

# Awakening

Category: Stories

written by Benjamin Ostro | September 2, 2011

## **Benjamin Ostro with Boris D Veysman**

Back when I was a premedical student, I didn't devote much time to community service. I cared about helping others, and yet, feeling as driven as I did to excel in my academic and extracurricular commitments, I had little time for volunteering.

It's been my sense that most physicians don't do much community service. If you ask a doctor why this is so, he or she might shrug and say something like "My work benefits the community" or "I'm already overworked."

Upon entering medical school, I absorbed this attitude more or less unconsciously. I viewed volunteer work as "rewarding," but devoid of any deeper personal value. It was as if, before even joining the medical profession, I'd acquired some of its bad habits.

Then, as a third-year medical student, I was assigned to volunteer at Damon House, where drug addicts pick up the pieces of their broken lives.

Heading into the experience, I anticipated that Damon House would not be for me. I don't enjoy heart-wrenching stories—and besides, what did I have to offer? Why would anyone there listen to a pampered kid from the suburbs? I was determined to do a good job, but I planned to cope rather than contribute.

My change of heart began while I was running a week-long seminar called "Autobiographies," in which ten residents shared their life stories.

One woman, Carolyn, had been raised in a crack house by her addict parents—a biker and a prostitute. She appeared much older than her twenty-eight years. Her hair was unkempt, her clothes were tattered and stained with this morning's breakfast, and her teeth were blackened by years of methamphetamine abuse.

As ragged as she looked, Carolyn proved to be articulate.

"My dad would come home drunk almost every night with his friends. I remember trying to do my homework while he and his buddies sold drugs in the next room. When I was thirteen, one of my dad's dealers raped me at knife point."

Carolyn picked up a drug habit of her own and dropped out of high school. She left home to live on the streets of Trenton, stealing her drugs from the city's dealers. Before she was arrested and sent to Damon House, she'd been sleeping under benches by the Delaware River, in hiding from dealers who were looking to kill her.

Jamal, another resident, had grown up in an apartment above a bar in Newark.

His mother, who worked downstairs as a bartender, often brought patrons home with her. By age twelve, Jamal had been abused sexually, physically and emotionally by some of these visitors. In junior high, determined to block out his childhood memories, he'd tried any drug he could find. Then, at nineteen, he'd been arrested for possession, put on probation and placed at Damon House.

Hearing their stories, I initially felt embarrassed and despondent over the misery they'd experienced. As the shock began to wear off, though, I started to feel privileged to hear their stories. They were trusting me with such intimate details.

After an hour of listening, it was finally my turn. Could I reciprocate? Should I?

I hesitated, but they insisted.

"C'mon, Doc, what's your deal?"

"Yeah, don't bullshit us, tell it like it is."

I cringed inwardly, but finally began.

"I grew up in Princeton, New Jersey. My mother was a doctor and my father was a businessman. Growing up, I had everything, all the best toys and clothes. Comforts and safety were never an issue...I went to private schools, and my parents bought me every possible tool I needed to succeed. My family was loving and peaceful and always supportive, even when I failed."

I took a breath and continued. "But with all the privilege came high expectations to succeed. When I didn't do well, I was angry with myself for not trying harder. After everything that's been done for me, I feel great pressure to finish well and practice successfully, to not disappoint my parents and teachers, and to prove that the time and money my parents invested in me was well spent...Here I am, almost a doctor, and only now do I feel that I'm beginning to meet the expectations that went along with my upbringing."

I looked around at their listening faces. "I realize that this pressure is very different from the sort that you're all familiar with, but it's pressure all the same. When I start something, I'm terrified to fail, which makes me work that much harder at it."

I thought for a minute, then concluded, "This pressure is really pervasive...Even being here, with you, way out of my comfort zone, I'm afraid I'm screwing this up."

There was a long pause.

I was certain they saw me as just a spoiled rich kid. But with a tact that surprised me, no one said so. On the contrary, they were fascinated by me. To them, I was a role model—someone who was goal-oriented, determined and perseverant. As I sat listening to their reactions, I felt surprised and

gratified—and strangely validated.

Over the few days, I did my best to counsel Carolyn, Jamal and the others.

“Let’s set some short-term goals. How can this problem be made a little better?”

“I know you tried that already, and it didn’t work out, but what can we learn from the setback?”

“What gets you motivated? How will your life be better off without drugs?”

We found common ground and shared values. Like me, they wanted a happy future, respect from others and a sense of worth. They listened and valued my opinions, even the ones I wasn’t so sure of. They really wanted to hear what it took to stay focused and achieve your goals.

In return, they opened my eyes, which had been focused for so long solely on my medical studies. They showed me that a life of meaningful service is more satisfying than a life of achievement for achievement’s sake.

Just as importantly, they taught me that you don’t know what you have to offer others until you try to give.

Now, I wonder if these realizations are what differentiates the doctors who grumble about their jobs from those who feel thrilled by the daily opportunities their work gives them to make a difference to others.

At the end of my assignment, Jamal approached me.

“I really appreciate what you told me about setting goals and getting motivated,” he said. “It meant a lot to me. I feel like I’ve learned a lot here.”

He paused a moment, then continued. “I don’t know if I can really change my life like you say...But I’m better off since coming to Damon House.”

In that moment, as his words resonated in my ears, I groped for the right words to say.

When they came, they were short and simple:

“Me, too.”

#### **About the author:**

Benjamin Ostro is a fourth-year medical student at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick, NJ, and plans to enter the field of emergency medicine. “This piece is my first real venture into published creative writing. I was inspired to write it after doing an elective in emergency medicine/narrative writing taught by Dr. Boris Veysman, whose narrative pieces have appeared in many journals over the years. He encouraged me to reflect on my medical school experiences, and this story was the

product.”

**Story editor:**

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