Redefining Privilege
by Luisa Apolaya

Last year, as I planned my ninth summer at CTY, my mother reminded me of my new position as president of my school’s chapter of the California Scholarship Federation. Wouldn’t a leadership course prepare me for that position? The Civic Leadership Institute, at UC Berkeley, promised to give me the knowledge and skills to make a difference in the world. It sounded perfect.

When we arrived at CLI, the teacher explained the goal of the program: to help students appreciate the privilege we have and identify ways to use it to help others. This concept was eye-opening to me, because as a Latina, a female, and an immigrant, I didn’t see myself as privileged. However, through discussions, videos, and field experiences, the instructors showed me that I have much to be thankful for—including a home and an education—and that I can help others who don’t have these things.

In class, we learned how the poverty line was defined in 1963, by multiplying by three the amount the average American spent on food. That’s because one-third of Americans’ income at that time went toward food. Today we pay more for housing, transportation, and medical insurance than food, but the way we define poverty remains unchanged. Consequently, many “middle class” families struggle just to afford school lunches. We also discussed how public policy can perpetuate the cycle of poverty. In Berkeley, for example, a law had passed prohibiting homeless people from sitting or lying on the sidewalk. Those who did would be fined. When they couldn’t pay the fines, they would be jailed. Having a criminal record would make it harder to get a job and move out of poverty.

The program gave us the opportunity to work with people affected by these forces. Volunteering at a soup kitchen, I came face to face with the homeless people my mom had been careful to shield me from. My job was to greet the people it served. The manager said this might be the only kind word they received all day, so as they entered, I gave them my biggest smile. It was Monday, and many hadn’t eaten all weekend. Many were dirty and unshaven, some were on drugs, but they were all hungry. Helping these men and women made my heart feel warm.

Speakers included people affected by poverty, including former substance abusers and ex-convicts, who told inspiring stories about how the Delancey Street Foundation provided them with tools—including an education—to help them get back on their feet. When we watched a documentary about the challenges of living on the minimum wage, I found myself irritated by how the couple in the film was portrayed. They acted like being poor was the worst situation to be in. Being poor is hard, but it teaches you to be strong and appreciate everything you do have. When we were asked to respond to the video, I shared my own story with the class. My family came to this country from Peru. My parents never made me feel poor, or complained about the long nights of hard work they did to pay the bills. Although my perspective differed from most of my classmates’, they respected my experience. CLI showed us the problems our society faces, but it also taught us that we can work together toward solutions.

Luisa Apolaya is a junior at Montebello High School in California, where she is chapter president of the California Scholarship Federation and a member of the choir, yearbook staff, and calculus club.

Learn more about CTY’s Civic Leadership Institute at http://cty.jhu.edu/summer/grades7-12/leadership.
Understanding the Issues
by Michael Morgan

I learned about Northwestern University’s Civic Leadership Institute (CLI) when my mom suggested the program as a meaningful way to spend my summer. I was impressed by what the program promised. Over three weeks, in Baltimore, Berkeley, or Chicago, students gain an understanding of issues communities face while directly serving those communities. Best of all, they would come away equipped with leadership skills to help their own communities. In July, I flew to Chicago, where I would live with three other students right in Chicago’s “Loop.”

In the classroom, we defined altruism and talked about how some people use service as a way to achieve personal gain. To be truly effective, however, altruism should come from a genuine desire to help others; otherwise, people might resent or even reject your efforts. We examined issues such as poverty and homelessness, as well as factors that contribute to them, including institutions that keep the poor impoverished. For example, people who lack the resources to maintain a checking account are often forced to pay large fees to check-cashing firms just to cash their paychecks. We discussed how the prohibitive cost of a down payment required to rent an apartment often results in those struggling to afford basic necessities staying in a motel—where they end up paying more per month than they would for a permanent residence.

We then focused on ways to help break the cycle of poverty. One method is for those unencumbered by poverty to point out injustices and work to correct them. Another method, the Social Change Model, involves using philanthropy, community organization, and advocacy to break the cycle of poverty and oppression. We also heard from inspirational speakers who had struggled against poverty, and another who explained the concept of social entrepreneurship. This refers to companies that use business principles to solve social problems, for example, by paying employees well. Some large, successful companies such as Tom’s and Honest Tea use social entrepreneurship models, demonstrating that they can work for both corporations and employees.

Outside the classroom, we participated in service activities. At a homeless shelter, we prepared lunch for about 40 people, served them, and sat down to eat with them. At first, I found the man next to me intimidating—possibly because of the spider web and skull tattoos covering his neck and face—but we ended up having a great conversation about his experiences and my motivations for volunteering. He encouraged me to stay in school and find a passion for something, no matter what it is—advice that has stayed with me since. Learning about the lives of people in the community helped us see them as individuals with hopes and desires, just like us.

CLI opened my eyes to issues that had been easy to overlook in my everyday life. As a result, I’m more comfortable speaking up about injustices. I’m more aware of what’s happening in society around me, and what must be changed.

Learn more about CTD’s Civic Leadership Institute at www.ctd.northwestern.edu/program/civic-leadership-institute.

Michael Morgan is a junior at The Northwest School in Seattle, WA. In his spare time, he enjoys playing the piano and playing basketball with friends.