

## There and Then

Kristi Lonardo Clemens

In December, I thought I had decided my future path—to leave student affairs and open a restaurant. In retrospect, this massive change in direction was fueled by a particularly difficult semester filled with politics and changes in responsibility, coupled with the 8 months that I had spent moonlighting as a waitress in a French wine bar here in New York City. In my time in New York, I've become very focused on the restaurant scene, tracking new openings and menu changes with the same voracity that I once held for reading books on postmodernism (no, seriously!). Coupled with my management experience from working in residence life for the past 8 years, I thought this was a smashing idea.

Except for a few lingering issues.

Reflecting on my time at the wine bar, I thought about the people I had met. There was the busboy, an immigrant from Ecuador, who had moved to the United States 10 years ago. He arrived in a cargo plane, stowed away in a storage area. When I asked about his family back in Ecuador, he would change the subject and go back to watching movies on his iPhone.

There was a fellow server, a current college junior, who would talk to me about his travels in Europe while still in high school. He would also ask me for relationship advice, which somehow by the virtue of being married, younger people seem to think I am an expert in dispensing. I will say, my interactions with him were a lot more familiar—a privileged young man who was learning the complicated world of dating in New York City. Sounds like many RA one-on-ones I've had in my life.

There is the owner, 6 years my junior and partial owner of three bars in lower Manhattan. Like me, she had gone to New York University (NYU) for her Bachelor's degree, but obviously headed down a different path. She was at the bar every night until closing. Her day began at 4 p.m., when she would wake up and head into work. In my observation, she didn't have many friends outside of the

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bar. Really, how could she? With no time for herself and a schedule likely opposite of her college and high school friends, how could she maintain relationships?

I don't want to mischaracterize any of these individuals as isolated or unhappy. Who am I to make such judgments? However, when I think about their daily lives in contrast with mine, there are significant differences. Though I might leave a job, chances are I will still keep in contact with my former coworkers, or at least grab a drink with them at ACPA. Though my HESA cohort has spread across the country, and while we did not always get along during those 2 years in Vermont, when I got engaged they were among the first to be included in my excited announcement email. I celebrated my wedding in October with former RAs, coworkers, and supervisors from my time in residence life.

So why was I trying to leave?

Let's be frank. The work that I do in residence life is not rocket science, but at the same time can be very challenging. We provide a place for students to live, learn, and make connections. We guide them when they are struggling and celebrate them when they have successes. My time at NYU has taught me more than I would have ever thought I would learn about mental health. In my first professional year, we had a spate of student suicides on campus which dramatically altered the trajectory of our work. Six years later, we are still nervous when our cell phones ring on the weekend. Our partnerships with academic deans changed from that of bridging academic and social experiences to receiving updates on a student's psychological status. Instead of hearing about what great experiences students had going to a dance performance in Harlem over the weekend, my Monday mornings are frequently spent learning about a first-year student who thinks that rats are coming into his apartment and using up all the toilet paper. This is not the job I signed up for.

However, there is something about the work that we do that keeps us together. Through the budget cuts, difficult parents, and sometimes unrealistic expectations, we know that we are here for a reason. I was recently talking with a friend who works in the field, and we were complaining about various aspects of our jobs. I think I may still have been under the delusion that I was opening a restaurant, which my friend supported. I said that she should come and work with me, since she was frustrated with her department. She said, "I can't. This is my job." Now, you may think that sounds defeatist. After all, don't studies now show that most Americans will have several careers during their lifetime? I understood what she meant, in a much broader sense than just staying in any given position.

For me, working in student affairs is the culmination of a journey which started when I was a college student. I never had any intention of working with students,

and if you told me 10 years ago that this is where I would be now, I would not have believed you. Too “touchy-feely,” not enough notoriety. I moved to New York City at 18 to work on Broadway, if not as an actress then as a public relations agent. I held various internships in the field and enjoyed the work, even if I did feel it was somewhat boring and repetitive. I had work-study, so I took a job with the admissions office, which led to a tour guide position after my first year. When I needed more financial aid, I set my sights on becoming an RA. I told people I loved being an RA because I grew up broke and could never go to summer camp—this may have been partially true. However, the connections I made in a place as spread out and disjointed as NYU were important. My fellow tour guides and I supported each other through 7 a.m. open houses and stressful finals. My RA staff had my back when a drunken resident became aggressive with me in the hallway.

When it was time to graduate, I was *not* ready to graduate at all. I finished in 3 years and felt unprepared for the post-college Brooklyn experience that my friends were headed toward. My supervisor at admissions offered me a graduate assistantship supervising the tour guides, if I were to enroll in graduate school. It seemed like a great plan, except that I had no intention of going to graduate school. I discovered that NYU had a program in Performing Arts Administration, so I applied and enrolled. And, I hated it. I realized I liked being an RA more than anything else I was doing, so after a year in grad school at NYU, I left and headed to Vermont.

What has happened since then certainly hasn't been a blissful journey as a professional RA. As I've learned, in both HESA and beyond, there are many more layers to being an educator than one would initially assume. For me, the biggest hurdle was seeing myself primarily as an educator. It is easy to get hung up on excelling at administrative tasks, but the moment you shift your focus away from the bean counting of how many judicial cases you've processed or how many programs your hall has done, it is liberating and gives you a sense of purpose in the work that you are doing. Even though I have been doing the somewhat generalist work of residence life for 8 years, I've found that I best connect with students through my true passion of social justice education. Once again, this is not something that I would have predicted! I truly have the HESA program to thank (or blame!) for igniting this dedication in me. I think back to my HESA interview in March of 2001. In several of my interviews that day I was asked about diversity and social justice. I thought I had this question nailed—after all, I live in New York City! I *totally* get diversity. We have theme months and *everything*. In time, of course, I realized my privilege was getting in the way, and continued to work on myself while educating others from a liberation perspective.

This lens that I bring has both helped and hindered me in my career. On the

positive side, I am the chair of ACPA's Commission for Social Justice Educators. I have started a monograph, and have trained and presented throughout the country. Locally, I helped create several experiences for NYU students and have been active in changing the perspective of my department. I have been able to have meaningful conversations with students about aspects of identity and the struggles they have faced. On the flip side, I have often been told that my challenging nature is off-putting to colleagues. I, of course, don't see it as challenging, but moving us to a process of dialogue and growth. Agree to disagree?

In the first month of working at the wine bar, I found myself in an awkward position. The doorman, a straight White male, decided that I would be his confidant one night as he gave a running commentary on our customers. It ranged from the relative "hotness" of the women at table four to the perceived "gayness" of the dudes at table 11. He also asked many questions about how the "Chinese" women in the window were acting, since they weren't drinking. He also said they probably wouldn't leave me a tip, so I shouldn't try as hard. If all this had happened while I was at my day job, my response probably would have been developmental and probing: "Why is the sexuality of those men so important to you? Why are you assuming that those women are Chinese, and what would that have to do with how much they tip?" If that didn't work, I would likely go on the attack, and tell him why he was wrong, racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. However, this was not that kind of environment. It was a busy night and I didn't have time to review with him the messages he had received about gender and race as a child. We didn't have a friendship, so I couldn't tell him why the things he said were hurtful to me. I didn't have the opportunity to learn about his background, and what experiences he may have had that led him to say these things. I was also scared. I needed this job, and knowing that the doorman was friends with the owner made me reluctant to jeopardize my position. It had been a long time since I felt silenced like this. I know that in my position in residence life, I can ask questions of my colleagues and challenge them appropriately. I know that if I am triggered by them and become upset, they will understand and we can talk through it. It's the time and the relationships that we form that make the difference.

So, when people ask me why I remain in my unusual job, I can tell them that it's because it is a great opportunity to mold young minds, to network and to stay current in a field with so much active research, or because it is never boring. You have a voicemail on your phone; is it a student in crisis, or just someone running a little late this morning? After so much reflection in the course of writing this piece, I think the reason I stay is because there isn't enough social justice in the restaurant world. Too simplistic? All right, try this instead:

It's because there is something unique and important about working in a field where discourse, disagreement, and diversity are embraced and encouraged.

Genuine connection and caring are a priority, and you can maintain relationships both professionally and personally for as long as you'd like. We do not let opportunities for education pass us by, and we try to think as intentionally and progressively as we are allowed. Sometimes it takes a little bit of a panicked career crisis to remind us of all this, but in the end, it's always better than opening a restaurant.