“We all share the same space”: overcoming the stigma of homelessness in North Carolina by building trust between members of the homeless population and college students

When I first entered the bustling office of the Community Empowerment Fund on a Wednesday afternoon around 1pm after eating a quick lunch and speed-walking to Franklin Street, I felt excited to see so much going on. The volume of the hum of voices periodically rose and fell, and I noted the clacking of keys on laptop keyboards—advocates always had laptops on hand. People sat either at the main round table or at one of the four desks in the small office space one-on-one or two-on-one (two advocates to one member) and addressed each other by first names. Sunlight poured in through the window; the fluorescent lights added even more bright lighting to the small room. Everyone seemed to be in a good mood, smiling and laughing with each other. They all seemed to know each other so well. I felt like a true outsider, not knowing any of the names of the members of advocates. But this would soon change. At CEF, you cannot help but to get to know people on a personal level through friendship, partnership, and trust. As one of the members whose name is Sam told me in an interview, “I’m not as smart as they are, but as being an equal person to them, they let me know that I do matter.” We are all partners in this endeavor for financial freedom and justice. From my ethnographic observations, I learned that CEF creates a space in which people from all socioeconomic backgrounds are seen and treated as equals. When I initially started volunteering at CEF, I unconsciously separated the
common spaces from the shared space of the CEF office. CEF and my personal life as a UNC student were separate. However, I found that they could not truly be separated, as the ideas I learned from CEF permeated my daily thoughts and perceptions.

Just to clarify a few key terms that I used—By member, I mean people in the community who struggle financially and seek help with their financial situations, so that they can get their lives back on track. Advocates are either part-time or full-time workers. Those who come in part-time are UNC Chapel Hill students who volunteer their time and are unpaid. Full-time advocates receive small stipends and compensation for working full-time from 10am to 3pm. Advocates come in to the CEF office and help members by providing them with the tools and resources they need in order to help themselves improve their financial situations. CEF is member-centered, meaning members are an integral part of the organization. I gathered this from both advocates and from what a member told me directly, “I think I’m a very important part of the puzzle…” From what I have heard from other advocates and members, advocates empower members to pursue financial stability, thereby expanding their horizons and opportunities. The advocate-member relationship is a “friendship built on trust”. Alex, one of the advocates who holds an administrative position said concerning the member-advocate relationship, “It is important to establish an equal partnership, which empowers members, who usually face oppression and have their voices suppressed and dismissed.”

The Community Empowerment Fund was started in the summer of 2009 by a group of students, shelter residents, faculty, and community members in Chapel Hill. They started CEF with the intention of addressing institutional financial barriers faced by the homeless and working poor in the United States, specifically those currently residing in Chapel Hill, Durham, and surrounding areas. It was founded on the notion that “small amounts of capital coupled with
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social support, savings opportunities, financial education, and positive community could facilitate transitions out of homelessness.”¹ The definition of homelessness varies. According to A. R. Venoss’s article on homelessness,

Although most people would agree that sleeping on the streets or staying in a shelter are examples of homelessness, less visible accommodations, such as doubling-up with friends or family, spending too much of one's income on housing, or living in dilapidated housing, may or may not be considered examples of homelessness. It depends on how home is defined and whether the home in question is protected by law. To make matters more confusing, some people classified as homeless may not accept that label as an accurate definition of their circumstances, and may reject the label for political and personal reasons.²

From my ethnographic research, I gathered that people who come to CEF for aid do not necessarily identify as homeless. Those who live in shelters self-identify as homeless. However, some people who live with family members do not necessarily identify as homeless. It is not necessary to be homeless in order to seek assistance from CEF. People who struggle financially and need help searching for housing, jobs, and/or need help with filing taxes or creating a savings account can come to CEF. CEF “offers savings opportunities, financial education, and assertive support to individuals who are seeking employment, housing, and financial freedom.”³

Found on CEF’s website, CEF’s mission statement says, “The Community Empowerment Fund cultivates opportunities, assets, and communities that support the alleviation of homelessness and poverty.”

In order to gather information about my field site and get to know my informants on a more personal level, I conducted both formal and informal interviews. I transcribed one of my

formal interviews that I conducted with an advocate. I also employed participant observation and took extensive field notes in my journal. Since CEF emphasizes partnership, I had to build rapport in order to establish a relationship with both members and advocates. According to James Spradley, rapport refers to the basic sense of trust that allows for the free flow of information. This is essential in order for advocates to provide personalized assistance to each member they work with. Participant observation involved the active interaction between the group and me. I shared in the activities of CEF by volunteering 2-3 times a week (spending about 4-6 hours per week with members and advocates). I initially shadowed trained advocates and observed their interactions with members. After I became trained, I began to work with members one-on-one and established my own bonds with them. I also spoke with members outside of appointment times by asking them about their days and listening to their background stories.

Something that stuck out to me during my interview with Alex was what she had to say about acknowledging and recognizing privilege: “I think what’s beautiful about CEF is that…[it] deals with some of these…systems of oppression and privilege and…allows us to look inside and see both of those within ourselves and within other people/and not just put…privilege on the advocate side and oppression on the member side. I think it allows for more of a mix.” I recognized my privilege as a well-off, able-bodied student at UNC who has not had any significant financial hardships or any experiences of homelessness whilst living in the United States. I also recognized that some of the members had privilege as well. Since I worked amongst a very racially and socioeconomically diverse group of people, I recognized intersecting

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identities. Some people held privilege by being a part of racially dominant groups while others held privilege by being part of socioeconomically dominant or gender dominant groups.

Initially in my research, I wanted to learn about perception versus reality, so I tried to understand how advocates perceived members and vice versa. I wanted to know if advocates and members perceived each other in the same way: as equals. As I did this research, another topic of interest came up. I began focusing on the member-advocate relationship and its significance. I wanted to know why trust and friendship were important factors in terms of how CEF functioned successfully. Members and advocates consistently emphasized the member-advocate relationship was an equal partnership. This led me to consider another research question: “What makes CEF different from other social service/non-profit organizations?” During my informal follow-up interview with Alex, she mentioned that the CEF’s emphasis on the member-advocate relationship set CEF apart from other non-profit organizations. During the interview, I asked questions like “How is CEF meaningful to you?”, “How does CEF work best?” and “Why do you value CEF?” Alex told me that CEF is meaningful to her because “We all share the same space…CEF is very much a part of life. Everything has more meaning, both inside and outside of the office.” Alex told me that, “CEF works best…when we have those…really strong one on one relationships…” She said that she valued CEF because “There’s nothing, I think, stronger than being able to…see yourself as a full person and I think that’s why I really value CEF.”

As I continued my research over the course of this semester, I came across a very important idea: common spaces and shared spaces. Although the physical office of CEF can be considered a private space, it is shared by both the advocates and the members. Members of the Chapel Hill/Carrboro community and surrounding areas inhabit this shared space and work together in an equal partnership in order to fulfill the goals of CEF. Common spaces are
considered to be places on Franklin Street and public transportation spaces. This led me to think about how I perceive common spaces and separate spaces. I began to realize that when I first began working as an advocate of CEF, it was easy for me to separate the physical, private workspace of CEF from the much larger and broader spaces outside of the office. I kept my work at CEF separate from every day student life. However, I began to realize that I could not keep them separate, especially given that I shared a common space and interacted both directly and indirectly with members of the homeless population in the community. I realized that the relationships and bonds I was creating inside of the CEF office extended into the common spaces. I viewed people on a more personal level rather than through the lenses that society gives us. Before working at CEF, I saw the homeless population through a negative and judgmental lens. I would try my best to avoid eye contact with people who “looked homeless” and if anyone came to me asking for money, I would either ignore them or say I did not have any spare change. I made the assumption that “those kind of people” would just use that money to buy drugs or alcohol rather than spend it wisely. During the very beginning of my experience of working with CEF, I was under the false impression that all of my preconceived notions had magically dissipated. But that was not the case. As I walked along Franklin Street, I still avoided eye contact with people who appeared to be part of the homeless population. I would acknowledge people I recognized from the office, but I would do so silently. After my interviews with Alex and her member partner Sam, I began actively trying to recognize the biases I still held. I made an effort to verbally acknowledge members that I saw in the common spaces outside of the office.

One day while I was at Noodles and Co., a common space part of west Franklin Street, with a good friend of mine, I noticed that an African American man with a scraggly beard and a
coat was walking slowly with a cane along the sidewalk and asking people for spare change. People either looked away, walked faster, or shook their heads saying they had no money to offer. It enraged me to see how people were treating him just because of the way he looked. It also pained me to recognize that I had been one of those people. I stood up and walked over to man and asked him if he wanted anything to eat. I offered to buy a meal from Noodles and Co. for him. He happily agreed. As we walked inside, I noticed other customers staring at the man or giving him sideway glances. I ordered chicken noodle soup and a Caesar salad for him and found a vacant table. I brought him some water and sat down across from him, ignoring the stares from others. I felt good finally being able to break past my bias and actively recognize my privilege. I recognized that I have the opportunity to dine whenever and wherever I want without having people question my presence. I wanted to give this man the same opportunity. The waitresses at Noodles and Co. were very kind and served him the same way they served other customers. This experienced really shaped my time at CEF and made everything I did and everything I worked for a lot more meaningful. To know that I was actively using my privilege to help others made me feel like the work I was doing at CEF worthwhile.

I asked myself the same questions that I had posed to Alex during our second interview: “How is CEF meaningful to you? How does CEF work best? Why do you value CEF?” CEF is meaningful to me because it allowed me to recognize members of the homeless population as human beings who are part of the same community as I am and who should be able to enjoy the same common spaces that I enjoy without judgment. CEF works best through the establishment of the advocate-member relationship. CEF achieves successes through this partnership between current and former students of UNC and members of the homeless population who both inhabit
the common spaces of the Chapel Hill/Carrboro community and surrounding areas. I value CEF because of its efforts to recognize and empower members of the homeless population.

From my research, I gathered that a great way to build rapport is to establish an equal partnership. CEF places heavy emphasis on equality and a relationship in which both partners give and take. CEF is “assertive” and very “supportive” of its advocates and members.

Iris Marion Young identifies and defines the Five Faces of Oppression as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Exploitation is a “systematic process in which the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain…the power, status, and wealth of the haves.” CEF works to provide its members with the tools needed to fight against exploitation and marginalization (“system in which people in a certain category are expelled from useful participation in social life…potentially subjected to severe material deprivation” [e.g. homelessness, unemployment/underemployment]) while putting themselves on the right track.

Sam shared a personal anecdote of how CEF empowered him:

I had been without a car for like 4 years…they showed me how to open up a bank account and save money and leave the money where it is and where it’s supposed to be and use that money…to buy an automobile, and I accomplished that…through them…Just trying to do it by myself, I could never do that…because if I had saved up money…my addiction kind of kicked in and took over…But since I’ve been in recovery…and doing what I need to do to stay clean…CEF program has opened my eyes to a whole lot of things…The people I bought my car from, Wheels for Hope, they had never heard of CEF, but by the time I left there, they knew who they were…When I first came to this program, they set a computer in front of me, and it was like reading Japanese, you know…so, I took classes and one of the other members of the CEF program tutored me to use a computer. So once he did that, then I purchased a restored computer for $75 and now I can get on my laptop and go anywhere I wanna go, then that’s just one of the other things they’ve done for me…is taught me how to use a computer, because I do know that everything in the world is going to be automated…and it was real important for me to learn how to do that…and they helped me do that. They’re

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always getting on me about saving money…I had just about exhaust my savings that I had, but right now I’m trying to build it back up. The people at CEF helped me start on my 401K…It’s just so many things that they’ve done, I really can’t tell you all of them…some of them I’ve even forgot myself.

He even described to me how the one-on-one advocate-member relationship has helped him personally. Sam works with Alex and they have a close relationship, which they have built over the past three years or so. I think their relationship encapsulates the purpose of a member-advocate relationship and how a successful friendship built on trust can work:

So I don’t live in Chapel Hill, I live about 18 miles from here…just up above Hillsborough…and she’s actually gotten in her car and come…went to my house when my car was broke down…she helped me get in touch with some people, to start by getting it fixed…and during that process she got in her car and came to my house…and I really think that was a little bit above and beyond, you know, the call of duty, as far as CEF can help you with…but it helped me…I can call her anytime and talk about anything and she’ll let me know what she thinks about certain situations then she’ll ask me how I feel about certain situations…that’s an essential part of the friendship thing…But anybody that comes to this program, I think it’s a worthwhile program to come to…now everybody may not share my enthusiasm about it…like I said, I know what CEF program had done for me…

Unlike “normal organizations” (e.g. non-profits/NGOs), CEF is all-inclusive and “dedicated” to its members. It provides a “common space” for members and advocates to interact and learn from each other. Other organizations tend to pick and choose who they serve. “Clients” must meet certain criteria in order to “qualify” for assistance. CEF is “able to work with people who have a wide range of abilities (even those with “mental illness”). Other organizations tend to be impersonal, helping their clients over the phone in lieu of face-to-face communication. They keep clients and workers “separate.” They “aren’t working with people on an ‘empowered’ level.” CEF relies on the passion of its dedicated members rather than pay as an incentive.

Sam had a lot to offer concerning his thoughts and ideas about CEF. Although he didn’t know me very well and therefore did not fully trust me, he shared his personal experience of his
time at CEF with me. I felt that his words encapsulated CEF’s purpose and his narrative provided a lot of insight into what members think of CEF:

It wasn’t until I came here that I found out I could actually help myself…When things didn’t work out I was blaming everybody but myself…They aren’t here to babysit you, they’re here to primarily give you resources to help you help yourself…When I started the program, It was a great fit for me because I was looking for help, and it did, it actually helped me. But the thing that really stuck out to me was…when I first came up here it was kind of funny because they didn’t know me, I didn’t know them…they’re always willing to help. And these are kids, you know what I’m saying…As soon as you say you need help with something you can see the laptops popping, you know, the lids popping…I thought they had ulterior motives, you know, what are you getting out of this? But it wasn’t until later on that I found out they were doing this because it made them feel good about doing it…about helping people that’s in my predicament…But since I’ve been in recovery…and doing what I need to do to stay clean…CEF program has opened my eyes to a whole lot of things.

Sam was right about why current students choose to volunteer their time at CEF. I felt good anytime I ascended the stairs and saw the wooden sign with “CEF” printed on it in big yellow letters. I loved being in the office and experiencing the atmosphere of the place. I always felt more productive on days that I volunteered from 1-3pm. Sam also touched on an important aspect of my research topic: that of the shared spaces and common spaces. As I mentioned earlier, I had initially separated CEF from the spaces outside of the office. It made me happy to know that other advocates and members were acknowledging each other outside of the office:

I think I’m a very important part of the puzzle…especially because after so many years of not trusting someone…and then to finally trust someone…with certain things that’s kind of personal to me…and it’s fascinating too because not only…the advocate that I work with…I could be walking down Franklin Street or at my job and certain people that’s advocates here, I don’t recognize who they are because their outfits or get-ups may be different because they’re running…they’ll say “Hey Sam!” and you know, I’m trying to figure out who they are, you know, and until I actually see who they are…you know, just that right there means a whole lot…for them to recognize me as being a member of CEF.
From this interview, I gathered that CEF provides a community space inside and outside of the office. CEF transcends its private office space through its members and advocates. Sam and other members take on the role of advocates and help others by telling people about CEF and how it can help those in need of financial assistance:

   I told people in my home group, where I do my meetings…about CEF; I handed out pamphlets and stuff…about CEF…to let them know that the organization works…and a few people has come since I’ve done that…and primarily anytime I can voice my opinion about CEF and who they are, then I will do so.

Through my ethnographic research, interviews, transcription, and participant observation, I found that CEF successfully creates common spaces both inside and outside of their main office. CEF not only helps members in the office, but they also provide members with Saturday and Sunday opportunity classes where they can learn more about savings, how to apply for jobs and housing, how to set goals, and what tools they need to get their lives back on track. CEF’s office space and opportunity class space provide a common space for both members and advocates to interact with one another and enrich each other’s lives. CEF holds meetings every Monday for members and advocates to prepare for the upcoming week and learn more about how to help each other and learn from one another. By volunteering at CEF, I learned how to acknowledge and recognize my privilege and how to use my privilege to empower others both in CEF’s office and in the common spaces in the community. I no longer unconsciously separate the common spaces from the shared space of the office. Instead, I actively try to acknowledge that these spaces intersect and connect. They cannot be separated. We really do “all share the same space.” CEF has helped me to change my perceptions and preconceived notions of the homeless population in the community around me. I see others as I see myself—as a human
being with thoughts and emotions, and I feel like CEF has managed to make me see myself “as a full person.”

I think CEF could improve its overall structure. Right now, it is still a relatively young organization so there is still room for improvement. CEF could encourage member-advocate pairings more. I have worked one-on-one with a lot of different members, but unlike Alex and Sam, I am not paired with a specific member so I have not been able to build a strong bond between myself and a member. I have noticed that the members who come in regularly to get help are paired with one or two advocates that work specifically with them and know more about them than the other advocates do. I think if CEF encouraged more of those pairings, we could have a higher retention rate among members since advocates motivate their members and encourage them to keep coming. I will be applying for a leadership position at CEF. By being a team leader, I think I can devote more of my time to the members of CEF and help to improve CEF’s overall structure. The CEF program is a unique friendship-based method which allows for members of the homeless population in the Chapel Hill/Carrboro community and surrounding areas to share the same spaces, learn from each other, and acknowledge and recognize each other within these spaces, and I hope to continue to learn more from members and advocates.

Bibliography


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