

Faces & Places - IKE Box - More than English and Algebra

The IKE Box Coffee Shop in Salem is located in the few blocks between the State Capitol Mall and downtown. Passing through this coffeehouse one might notice that it's a little different. The place has character, certainly, with its wide-open ballroom in the center of the building, small workrooms and quieter spaces to read or talk in the corners. There's a stage in the main ballroom. When I was a student at Willamette I attended a few concerts here, not knowing the true significance of this place. I imagine I was like many other patrons, I was unaware of the powerful opportunities and learning that IKE Box, its non-profit branch Isaac's Room, and their youth development program called IKE Quest, was providing to Salem's young people until I began working for OregonASK.

Isaac's Room is the non-profit founded by Mark and Tiffany Bulgin. The organization helps "divested young people build the capacity to rise to the challenges of life." They accomplish this mission by providing divested young people with a "progression of opportunities and services that help them get on their feet, learn to walk and then learn to run." The progression of opportunities begins with something called an IKE Quest, followed by training and an internship working as a barista for Ike Box; and potentially employment at the café and an opportunity to mentor other young people. I spent my day at IKE Box with the newest IKE Quest students – it was their third day in the program.

I began my day by talking with the students. I asked them what they thought about their experience so far, and what had brought them to IKE. Stories ranged from a young man who was living in his ninth foster home, getting ready to graduate from high school with dreams of moving into his own apartment; to a young woman with dreams of becoming a social worker following her experiences living with homeless youth. The group was excited about the next three and a half weeks, to learn more from Mark's life skills lessons, make friendships and better themselves body, mind and spirit in order to take on the world. I could tell IKE Quest was already working its magic. As one young man put it, "Mark wants you to do better and that's why I like being here."

After conducting several interviews and getting to know this group of extraordinary young people, we set off for a workout. It was a warm fall day – the kind that we miss here in the winter months – and the kids were in t-shirts and shorts. We traveled the few blocks East from IKE Box to the State Capitol Mall. The grassy lawn that takes up about two city blocks is overlooked by the stately capitol building and the golden man who rests on top, and provides the perfect spot for crunches, crabwalks and sprints. Despite the typical groans of exercise no one was complaining. In fact, encouragement rang louder than anything. "You got this!" "Keep it up!" and "Almost there!" from mentors and students alike could be heard throughout the mall for an hour.

Following the workout we headed back to IKE Box for dinner and a life skills lesson from Mark. We all crowded around a long table in the "Big Idea Room". As students and mentors loaded up their chili and cornbread they took seats along one side of a long table, facing a white board filled with what looked like a slightly unconventional lesson

on English and Grammar (dinner, by the way, is donated by community members and friends of Ike Quest students throughout the four-week term).

As we settled down, Mark took his spot in the front of the room—chili in hand. He starts by erasing the previous day's lesson and reviewing it at the same time. It seemed that trust, decision and action making, and taking charge of your life were some of the main conclusions. Mark reminds the group of their homework. "While brushing your teeth did you think about these things? Did you tell yourselves 'I am the hero of my story, the master of my sentence. I will make my life, I will take charge. And from here, I will get better at the skill or process of making my life.' "

Today's lesson followed the acknowledgement that we are all responsible for making our own lives, and focused on how to make our lives better using that personal power and responsibility. Today's lesson was a lesson in unconventional Algebra. To summarize the lesson: In an algebraic equation there are givens and variables. Givens are things that exist beyond our control – they are a part of the equation we can't change, they are already established. Variables, on the other hand, can and often do, change. Each of our lives are the result of a mathematical equation that contains certain givens (Body, Mind, Spirit, Family, Community, External Events) and variables—the actions we can take to change the givens, i.e. working out to improve our physical health (our body). What we do with what we're given makes our lives.

Mark pauses a lot. He lets things sink in. He asks questions and tells stories of when he was in high school; he talks to the students in ways they can understand without lecturing or demeaning them. And you sense his passion, his belief in the algebra, which like any good speaker takes his audience with him. Breaking down the results of our life into an easily understandable concept helps show the direct connection between our choices (our variables) and our results. Everyone in the room was hanging on his every word and thinking, these words were being taken to heart.

He uses the analogy of a factory to explore the idea that each of our choices, each moment of our lives, adds up to be the picture of our whole lives. Mark states, "If this picture [of your life] is going to be full of your dreams, you have to go to the 'factory' and put your dreams in. When you wake up in the morning, and you're deciding on breakfast you have to ask, 'Which breakfast is going to get me one step closer to my dreams?' We're not here to say what's right or wrong. But we're here to say: you choose."

We covered English and Algebra, but this lesson was more than academic tutoring , and had broader reaching impacts than life coaching. The passion Mark and Tiffany and each of the mentors at the IKE Box feel for the youth they're investing in gives these youth the space to change their lives forever.

