspect, which truly sets the school apart from other public high schools and even other charter schools in Austin; it is the service learning program, or service corps.

“I think that’s something that makes our school unique,” says McGavick, “I don’t know of any other school where students leave campus once a week and go do something in the community that helps other people.” Terence Gahan, principal of AYW feels strongly about the value of the service component: “Get them out in the community, get them being productive, show people how awesome our guys are, and they continually rise to the occasion when they’re in their small learning communities.”

Upon being hired at AYW, as a teacher, you are expected to create and ultimately lead your own service corps program; for Jack McGavick, his idea ultimately led to what is now called Stories Corps. The program focuses on finding and telling people’s stories within the community, and once back in the classroom, the students will write stories, edit audio, and when and if the equipment was available, edit video from their interviews. Every Monday, the students meet 8am-12pm for the Stories Corps Program, and the remaining weekdays meet 8am-12pm for their regular classes.

McGavick feels the students really respond well to the Stories Corps program and particularly to the project about the stories from the homeless at the ARCH. “These kids have been subjected to stuff that kids just shouldn’t be, you know,” says McGavick, “homelessness, or drug abuse in the family or themselves, or incarceration, and it makes normal high school not a thing for them.” By listening to

some of the stories of those who are homeless, particularly two stories, it gave the students perspective on their own lives, and even a newfound understanding about who the homeless really are.

The first story was about a man named Louis Meeks, who in one day watched the doctors pronounce his three year-old son, then his 17 month year-old daughter, and then finally his wife 'dead' after being struck by a drunk driver. His story opened the students' eyes to how tragedy in one's life can lead to homelessness, rather than the misconceived notion that all homeless are simply lazy.

The second story was that of Anthony Ortega; "My story was a criminal background back in '95 [...] it was a sex offense, yes I'll be perfectly honest, yes it was. And I'm willing to get that off of my shoulder." All Ortega wants now is a way to move beyond his incarceration and the taint on his record, and to get a job and work, so that he can become independent and provide for himself.

"The vast majority of our students either have been locked up or know someone, or have someone in their family who has been or is in jail, and I think that was a big commonality at the ARCH, a criminal record." Says McGavick.

Maira Gonzalez, a student of McGavick's in Stories Corps, is the only child in a family of four to make it to her senior year equivalent of high school. "[My other sister has] one kid, doesn't go to school, bad record, and she kinda reminded me of Anthony for a second. I did, I talked to her and I told her that we met a guy in the ARCH and that he reminded me of her, and I told her his story and that if she was going the same path, she will end up in a homeless shelter like him."

Mike McGavick, Jack's father, has had a prominent career, first as CEO of the Insurance company SafeCo until 2006 when he stepped down to run for U.S. Senate, he lost the election, but ended up in his current position as CEO of the global insurance company XL Group. Despite his father's presence and personage, Jack is quiet and unassuming at first glance; in fact you may not even notice him. Although his red hair does help a bit to draw him out of the crowd, and his small ear piercing on his left ear, let's you know he's not your typical teacher.

Becoming a teacher, for Jack McGavick, seemed fated; his mother, who played a lead role in raising him after his parents' divorce, worked as an AP Biology teacher until he was fourteen, and even while in high school, he was inspired by some of his own teachers. He attended the University of Virginia where he was in a program that allowed him to work on his Bachelor's and Masters simultaneously in education.

As part of the program at UVA, for his placement, he worked in a charter school there in VA with a similar mission to AYW, to help at-risk youth pursue their education. It was working there that would later on inspire him to apply for the position he currently holds.

"I think the primary reason I always wanted to work with high schoolers is because I'm super passionate about language and literature and poetry and all that stuff. I think I need to be interacting in those media to really feel sustained as an educator, and high school is a time when I can do that." Says McGavick.

But his decision to want to work with high school age kids who are deemed “at-risk” poses its own set of struggles. It’s just the “enormity of what you are working against” says McGavick. “[T]he worst part of working with this age group is seeing behaviors that may have solidified and will make a successful life a very hard thing to come by.”

In the classroom, McGavick tries to make that space into a community. While the education system, politics, and structure in place, are several factors that lead to students dropping out from public high schools, McGavick also believes that the community and where the student comes from plays an integral role as well. Working to make the classroom and the students feel like a family; that is his mission to help extricate some of the “solidified behaviors.” Gahan shares in McGavick’s view in that his goal for the school is to “create a sense of belonging” something he feels most public institutions fail to do.

If there’s one thing McGavick tries to teach and instill in his students, it is kindness. McGavick’s hero is his mom, although he questioned the cliché of his own answer, but it was she who first instilled this lesson in him. “It was just me and her for many years when I was growing up, and the big reason she would be a hero for me is just her emphasis on being kind and doing things for other people; sort of avoiding the competitiveness of life and more so seeking to just make people happy rather than trying to get ahead.”

Maira Gonzalez, who is one of McGavick’s students, says having Jack as her teacher is “Good; he has taught me a lot, where I came from I didn’t learn nothing,

but working with Jack, he does know how to explain everything; he's very patient. And I need patience." Adds Maira.

Maira, who at one point used to skip school and was consistently in trouble, now plans to graduate January or February of next year and explains her continued motivation: "I experience what [my sister's] experience, if I didn't listen, I would already have a child as well. Like I see what they went through, the struggle, the struggle of not having a school diploma, of not having a job, having a baby, the baby daddy not being there; the struggle they put my mom through and I don't want to be another one of those."

Gahan says AYW is a place where "you can rewrite the story of yourself" which for Maira, with the help of teachers, like Jack McGavick and the Stories Corps program, that is just what she has done. Success at this school is measured in many different ways; the fact that this school exists for students who possibly never saw themselves finishing high school, is in fact a success story. For Jack, in the end, says "[it] is the idea that it's more important to be kind than to be smart. [...] I mean, ideally, you can be both kind and smart, but kindness always wins."