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JCN Poverty Simulation

This event involved students being assigned a role and “surviving” four weeks on a limited income and under challenging circumstances while using whatever resources were available to them. Each family was given a scenario, goals to meet, such as managing bill payments and purchasing food, as well as personal resources such as food stamps or bus tokens. The room had stations including social workers and job assistance offices. Bus tokens were required to move from station to station, older children had to go to school, and small children could not be left alone at home. My family was lucky because although our mother was in jail, she had prepaid for our sibling’s daycare and left us money and tokens. The room was chaotic with people finding any way to make ends meet without cutting legal corners. As the “weeks” went on, I saw families develop strategies and take risks, such as leaving their small children at home just for a second in order to get to offices on time so they could get enough food stamps to get through the week. I also saw students, tired from the activity, break character and find comedy amongst friends in the chaos.

I started off the event feeling relieved that it would be easy for our family since we only had to worry about food and paying some bills, requiring a bit of public assistance but overall more manageable than what I saw other families dealing with. However, since we were all children who had to go to school during the day, by the time we got to public assistance offices the lines were often too long to be seen. When one of my siblings was suspended from school, we were actually relieved because she could now run errands. During the event, I was excited everytime we made a payment and kept pushing towards our goals, lacking regard for the social costs to get there. This was a downfall of the simulation; although it was meant to reflect reality, it ultimately felt much more like a game, and the stress I felt was largely due to times when we were losing. I saw other teams take risks, like leaving an infant at home alone, that should have caused great distress but instead played out as comedy during the simulation. Despite having worked with families in very similar scenarios to the ones being reenacted around me, I found myself getting competitive and making light of what would be tragic circumstances in order to

win.

As I look back on this event, I realize I initially enjoyed it not because of what I learned but because it felt like a game I was able to beat. The disturbing reality is the fact that it took huge sacrifices to our family's education and safety to survive that month. Suspension was a lucky turn of events, we often left our young sibling in daycare to be picked up by the police when we didn't have time to do it ourselves, I spent my time at school planning for the week. We were kids running a household; there was no relaxation or play time in the simulation. But what about in reality? In writing this now, I am reminded of the importance of self-reflection and how much more I have gotten out of this event having reflected on what the consequences would have been if that month played out in reality.