

Finding Agency to Create Ripples of Social Change in the Cancer World

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Ripples. We have all experienced this seemingly minute wonder at some point in our lives. They are a series of waves in a body of water caused by a single force, disturbing the water's quiet stillness. Given the strength of the force, this ripple effect can be as minimal as dropping a small pebble in the water. A noticeable disturbance is witnessed, catalyzing a repetition of small waves, but after only a brief moment, the water returns to its original stagnant state. However, if we were to introduce a tremendous force, such as a boulder into a pond, a succession of higher order cataclysmic ripples would exist that would eventually erupt into waves crashing on nearby land. When I envision this effect, I imagine it being analogous to finding the agency to create a degree of social change. The cancer world has been perpetuated with fear and anguish, more lives tarnished than almost anything man could ever produce. Its prominence proliferates daily, and simultaneously, growing research and cancer walks are conducted. It has become the talk echoed around the world, but maybe that is exactly what society needs. A conversation. Society needs a proper conversation that will ignite the flame of the great social change. Coming to this deceptively simple understanding took time as I and other students journeyed through the Cancer Biology class and saw the beauty of cancer through the power of service learning.

For the Cancer Biology class, students knew they would be utilizing the overarching topics discussed to aid in their understanding of cancer, the patients involved, and the service work they would be generating. As such, we were encouraged to place all of the work that we completed in the classroom on a larger social context, understand both local and global perspectives, and effectively engage a wide variety of stakeholders. Throughout the course of the semester, I meditated on how I could personally implement change in the cancer world as a student. Organizations, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, and National Cancer Institute have attempted to crack the code to cancer. While there have been vast improvements in comprehending cancer on multiple levels, representatives of these organizations eventually end at a crossroads, perplexed by one or more mechanistic effects of the disease. Admittedly, I am not a leading researcher or oncologist. I also cannot empathize with a cancer patient or survivor because I have never had cancer. With these notions in mind, it became increasingly challenging to wrap my mind around how I, an undergrad student, could make a difference on an international issue and initiate my own ripples. Cancer dates back many millennia and has affected the lives of hundreds of millions. How could one person, then, bring social change to an issue that has permeated so profoundly through time?

We understand cancer is a disease with an extensive history and recognize it as an ailment so complex that we have failed to find a cure. Even as we find new treatments, sometimes they are only effective to aid one aspect of the cancer but then unleash a cascade of other unexpected issues in the human system (Mukherjee 2011). Given the beastly nature of cancer as a topic and a polymorphic entity, it seemed testing to uncover a method I could develop that would facilitate advocacy in a way that was novel and generate social change. Since we find ourselves in a time where we are uncovering more treatments and answers behind cancer, it would seem imperative more than ever to have more societal involvement. This was my agency manifesting.

The term “change” meanders heavily in this reflection because it is an interesting concept. In its simplest form we could define change as a general shift or overall movement to something different. The degree of this shift and movement, if having the proper impetus, has no real bounds, and thus, if we as a society wanted to create major change, we would need a collective agency powerful enough to draw the attention of the general public. Finding a suitable boulder to drop in the pond took time. Of all the possible avenues, it was quite fascinating that our boulder was art. We decided to use art as novel tool to spark the conversation of cancer for a few reasons. When people think of cancer there usually is, for understandable reasons, a very negative connotation. As the common person envisions cancer, he/she may see a sickly person being wheeled across the hospital, waiting for the next chemotherapy session. Those with a personal connection may even think back to the pools of vomit a family member would produce throughout the night, his/her body losing the battle to cancer and the drugs attempting to stop it. Simply discussing cancer can seem like a difficult feat because it brings forth an awkward tension. I and my fellow team leaders envisioned a moment where we revealed the “beauty” of cancer while comfortably being able to hold a conversation about the topic to the general audience. It was through art that we believed people could express their opinions, sentiments, and understanding. Through art, artists are able to communicate in a manner that is on their terms and in a way that unleashes their emotions. Thus, the “Cancer Night of Art” was born. On the road to forming the event, we asked students in the Cancer Biology course and other interested students to find photos of histology slides of a particular cancer they were curious about and then, in their own way, generate a piece of artwork that portrayed their personal sentiments of the cancer. In addition, they were asked to not only provide a general description of their artwork but also provide a fact sheet about their cancer in the hopes of facilitating the general public’s understanding of the disease. Visitors not only learned about cancer by viewing artwork, but also through conversing with cancer biology students about cancer knowledge and creating their own cancer art. This was the ripples of social change hard at work.

From this moment, I learned something very valuable about service and ultimately being the agent of change. The best learning in most aspects of life derives from the act of service, whether it is service being imparted to a person, a group of people, or the greater community. When one begins to take on service, he/she is posed with profound, fundamental questions: Who am I serving? Why am I serving? Why should I care about this service that I am considering? What social change could be made as a direct result of this service? What avenues can be taken in order to assure that this service and change comes to fruition? Once this service is completed and a degree of social change is achieved, what can I do to assure that this change is maintained? As we begin to navigate through all these questions succinctly and find the answers within ourselves, we will have an increasingly better personal investment with the issue(s) at hand and a better understanding of our service work. In saying this, I have a profound appreciation for the service learning program at my university because it is a valuable opportunity to get students involved on a different tier of learning. The difference resides in the fact that students become much more connected to an area of learning when they have something to apply it to and actually visualize what they study in action. By witnessing such effects, students are more inclined to make a greater change. Specifically for the Cancer Biology course, the service learning component allowed the students to go beyond the texts and apply what they learned to the Atlanta community. For instance, knowledge about the varying methods of treatment for the patients was supported as the students volunteered at service sites, such as Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, American Society Hope Lodge at Emory University, and at a local hospice. By

immersing ourselves with cancer patients, learning of their toils, and hosting events that would create awareness of the disease in different settings, we ultimately raised our voices and proclaimed why the general public should care about cancer and why people should want to do their part in raising more awareness. We were finally able to comprehend the meaning behind creating ripples of social change and how others in the world could spark change of their own.

Social change is an altering in the social order of society, whether it is modifications in social nature, behaviors, relations, or institutions. With every occurrence of successful social change, there always exists an initial, potent force that drove the idea for the change. This force, “agency,” is ultimately the urgency felt and the action taken to invoke a change on a current societal norm. As with my time in the Cancer Biology course, it is sometimes difficult to adjoin the hands of agency and the hands of social change. An instance in which I witnessed and understood the collaboration of agency and social change for the first time occurred in 2007. During August of that year, my home was struck by lightning and erupted in flames. Being the eldest of four siblings, having one parent out of the country, and consoling a distraught mother, it proved very difficult to maintain any ounce of hope. However, by living in a community that took the time to understand our plight, we were able to feel the ripples of change. There were teams of people who specifically focused on establishing new living arrangements and collecting food, clothing, and monetary donations. Each of these areas of assistance equated to multiple stones thrown into our “pond,” creating consistent, successive ripples that would eventually lead to the grandest wave of change for my family. Looking back on this moment, this became a time in my life where I personally grasped the concept of the true meaning of service and how, with the aid of others, social change can be realized and sustained. I believe it was this understanding that ultimately guided me through my future service work, and even more as both a Civic Engagement Scholar and student of the Cancer Biology course.

A Civic Engagement Scholar is a distinction granted to up to three incoming freshman students invited to Oglethorpe University’s Scholarship Weekend. After a weekend of competition these three students are selected on their ability to comprehend the true nature of service and its purpose and on their potential ability to guide students at the university through their journey of service work and service learning. Ultimately, it is in part through this guidance that by the end of a student’s time at Oglethorpe, he/she will truly grasp the school’s motto of “Make a Life. Make a Living. Make a Difference.” As a Civic Engagement Scholar, I was consistently seen as a service leader for my peers, and even though my past experiences prior to Oglethorpe afforded me the ability to witness the fruits of social change, with every event I co- led at Oglethorpe, I became even more cognizant of the road that leads to great social change. For every volunteer opportunity, there exists a moment to create more astounding ripples. When students share their time to sort books to send to Africa, they produce social change by enhancing the education opportunities for tens of thousands of lives who otherwise would not have an easier means to learn. By cleaning a local park, students add to the ripple of social change by reducing urban sprawl and allowing for the area to be environmentally friendly. A new set of challenges emerged with each service learning project I was involved with, but with the proper agency and spirit of the students, it was possible to witness social change and the sustainability of our work. However, it was not until I took the Cancer Biology service learning course that I realized that I was embarking on a journey that would be much grander than myself. I had to remind myself about the idea behind leadership and what social change could accomplish on a vast scale.

Authors of the Social Change Model describe a leader as not necessarily being the one to hold a position or the one to be perceived as a leader by others, but rather as one who is “able to affect positive change for the betterment of others, the community, and society” (Komives and Wagner 2009). Thus, leadership is not one of positions, but one that is a process of collaborative bodies coming together because of a certain agency. Proper agency then leads to a collective action facilitating positive change. A leader is an agent attempting to promote social change, and leadership is the collaborative action that is taken to create social change on the basis of shared values of the collective whole. As students attempting to study and understand cancer, we often became perplexed by its unyielding complexity. For every scientific journal read, every study discussed, and every molecular mechanism analyzed, there was a proclivity to conclude that more research needed to be done. Even more so, we realized the layperson needed to invest time in learning about the disease. Agency for change was propagating and art was our brilliant boulder.

The general audience for the Cancer Night of Art event was primarily Oglethorpe students and friends/interested persons of the Atlanta community. We reached out to these people via social media, flyers, and table topper ads that were displayed across the school dining hall. As the event proceeded, the size of the audience continued to increase tremendously, admittedly much more than we ever expected. The most inspiring thing was that all attendees seemed emotionally invested in our cause and were more excited to generate pieces of art that would tell their stories and personal challenges with cancer. One piece of artwork expressed the difficulty of breast cancer for women and complications involved. However, the woman portrayed, though missing her breasts as a result of surgery, was wearing a beautiful dress composed of endearing words, such as “beautiful, intelligent, and strong.” This overall revealed a great sense of retained identity for the cancer patient despite a disease that physiologically altered the woman greatly. One particular student was a friend of mine, and I never knew until he started to paint that he is a cancer survivor. As he generated a piece depicting the scar he developed as a result of surgery, he told me about how he once had a strange feeling when he was sixteen years old and decided to visit the doctor. By chance, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Fortunately, he found out about his condition early enough to successfully treat it. As he made the final touches upon his painting, I became amazed and moved that he depicted his scar in a way that did not reveal pain or disadvantage, but one that primarily unveiled a sense of gratitude; rather, he was granted tenacity and strength. Overall, it was enlightening to see so many people becoming invested with their individual artworks and taking a moment to learn more about cancer. The purpose of the Cancer Night of Art was reached, and ripples of change had occurred. The only question left was “What next?” What now, after we have seen our ripples?

If there is one final thing that I have learned from this moment it is the essence and power of continuation. Once social change has been established within a given community, efforts must be made in order for the conversation to continue to circulate and for the positive change to continue to thrive. Considering how well the Cancer Night of Art was this year, it should be a recurring event and expanded upon, specifically on the grounds of it being a good conversation starter and generating a unique sense of advocacy. To expand on the project from this year, with enough preparation time, it would be more than feasible to still have different art pieces displayed in conjunction with a fashion component where students would dress/design clothing that would depict their sentiments of a particular cancer or cancer as a whole. To make the night even more artistic, possibly having some students perform some interpretive dances or having

musicians play an instrumental piece/sing based on their perceptions of cancer would be even more inspiring. Imagine if we even wanted to take this idea one step further. We could contact the American Cancer Society and pilot local cancer art nights, and given the successes of the local events, we could eventually expand into a state-wide and even a national phenomenon. But that is just it, isn't it? There are an infinite number of things we can do to sow the seeds of true social change. When the agency to create positive social change is potent enough, anything can be realized. You just have to be the initial force. Ripples.

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I would like to thank Dr. Karen Schmeichel for being the agent of change for me and other students at Oglethorpe University. Whether in the realm of academics or service, she consistently encourages her students to expand their minds and think on a much wider scope. She inspires students to always be better than their current selves and allows them to realize that the journey throughout the course of life is sometimes a difficult one. However, as she so adequately advises from her time as a hockey player: "keep your stick on the ice" and you will be able to relish in the fruits of your labor.

References

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