

MIND 2 MIND: GOOD MEDICINE, GOOD WORK

By Eleni Johnson

My experience in Mind 2 Mind over the last two summers has included a space for my personal explorations to move around freely while I worked with an awesome group of adults and kids. I had personal areas of myself and my life that were calling for my attention, and while working at M2M I was able to give those areas my attention. There was a dynamic group of people working at M2M this past summer that created an atmosphere of love and endless possibilities for M2M staff and kids.

So what is M2M you ask? Well it is a project of East Hillside Patch that is after school and all day during the summer for kids age 6 -14. Staff and volunteers work as empowering role models for the kids. The website describes the summer program as “a zest of recreational and cultural enrichment projects.” Patch was started in 1997 by residents of Duluth’s East Hillside neighborhood to make the East Hillside a more positive place to live. There is a lot of information on their website at easthillsidepatch.org. One thing that I love about Patch is that Patch was founded by East Hillside neighborhood residents. This represents the theory that any said community of people who need a positive change know exactly what they need, and have the power to create their change and do! In any case I think its rad that a group of people came together, voiced their opinions, and made positive change. I feel honored to have the opportunity to work within such an empowered group of people at Patch.

Personal explorations: in summer 08, while working at M2M, I was in the heart of a personal battle with myself, and in many ways it controlled me. However M2M was a place where I was in more control of my struggle mainly because I was doing work that wasn’t about me. I had 40+ kids to keep safe and be a positive role-model for. I had to think in ways outside of my usual paradigm. In the summer of 2009 I was about 90% free from all symptoms and began the summer with no personal goals in mind. I was free to allow whatever would happen, happen - and what happened was amazing! I started listening to my heart and my soul and allowed them to speak, which took a whooollle lot of courage to do those things my heart and soul knew were good for me but I didn’t want to do and was uncomfortable with. Now I don’t think it was solely M2M that enabled me to do the personal work I did, but I know the environment was an enabler.

Clearly my personal exploration for the summer of 2009 was that of spiritual growth. I feel blessed to have had this personal experience and to have shared it with others, especially kids! Kids know it because (this is my personal theory) they are closest to their authentic voice. Because I was new to this work and a little uncomfortable, the first summer I stayed fairly quiet, in fear of saying the “wrong” thing, and watched how the other staff interacted. What worked for them was staying in the moment and being free in each moment to go wherever that moment called them to go. Kids are FULL of energy and for the most part pretty authentic, so they can sense when you actually are into an activity or lesson. To be comfortable in each moment you have to feel free and confident in the decisions you make, trusting yourself and all that you know - and what you know you don’t know. So on the first summer when my voice was quieter, I felt I

learned about these kids in a way that I wouldn't be able to through books. I witnessed their everyday joys and struggles, and the games they played; I saw the connections to the games they played on us to their present realities. I saw kids eating so much food that they got sick, or screaming in frustration about their dis-belief in a God because God wouldn't allow them to feel the things they feel. I heard their re-counts of why they lived with just their mother and their sadness over the way in which their current nuclear household was set-up. I witnessed ways of rearing children that I was inspired by and some that I was upset over. I witnessed pre-teens stepping up to be mentors, silently noticing what they could do as older kids in this program for the other kids. I witnessed tears, and joy and frustration. I felt connected to a big part of Duluth I had never felt connected to before. All of the things I saw I had never seen before. They gave me a new understanding of realities outside my own. Not to mention the skill of connecting with children.

My 2009 summer experience was that of love and trust. One of the rewarding aspects of my experience at M2M has been the work environment. My co-workers were exceptionally awesome for many reasons. One of which was because they spoke up! The women who hired me, Mona, Carol and Jahna all hire based on ability to think quickly and act responsibly. They ask the questions that I feel I have been found a lot of answers to in my Women's Studies courses. We truly were advocating for these young kids (whom I've fallen in love with!) to mobilize and organize themselves. We volunteered together, ate together and played together. I worked under the direction of six women who had tapped into their infinite power and know what they are doing; they are open, transparent in fact, they speak the truth of what they see. They speak what is on their minds, no games, totally in the game of making M2M work for the kids and for the East Hillside community. Additionally, I was privileged enough to work daily with, Tamara, a UMD MSW graduate; Eric, a Women Studies, International Studies, and German studies major (and dear friend); Laura, a sociology major and UMD graduate; Tim, a local Duluthian, and staff Jahna, Carol and Mona. All of these people work for East Hillside Patch because they believe in the East Hillside community and what Patch stands for.

M2M worked on three new awesome initiatives for the 2009 summer. One was in collaboration with the American Lung Association to assign designated non-smoking areas at the Duluth Transit Area Bus stops. Throughout the summer our oldest kids surveyed Duluthians at the beach, on the lake walk, at the DTA bus-stops and on the buses about their experiences in regard to second-hand smoke at DTA bus-stops. On the second to last day of M2M, Tamara and Jahna scheduled a press-release about our collaborative initiative. We had t-shirts made for all of our kids and staff to wear at the press-council and prepared two youth to make a speech. The experience was exhilarating. To be part of an effort to help kids create the changes they want to see and are passionate about is a thrill out of this world. When one of our children who made the speech said about her experience, "it was really cool to find out that they actually wanted to hear what I had to say," I felt one of the best feelings I have felt in my life. Chilled to the bone. The second new initiative was teaming up with "Girl Power," a YWCA girls group. Our oldest M2M girls and Girl Power's oldest girls met once a week to discuss identity. This was the first year and thus a trial run. This grass-roots idea was also a blast to be part

of for the thrill of being able to share my stories and allow them to be inspirational as well the sharing to be inspirational. This part of M2M was similar to a Women's Studies classroom with its circle discussion, and talking-piece conversations.

Working at M2M and the Women's Resource and Action Center has allowed me to have almost two full years of working in fields that directly integrate my classroom work. These are jobs that I would work after graduating and would encourage anyone to do the same. In recent times of economic strife Patch no longer has an executive director, and is solely focusing on one of their three projects, Mind 2 Mind. The other two on hold are the Health Equity Project, and the Community Assessment Project. Due to hard economic times, Patch has recently lost donations from some of their main funders. So, if you are a dedicated individual who would like to volunteer or intern with East Hillside Patch during your college experience contact them at 1406 E 2nd St. Suite B, Duluth MN 55805, Phone: (218) 728-4287, E-Mail: cdpatch@cpinternet.com You won't regret it!