Community Service / Social Responsibility Project
The Mentor Oxford program matched James and I back in 2005. James was eight. I was 36. James lived in homeless shelters with his mother and sister at the time. Shortly after being matched, James moved from a convenient central hillside shelter to a distant shelter in Superior, Wisconsin. The shelters allowed them to stay for about three weeks. When time ran out, they’d pile everything they owned into a taxi cab and move to another shelter. In those days, I wasn’t married or in the MBA program. We were able get together at least once a week. We did a lot of outdoors activities like hiking along rivers, canoeing and swimming.

In December 2006, James called to inform me that he was moving to L.A.. His family drove to California the very next day. It was to be a permanent move. We spoke once in a while by phone. Then in September 2007 they came back to Oxford. They moved into a duplex with his grandmother.

I hadn’t known James’s grandmother. From his descriptions early on, it sounded as if she was battling alcoholism. By the time they all moved in together she had become a responsible caregiver. I imagine her Social Security and their AFDC allowed them to rent a duplex out in Oxford. The stability was just what James needed. In addition, it was within walking distance of his elementary school.

Unfortunately, the new stability was short lived. Shortly thereafter I heard that two banks had been robbed by 250 pound black woman. My fears were confirmed when I saw James’s mother’s picture in the paper. Apparently she was conned into being a front man for the bank heists. Two men orchestrated it and made away with the money. I don’t think they were ever caught.

Knowing how traumatic it was for James, I waited for him to confide in me when he was ready. In retrospect that was a bad idea. He was really ashamed. It’s obvious to me now that the secret was eating at him. When it finally came up, I reassured him that I cared for him and that it did not reflect on him. He told me that his mother was sentenced to one year. I was skeptical that it would only be a one year sentence, but I didn’t say anything.

James and his sister had his grandmother to take care of them. His grandmother has been a dedicated caregiver, despite a serious liver condition. The state actually paid for her to go all the
way to Mayo for treatment. She had very low energy and slept during the day while the kids were at school. From what I understand it’s not likely she’ll be healed or receive a transplant. As the lone guardian of James and his sister, she naturally worried about their future. She asked me to be a temporary caregiver should something happen. James’s sister’s mentor agreed to do the same. Thank goodness James’s grandmother has been fine. In addition, James’s mom really only had to serve one year. She’s just recently returned home.

**What activity did I engage in and how long?**

Thanks to this experimental exercise, James and I had two fun evenings together. The first of which started at a Vietnamese restaurant. James can be a healthy eater for an eleven year old. He loves Asian food with lots of fresh vegetables. The waitress thought it was cool that we were both using chopsticks. I didn’t teach James how to use chopsticks. He learned how to use them when he was five years old simply by reading the instructions. It’s great that he chooses Asian food. I suspect that his normal diet is high starch, low veggie and low protein. Starchy foods are more affordable for the poor. James and his sister are pretty overweight. James’s mom would be classified as obese. Anyway, we had a good dinner, ate fortune cookies and headed back to his house. I went upstairs to visit with his grandma and his mom. This was the first time I’d seen her since she had been released from prison. They offered me a piece of sweet potato pie. Seeing how much I enjoyed the pie, they had me try some more soul food… collard greens and dirty rice. Even though I was full of Vietnamese, it was very good. (Duration: 3 hours)

On our second outing, James and I went shopping. Christmas can make poor kids feel poorer. So my gift to James this Christmas was 50 dollars and a shopping spree. I told him that he could do whatever he wanted with the money. He could spend it all on himself, buy presents or pocket the cash. Somehow I knew he would buy presents for the three women in his life. He chose Target in order to get the biggest bang for his buck. Like me, he’s a fast shopper. He bought earrings and ear buds for his sister. He picked out two pans for his grandma and a candle for his mom. He hoped to get the newest Beyonce release for the whole family with the balance. Instead we happened upon an alarm clock that he needed. His purchases came to $52.50 which is pretty good for an eleven year overlooking sales tax. The spree only took 30 minutes. I told him that he shops fast like me. He told me, “Now I can relax about Christmas”.

We drove over to the food court. I told him that he could choose any type of food. I was glad he chose Chinese. We found seats and ate with our chopsticks. I didn’t say grace this time. So he said a quick prayer by himself. We talked about school and life in general. I asked most of the questions. I’ve noticed his conversation skills improving. He thinks to ask thoughtful questions about my life. Most of our conversation was simple. There have been a few occasions when we’ve discussed critical subjects. Like the time I explained to him why kids would be mean about his race. I told him that it makes them feel superior. And that they are probably hurting inside with low self-esteem. We talked about why they might have low self-esteem. Hopefully he had heard it before, but it didn’t hurt to hear it again. I think my primary role in his life is to be an example as well as to reassure his confidence.

After Chinese food we walked to Barnes and Noble. He showed me the book section that interested him… Comics. I showed him the section that interests me… History. We then drove over to The Malt Shop to meet my wife for a sundae. She asked him what it was like to live with three women. He said they all can be intense sometimes. And that he mostly stays out of it.

(Duration: 3 hours)

**Why I chose this activity:**

Of all the experimental activities available, investing time in a disadvantaged youth seemed like the most ethical use of time. Especially since this youth is near and dear to my heart. Recently my studies have reduced our time together. So it was a welcomed surprise to simultaneously dedicate time to coursework and James.

I also thought of our class as the audience for my experimental activity. Since the Web Vista posting is anonymous, it’s a great way to humbly share the virtues of mentor programs.

**What did I learn from James?**

1. I learned that some chopsticks come with instructions.
2. Spending time with James realigns my perspective. Too often I’m around wealthy achievers. Their company can frame my ideas about my own life. Spending time with a disadvantaged youth who needs and appreciates my time puts a healthy perspective on reality.

**How is James different from me? How are we similar?**

I grew up in a wealthy suburb. Most my friends were from wealthier families. I benefited from living in a wealthy community focused on its youth. All the houses, schools and parks were new. Because my friends were from wealthier families with two married parents, I learned what it feels like to be relatively less advantaged.

The extent to which James is disadvantaged is so much more profound than what I experienced. I was relatively less wealthy than my peers. James lives well under the poverty line. My parents were divorced. James doesn’t know his dad at all. In addition, the color of his skin is often the first thing people notice about him. I’ve seen kids be cruel to him about his race. I was surprised to learn that he prefers being a minority in Oxford over living in the rougher all-black neighborhood in L.A..

Research has shown that happiness is not correlated with wealth. Instead, it is connected to the richness of our relationships. Despite his difficult life, James is a happy and positive. I haven’t been tested to the same extent, but I’d like to think that I’d be happy and positive despite my financial condition.

**Reflect upon the issues of justice, equity and fairness with regard to the individuals I served as compared to me in my life.**

In the late 19th century, my great grandparents were farmers in Germany and Wisconsin. They were all literate and worked their own land. James is no more than six generations from his ancestors of the same period who were most likely illiterate slaves. Do legacies remain after six generations?

James is better than the life he was dealt. Six generations of James' would lead to healthy self-sufficient families. However, the James' of our country need adult support to overcome their
disadvantages. I was fortunate to get extra support from a wealthy youth-oriented community. Poverty stricken families aren’t so lucky. They desperately need help from volunteer organizations and youth programs.

*Overall, what did I learn from this exercise?*

Due to business travel and coursework, I would not have spent time with James until the class had ended. The six hours spent with James were valuable to both of us. I really felt like I learned more about James’s family when visiting with them on the first night. Typically I just drop him off without spending a lot of time at his house. They presented their ethnicity with pride that night. That was fun and interesting.

The second night allowed me to give James a more thoughtful and impressionable Christmas gift. The shopping spree was much better than just buying a present. This exercise allowed me to consider Christmas from a very poor kid’s perspective. I hadn’t been as thoughtful in previous years.

*What changes should be made in this exercise for future classes?*

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