

Faces & Places: Self-Enhancement Inc., Youth Potential Realized

“Connection is why we are here. It’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. It doesn’t matter whether you talk to people who work in social justice and mental health and abuse and neglect, what we know is that connection, the ability to feel connected, is -- neurobiologically that’s how we’re wired -- it’s why we’re here.” **Brené Brown**,
Research Professor, University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work

Brené Brown has spent the past ten years studying vulnerability, courage, authenticity, and shame. In a TED Talk delivered in June 2010 Brown explains that the root of connection, the thing that gives purpose and meaning to our lives, is vulnerability. That by being vulnerable and whole-hearted, by allowing ourselves to be truly seen, flaws and all, allows us to develop deep, meaningful and authentic connection. Vulnerability is not an easy thing to practice; often shame and fear stand in our way. The fear that you’re not worthy of connection, of unconditional love and acceptance, and the shame you may feel due to your flaws and imperfections. This shame and fear often stems from our image of who we are “supposed to be”, and our knowledge that we do not always meet that expectation, or fit into that perfect box.

Unfortunately, for many minorities in our country, this image is not always a positive one, it is not an image of perfection, but rather a negative stereotype placed upon individuals because of their race or ethnicity. It is one of a gang member, an undocumented laborer or a criminal. These stereotypes create barriers to success unique to our nation’s minority students.

On two separate occasions, both in North East Portland, I spent time at Self Enhancement Incorporated, an organization working to break down cultural barriers by utilizing many of the principles Brown explores in her **TED Talk**.

Self-Enhancement Inc. started as a weeklong basketball camp in 1981, and has grown into a nonprofit organization that helps at-risk urban youth realize their potential by providing in school, out of school, summer, post-secondary and parent supports. SEI also operates a charter school serving grades 6-8 out of the Center for Self-Enhancement. The Center for Self Enhancement is located in a North East Portland neighborhood that has historically been predominantly African American, and fraught with gang violence, poverty and struggling schools. Jefferson High School – the only high school in the area – is the only high school in Oregon with a predominantly African American student population. SEI serves thousands of students each year, and their student demographics include:

- 97% African-American
- 85% qualify for free or reduced lunch

- 73% from single parent households
- 36% are gang affected
- 30% have a parent or sibling incarcerated

I'm not sure where to start in my description of SEI, and my time spent there. One singular experience doesn't sum up what SEI does for kids. Perhaps because what they do is so multi-faceted, so all encompassing that it can't be described in one snapshot. My experiences ranged from tough love lectures in which SEI staff stopped everything in order to give middle school students the opportunity to reflect on the valuable role SEI plays in their lives, and to remind them of the respect and attention its staff deserve; to the organized chaos of a gym full of elementary and middle school students awaiting swim lessons, and trips to the movie theater; to conversations with coordinators who provide mentorship, guidance, listening ears and love, sometimes tough love, to a case load of 30 students 24 hours per day, seven days per week, 365 days per year. I drifted through halls, listening in on math, language arts, leadership and personal development classes. I found a small group of students painting a boat they had built themselves, but disappointed to have missed a team of young communication strategists because they were off-campus presenting their Nike ad campaign to Widen and Kennedy.

Walking the halls of the "Center" (as staff refer to it) and taking in the buzz and excitement of the students, I can believe that all of them chose to be there. Participation in the six-week long intensive summer program is completely voluntary, and SEI has no problem filling the halls of the "Center" and Jefferson High School. At both locations one can sense that each student knows their way around, that they are comfortable, and they belong. They are connected.

This brings us back to Brené Brown. In order to be connected, we need to be vulnerable, we need to open up and let others see the real us for better or worse. SEI has created a space, a family, a home, in which its students are comfortable doing so. At SEI its okay to struggle, to fail and to make mistakes. More often than not the adults guiding youth through those life lessons have made the same mistakes, and have faced the same hurdles as the students they serve. This fact, that kids can see themselves in their mentors, and vice versa, is a key ingredient to SEI's success.

By creating a community defined in large part by the culture of the students and staff, SEI creates a safe space where both students and staff can let down their guard and show their real selves. In other words, they can be vulnerable, which therefore allows them to connect. For Oregon's disadvantaged and minority youth the ability to connect, to genuinely be a part of something, will drastically change the trajectory of their lives.

In light of the 50th anniversary of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech the Pew Research Center asked Americans how much progress has truly been made toward racial equality. The **poll and analysis** shows that although Americans believe our country has made some progress, half of all Americans (44% white; 48% Hispanic and 78% African American) said a lot more progress needs to be made in order to achieve Dr. King's dream. As we begin another school year, and continue to strive toward our 40-40-20 achievement goals, policy-makers,

administrators, educators and citizens will need to think critically about how we can best serve the diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds of Oregon students, in addition to how we can contribute to achieving Dr. King's dream.

In an interview with the Oregon School Board Association, Dr. Doris McEwen, the Deputy Director for Curriculum and Instruction at the Oregon Education Investment Board, discussed the OEIB Equity Lens. Dr. McEwen summed up the root of the **Equity Lens**, "if we believe that every child can be successful, if we're inclusive, and see them as bringing assets not deficits, then we're reaching our goals of giving kids what they need to be successful." This belief, that all children can succeed, no matter what their background or family history, is also the root of the SEI philosophy.

SEI has a couple of taglines, both of which speak to the organization's ability to break down the stereotypes placed upon their minority students.

Youth Potential [is] Realized by breaking down barriers to connection – fear and shame. Through vulnerability and whole-heartedness SEI teaches their students that **Life Has Options**.

To learn more about Self-Enhancement Inc., visit their website [here](#).