

Anthropology News



"We Can't Be What We Can't See"

Everyday Anthropology

Myeashea Alexander

The students were excited. I'm sure their delight may have started with the prospect of getting out of class for a while, but as I stood in front of them with hands full of artifacts, skulls, and tools, I realized that this was beyond some time outside away from incessant test prep and standard text books. I had introduced them to a whole new and curious world. They moved their hands across their faces trying to feel their own mandibles. They widely opened their mouths so that classmates could see their dentition. They shared stories about how they were different and the same. One girl even asked another classmate share his experience by bringing her Sudanese food. Not a single student asked, "when will I use this?"

In that moment, they were using anthropology to better understand themselves and each other. And they were having fun.



Image by Myeashea Alexander

We often think of remote locations as places that are geographically difficult to get to by modern forms of transportation. Yet, I want to consider another type of remote- one that leaves members of its community to operate and perform without traditional support structures because of its sociopolitical location.

The needs that are being overlooked range from underserved education, lack access to nutritional foods, lack of community support and a number of other issues that create a complex of inequalities. All of these ills were self evident when I visited this public school, which is considered failing. However, the role that I chose to play for National Anthropology Day was not one of a grad student seeking a bit of participant observation for my latest research project, but as an opportunity or possibility.

Anthropology has offered many evaluations regarding the challenges of education and schooling that face vulnerable populations within urban environments. A day of commemoration such as National Anthropology Day can serve as an occasion to be of service to those vulnerable populations as opposed to just talking or researching about them. Although, it is important that research and inquiry continue to examine the ways in which we can create new learning models that specifically reflect the unique situations of the environment.



Photo Courtesy Myeashea Alexander

However, it is also critical to consider that the benefit of training members of a particular community to participate in anthropology is that we all gain the added benefit of their unique perspectives, rich set of experiences, and there is the incredible prospect of being able to conduct research that will potentially impact their communities positively. They would be able to advocate and champion for local and community good. While we may not speak of the people in neighborhoods of New York City as indigenous people, we can consider how equally beneficial it would be for children in underserved communities to take an interest in being able to critically examine the world around them and to some day

developing research that speaks to the inequalities and hardships that they face and manage daily.

However, before that can be done, they at least need to know what anthropology is, does, and can do.

"You can't be what you can't see" was the mantra floating through my head every day as I prepared to use National Anthropology Day as a channel to introduce the discipline to the kids. The statement from Marian Wright Edelman, children's rights advocate, was spoken in relation to the importance of feeding the dreams of children by providing them access to new information and strong role models. I was more than representing some weird career option that they never heard of and would forget after assembly. I had an opportunity to engage a group of children living in a remote part of Brooklyn in a new encounter that was about them.

As the students left the gym, many students asked if anthropology would be something that they did every week, or if I would be coming back. While I cannot provide a weekly experience, I do hope to

visit again as the weather warms up. I would also like to encourage other grad students and professionals to participate more in local communities and schools that are underserved, under-represented, and under-motivated.

Introducing children to basics concepts in anthropology could have a long term affect and spark a curiosity that leads to re-imagining the world around them.

***Myeashea Alexander** is currently a graduate student at CUNY Hunter College and a trained filmmaker. She is studying biological anthropology with a focus on skeletal pathologies. Myeashea is also interested in bodies of the future- the interactions of human biologies with technology. She also runs the blog, *The Rockstar Anthropologist*.*

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