Sunflower County Blues: My Summer in the Mississippi Delta

More than anything the summer in Mississippi is hot. Rainstorms that would, anywhere else, garner a respite from the heat only end in the steaming turf here. Afterwards the mud is still cracking from heat and the only sign of your brief reprieve is in one’s now absurdly unusable glasses (their previous fogging now something akin to severe cataracts). Much as the capricious wilderesses of yesteryear, the Mississippi Delta is still unconquerable. Any attempt at changing it changes you in return. The end result is a land that is as uncompromising, brutal, and vibrant as it gets. During my stay I was stationed at the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center. This cultural asset, focusing on one of the Delta’s only viable resources, maintains one of the most effective educational regimes in the region, provides a monument to its’ namesake, and brings much needed economic opportunities to the community. I lived 15 miles to the east of Indianola in Itta Bena, Mississippi. Itta Bena is over 85% African American and has only two residents registered as having ever lived outside of the state. The historically black college at which I stayed was a bizarre mixture of talented musicians, colorful anecdotes, and ex-convicts majoring in criminology. My stay in the Delta was a mixture of horror and wonder.

As mentioned by almost anyone who lives there, relationships with the Delta are ones of both love and hate. Personally my time countered classification and even now, after some time to process my stay, many memories are still filled with humor and sadness, a touch of fulfillment, and a dash of futility. One of my main tasks while I was at the Museum was to help come up with a funding proposal for an independent film festival. This may seem a bit elaborate for a
county whose average ACT score is 13.5 (the nation’s average is 21.1), but we had our reasons. Sunflower County also has one of the highest teen pregnancy and substance abuse rates in the country. While the unquestionable answer to these problems is education, one might ask why education through an independent film festival? A condition unique to the Delta amongst modern America is that many youth’s there have never travelled beyond the edges of the delta. Many have never been beyond their own city, a neighboring town, or the county. While urban youth’s suffering from similar plights may also be sequestered to their region of birth, the distance one must travel in a large city to breach another cultural niche is much smaller than the distance one must travel in the Delta. This isolation greatly exacerbates the social conditions. Over time the failure of the system and those around them becomes all local children know. It takes quite a leap of the imagination for a child who has only ever been fed pork rinds to envision a salad. While the B.B. King Museum prides itself on presenting a model of success from its Delta namesake, education focusing on non-indigenous culture cannot hurt as a supplement.

Besides writing a request for funding for the film festival my time at work can be divided up into three parts. I helped as a support worker during the Fourth of July “homecoming” festival; I was the membership and development intern, and I worked at the front desk of the museum getting people started on their tours. I enjoyed writing parts of the grant as well as working with people at the front of the museum the most. Throughout my work with membership and development I helped to garner donations to the museum, contact members in hopes that they would renew, track trends in visitor data, and contact visitors in solicitation for their becoming members.
I was originally immersed in the Delta on a school trip two years ago. Apart from simply finding the region interesting, I thought that this internship could help me to determine career goals as well. The two career paths that I am considering the most are law and teaching. I figured that the museum would lead me to direct experience in the latter, and the regions extreme politico-social situation would give me indirect experience in the former. Besides the overtly educational aspects of the museum, there was also a summer camp going on for a majority of my stay. This camp was for local children and truly one of the only successful and healthy outlets for the local youth in the region. Throughout my stay I met several teach for America teachers, as well as a few people from the Sunflower County Freedom Project. This project is quite competitive to get into and provides year-round civil rights and leadership based education for local children. Throughout the last few years the Freedom Project has had an almost flawless record of getting its graduates in to college. The passion and fulfillment seen in teachers of the previous two programs showed me, if I were to become a teacher, what type I would want to be. Even a few hours away, there are educational needs undreamt of by the average Sewanee student’s experience.

This summer also helped greatly with the discernment process regarding law. Throughout my stay I met several regional judges as well as lawyers. One of the most interesting figures I met was a regional Children’s Court Judge. As I previously mentioned a large portion of the students at the college where we were staying had at some point been in jail. These were typically the lucky ones who were in and out of jail early, who learning and moving on. The Judge stated that there is almost a 90% difference in recovery rates and in prisoners’ long term ability to integrate back into society when looking at prisoners interned at 14 and at 15. Almost 100% of all children of that region who were in jail at 15 would be repeat offenders and long
term prisoners. Almost all of the children that got in and out of jail at the age of 14 recovered. This is partially because of rehabilitation methods and partially due to thorough ensconcement in the crime culture by the age of 15. Through a position such as this judge I feel I could reconcile multiple passions that guide my life. If instead as a lawyer I could at the very least work on children’s cases pro bono. Particularly in regions dealing with so many youth miscreants such as the Delta, the effect of having good representation can make a difference between facilities one is treated at, time spent in jail, and, at that age, one’s entire future.

All in all my time spent in Mississippi was very interesting and enjoyable. I enjoyed the slower pace of Deep South life and learned the new hobbies of snapping turtle shooting, riding under corn field sprinklers, hot box shopping, Indian Mound wrestling, and mosquito swatting. The slower pace gave me time to reflect, read, write, and made the friendships gained down South that much more worthwhile.