

LINDA – Fieldnotes – May 24, 2007

Subject: Observation of In the Spirit of the Children

Date: Thursday, May 24, 2007

Location: Office of In the Spirit of the Children, 126th St (Park and Lexington Ave)

Time: 11:45-3:45

Pam Jones, the executive director of the organization, invited me to observe today since several young people were scheduled to come in, including a new person doing an “intake.”

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058p

I had some difficulty finding the office. As I was riding the bus there, I realized I forgot to write down the address. I also forgot to bring my cell phone. I knew the place was on 126th St between Park and Lexington. When I got to 126th Street and Park, I didn't see any signs on the buildings. I walked halfway down the street, then asked three young women standing outside, two of them with cigarettes, if they knew where “In the Spirit of the Children” was. One wasn't sure, but another pointed me to a building across the street. This building was brightly painted with a design in yellow, blue, and red on white. I went in, where a woman wearing a security guard uniform was sitting at a desk. I asked her if she knew where “In the Spirit of the Children” was, and she said no. I asked her if she had a phone book, and she replied, “Not on me.” I headed back outside and walked further down the block. There was a housing complex surrounded by a chain link fence and an empty lot. I headed back toward where the young women stood.

One of them called out to me. I asked them if one of the brick buildings was an apartment building. They mulled over my problem and pointed me toward another building as one where they have seen kids coming in and out. I thanked them and opened glass doors to the building with the newest-looking façade on the block.

Inside a man in a red dress shirt and black slacks was sitting on an office chair in a small space near an elevator and stairwell. There was no desk. He looked inquiringly at me, and I said I was looking for In the Spirit of the Children. He told me 4C, which I misheard as 14, and told me to take the elevator. He decided to accompany me, telling me it might be hard to find. In the elevator I asked if he was a security guard. He said something about being a super, maintenance, and something else I don't remember.

When we got to the fourth floor, he showed me out the elevator to the left, then left. The inside of the building appeared surprisingly dingy compared to the outside. The white walls needed painting, particularly in the corners and around windows. The floor was institutional grey linoleum, and the ceilings were made of the greyish pitted material that I associate with cheap places in strip malls and depressing institutions. Doors were painted bright blue.

I walked down the hallway and saw a door for the Community Health Center Program of the Northern Manhattan Perinatal Partnership, Inc. I walked past the door and turned a corner. Immediately I turned another corner, where there were doors labeled as restrooms to the left, with blue circles. More doors were labeled with “Northern Manhattan Perinatal Partnership, Inc,” and also with “Community Health Outreach Worker Program.” I turned another corner and was back at the elevator. I headed back to the first door, and found a second door right next to it, labeled “I.T.S.O.C.” 366

I knocked at the door, and heard voices inside. I wasn’t sure if I heard somebody say they were coming, so I waited. After awhile, I knocked again, and a heavyset man opened the door. He was wearing a light green dress shirt, dark green slacks, an inexpensive black belt and shoes. He had pitted café au lait skin, green eyes, and a very short beard. I asked for Ms. Jones, and he told me to take a seat. I saw a young man sitting in a plastic chair behind him. The young man was wearing an off-white t-shirt, jeans, and white Adidas sneakers with orange and purple splashed on the stripes and on the part of the sole showing around the shoe. He had an orange nylon jacket over the back of his chair. He had a small stud in his left ear and a short goatee.

Before I could sit, Ms. Jones came out of an office in the back of the room. She was wearing a fitted white cotton t-shirt under an orange button-down short-sleeve blouse and orange pants (possibly linen). Her hair was pressed and curled, and she wore red lipstick. She asked, “Is that Ms. Lin?” She told me Mr. Penn was a Program Specialist, and that I had spoke with Keila Simons. I repeated, Keila, and she told me they go by last names here. She explained that the young people needed to learn professional etiquette, that they call their caseworkers by their first names. 059p
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I followed Ms. Simons to her office. Along the way she told me that the day turned out to be very busy. CBS wanted to feature them, and a policy brief was coming out of Capitol Hill that afternoon on the issue of foster children aging out of the system. I alluded to our last conversation, that the organization was getting a lot of attention. 370
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She told me that she would have to leave at 12:15, as we discussed earlier, but she’d have some time to sit with me. She launched into a description of the organization, as helping foster children to transition out of the system with the goal of preventing homelessness. She talked to me for a bit about their work, but I couldn’t take it all in.

She took me to the main part of the office and showed me a couple of desks where I could sit and observe. I asked her if Mr. Penn knew I would be observing and she indicated that of course he did. She took me to Mr. Penn and Kwan, and introduced us formally. She told Mr. Penn that I would sit at ?? or Mr. Harrington’s desk, and he acknowledged this. The phone rang, and it was Mr. Rodriguez from CBS. She took the call in the office. I listened to the spiel again and got some of it, taking notes while sitting at Mr. Harrington’s desk.

“They can sign themselves out legally at the age of 19, but they can remain [in the system] until age 21.” She also told the caller that you have a number of youth who

“return to the parent” at age 18, but still end up homeless “because the return to parent option is failing.” She mentioned group homes, and “closing out,” which I didn’t understand. She explained, “We’re a community-based program,” and that they were “trying to receive them 2-3 weeks before discharge.” She mentioned that they play an “advocacy role.” Apparently in response to a request to speak with a foster youth, she exclaimed, “Oh yeah! I got one now! And we gonna have about 4 of them in the next 3 hours.”

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She came out of her office, announcing, “He’s gonna talk to Mr. Rodriguez.” She also stated, “I don’t like scripted.” She told Kwan, “You’re gonna be good. You’re gonna talk with Mr. Rodriguez about this process [of] aging out.” Somebody put Mr. Rodriguez on speakerphone, and Ms. Jones introduced Kwan Coleman. Mr. Rodriguez apologized for the connection as “not so good” and asked, “So, how long have you been working with Spirit of the Children?” Kwan answered, since 2 month, February. After a few questions and brief answers, including a promise to speak on camera, Ms. Jones told Mr. Rodriguez, “I want you to feel free to call back and have dialogue with them.”

062p

Ms. Jones took me to the back of the office, near the windows, to show me several posters made of photographs stuck on white posterboard. Two of the three were framed. Some of the pictures were of a trip to Great America, a theme park. She started talking about planning summer activities, and told me that the youth were isolated because of family circumstances. They come from the 5 boroughs. [I’m not sure if she actually used “the youth”; later, Ms. Simons used this phrase frequently.] She said something about recently finding out that the foster youth “become their own community.”

DeQuisa Hines, another young adult, came in. She was wearing cropped jeans with the cuff turned up mid-shin, a baseball t-shirt (3/4 sleeves) in dark and light green with the number 19 on the back and “NORTH ALBANY” on the front, black Adidas sneakers and white ankle socks with the Wilson logo on the back. She had a thin grey hoodie over her shoulder. Her braids were pulled back in a short ponytail. She is plump, with a café au lait complexion.

Ms. Jones immediately asked DeQuisa, “How you doin’ with the apartment hunt?” DeQuisa told her, “I found something in Williamsburg.” DeQuisa is holding a crumpled packet in her hand from ACS [which I later find out is Administration of Child Services], and Ms. Jones takes it and hands it to me. Ms. Jones says, “Wait, I can’t give you this, and hands it back to DeQuisa. Somebody offers to make a copy for me.

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DeQuisa reported that saw the apartment, liked it, and spoke with the landlord. She tells Ms. Jones that she gave him \$925 as a security deposit, whereupon Ms. Jones rolls her eyes and turns away, saying, “No no no no no.” Ms. Jones starts scolding DeQuisa, letting her know that she should have known only to give \$50-100 to hold the apartment. Apparently it is not clear whether the building is Section 8 approved.

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Ms. Jones walks DeQuisa to Mr. Penn's desk, scolding her the entire way, reminding her that they've told her again and again not to give a security deposit. Mr. Penn chimes in, "He's [the landlord is] happy to have the money earning interest." Ms. Jones emphasizes, "Thank you!" She asked DeQuisa accusingly, "Where's your receipts?" "At home," she replied. Ms. Jones, not mollified, tells her, "You better put a copy in your file, here."

DeQuisa complains that her references ended up being her SILP coordinator [something about "independent living"], with whom she does not get along, and someone else, I am not sure who has the power to set DeQuisa's references. Apparently somebody also asked DeQuisa for her previous apartments, but DeQuisa has never had her own apartment before.

DeQuisa: "Oh she not answering her phone."

Penn: Is the voicemail coming on?

DeQuisa: [shakes head] No!

At some point Keila Simons comes into the office. She is wearing a black short-sleeve t-shirt that reads, "BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL" on the front and "100% natural" on the back, blue jeans, and black flip flop sandals. Her hair is wrapped with a dark blue and white tie-dyed cloth. [I wonder if it is "natural" underneath.] She wears small thick gold hoop earrings and glasses with black plastic frames. Her skin is milk chocolate and she wears no makeup. I later find out she is 22, but she could easily be mistaken for older, perhaps 25-27. [She comes across to me as centered and matter-of-fact, although later in her conversation with DeQuisa her age shows (finding housing).]

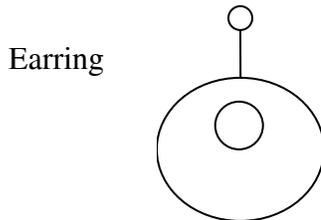
Ms. Jones calls Ms. Simons into her office with the door almost closed. They talk in low voices, which is unintelligible as Kwan and Mr. Penn talk. I hear something about, "and this'll be the folder that he will work with tomorrow." [Perhaps this is a conversation that could take place if I were not there, since I find out later that Ms. Simons is an administrative assistant, and not a program specialist.] Kwan calls someone on the phone.

[Notes continued Tues 5/29/07]

Mr. Penn also gets on the phone. It sounds like he is talking with someone who is trying to find the place. He tells them the cross street, then says, "The proper address is 104 E. 126th Street, fourth floor, Suite 4D." After a pause he clarifies, "I'm sorry, D as in Dave." He continues, "It's got a red awning. You on 126th already? That's the daycare center on the first floor."

Around 12:18 somebody knocks, and Mr. Penn gets up to answer the door. "Hello how are you," he says to the young woman who enters. She is tall and thin, dark-skinned, wearing skinny dark jean shorts to the knee, a black blouse/overcoat with

puffed sleeves that hangs mid-thigh over a white fitted t-shirt, and black wedge open-toed sandals. She carries a small white leather purse. Her straightened hair hangs to her shoulders, and she wears a black beret on top. She also wears large dangling earrings of a design I've seen several times around town, a thick loop suspended from a stud. [She seems reserved, in contrast to DeQuisa who is gregarious. Kwan's quiet also seems less defensive or shy than hers, since he appears alert and ready to engage with others should the opportunity arise.]



Mr. Penn sets up the young woman at the table at the back of the room, where she sits quietly, her back to the room, filling out paperwork. Meanwhile Ms. Simons is trying to reach Reverend Williams, who DeQuisa had said was helping her to find housing. She explains to the person on the other end that she is calling from an agency that is trying to help foster youth transitioning out of the system “to attain housing, to attain employment.” She starts to explain, “We’re not for profit, so we’re not charging then to—”. She listens for a moment, then says, “I see what you mean.”

At 12:23 Ms. Jones leaves. The tall thin girl’s cell phone rings with a song I don’t recognize. Ms. Simons and DeQuisa continue to talk about her housing situation, with Ms. Simons explaining that “if it’s not already a Section 8 landlord then they need to do the paperwork.” DeQuisa asks if it’s possible if she can get an extension, I think on her voucher that expires in a month. Keila replies, “Generally only when the apartment is secured and the paperwork is all completed.” Keila stressed that a month is not a long time and that DeQuisa has to keep looking for an apartment.

DeQuisa is upset, asking, “How they gonna show me the apartment when it’s not Section 8?” Ms. Simons replies, “Not everybody is on the up-and-up.” DeQuisa, presumably talking about the landlord, protests, “He lied to me! I hope I won’t be denied my money back.” Ms. Simons tells her something to the effect that she is still learning about these processes. “I’m getting acclimated to this. You can talk more with Mr. Penn about this.”

At 12:31 Mr. Penn checks in on Skinny Girl. Ms. Simons is telling DeQuisa, “I know it’s frustrating. I mean it’s not just hard for you. It’s hard for everyone. I have friends who have been looking just as long as you and they still haven’t found an apartment.” [I immediately think, yeah, but your friends probably aren’t trying to find Section 8 approved housing—a thought that I later find out is also going through DeQuisa’s mind.] Ms. Simons asks, “So the target areas are Brooklyn and the Bronx?” She turns to Kwan, who is sitting by himself and watching, and asks, “What realtor did you use?” He lists some names I don’t catch.

KS: Were they on the list or did you find them?

Kwan: yeah

I assume “the list” is one provided by the organization. Kwan takes this as an entry point and asks DeQuisa, “What area are you looking for?” She replies, “Doesn’t matter.”

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Mr. Penn is telling the skinny girl that she needs to apply for her housing subsidy since she is over 16, even if her goal is return to parent. The phone rings, and Ms. Simons answers it. Mr. Penn asks, “Was that ___?” [I don’t catch name] She replies, “No that was Ms. Jones.” There is something in my notes about Bloomingdale’s Men’s Denim Department. Mr. Penn gets up and starts rifling through the files in the file cabinet in the middle of the room.

At 12:43 DeQuisa calls Mr. Penn’s name. “Did you find out anything about the grant? For the scholarship?” He replies distractedly as he flips through files, “Give me a minute and we’ll talk.” Ms. Simons is on the phone, asking, “I was wondering, does a Christopher Wright work in your department?” After she hangs up she says frustratedly, “When they transferred me it transferred me to the voicemail of a random guy.” She gets ahold of someone else and says, “Hi, this is Ms. Simons. You happen to know Christopher’s girlfriend’s number?” [I don’t ever catch who this is and why it’s so important to get in contact with him.]

Ms. Simons asks DeQuisa, “She wouldn’t say over the phone if she had an apartment available?” I don’t catch DeQuisa’s reply. “Did you tell her it’s pressing? That if you had a normal timetable, then...”

Ms. Simons: You don’t feel like living somewhere?

DeQuisa: I mean it’s pointless [don’t catch] and they don’t call back

Simons: Do you call them back?

DeQuisa: One day I called like 50 apartments.

Simons: Okay. (Looks away, hand on mouse)

DeQuisa is on the phone again, answering questions. “No, I don’t have any children. ... Yes, I am.” She gives a phone number and a PO Box in Bowling Green.

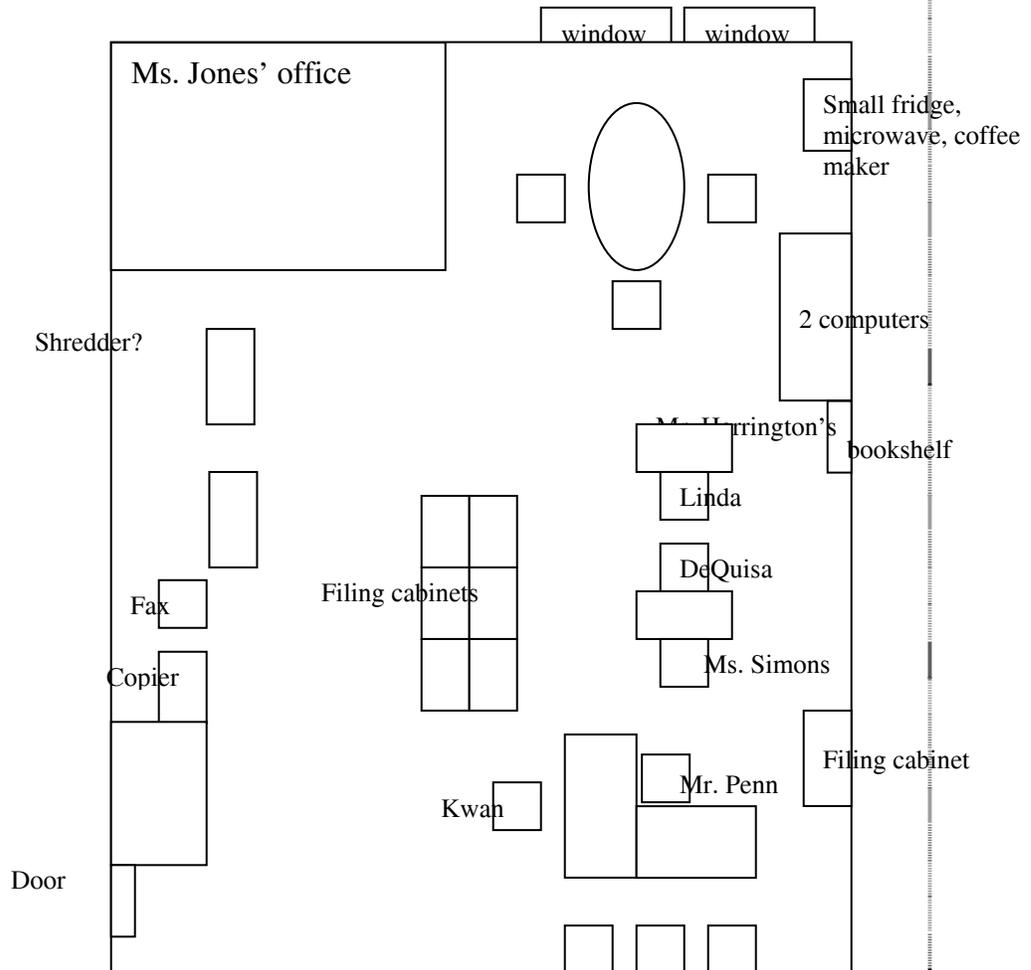
At 12:54 Ms. Simons goes to Skinny Girl and asks, “Are we able to fill everything out okay?” She introduces herself, holding out her hand. At the same time, Skinny Girl says, “Uh, yeah.”

12:55 Ms. Simons goes to the other empty desk and starts making phone calls.

I start looking around the office. A sign hangs from the ceiling between the file cabinets and Ms. Jones office, hand-written on a piece of sky blue posterboard printed with white clouds. It reads: “Welcome To The Real World where you have The Power of Choice!”

I also start to sketch the room. The proportions are incorrect. There are two windows at one end of a long room, next to Ms. Jones' office. The windows are filled with three healthy potted plants. There is an oval table with three chairs set around it, and extra chairs stacked [can't remember where.] Photos hang on the wall of Ms. Jones' office, and facing that wall. The photos are mounted on white posterboard. Two are framed, two are not.

In the corner there is a small white refrigerator with a microwave on top and a coffeemaker on the very top. A large table holds two desktop computers and a printer. A bookshelf holds mostly picture books.



[Notes continued on 6/107]

There is a gray oval table with three chairs arranged around it, one facing the window. The table is set in a small area created by Ms. Jones' office, which is a small room with a door inset in the large room.

On the left side of the room, there are two work stations that face the room. One is the

mystery name's desk, and the other is unoccupied by a person but used as storage for papers, books, equipment, and other random things that I don't look closely at. The fax machine and copier are also on the left side. There is a large brown table by the door covered with literature, pamphlets, flyers, and the sign-in sheet.

On the right side of the room, I sit at Mr. Harrington's desk, which faces the window. Ms. Simon's desk is right behind mine, also facing the window. DeQuisa sits between us, on the other side of Ms. Simon's desk. Mr. Penn's desk is the largest, a mahogany colored, L-shaped desk. Behind his desk is a row of plastic chairs (maybe 3 or 4 or 5).

In the center of the room is a set of filing cabinets. The top ones on the right have files in them, and the bottom row have supplies such as file folders. [At some point Ms. Simons offers one to DeQuisa for keeping her papers.] There is also a file cabinet behind Mr. Penn's desk. Another handwritten sign hangs on the wall by Mr. Penn's desk, reading, "ALL MUST ATTEND THEIR ASSIGNED APPOINTMENTS ON TIME. NO EXCEPTIONS!" [This is in contrast to Ms. Jones, who told me that people would probably be late to their appointments.] Another sign hangs from the ceiling, near the entrance, and it says something about life can teach you better than I can tell you.

Ms. Simons is telling DeQuisa, "I understand this is really frustrating. You have to keep sticking with it. You have to try to be optimistic." Ms. Simons asks DeQuisa about her job, apparently trying to clarify what is happening. DeQuisa says, "I don't want to have to lose the job" because of "all the days I have to take off."

At 1:00 another person knocks on the door. Mr. Penn says, "Hello miss, have a seat and I'll be right with you in a few minutes." The young woman is wearing white pedal pushers, a pink and white baby doll t-shirt, oversized sunglasses, and pink flip flop sandals. She carries a pink striped fabric tote bag. She poses for a moment with her left hip stuck out, and drinks from a bottle before sitting down.

Ms. Simons is chewing gum. DeQuisa is looking at a map, possibly a bus map (it's not a subway map). Kwan asks her where she is looking. They talk back and forth.

Kwan: Where are you coming from?

DeQuisa: Flatbush

Kwan: Oh you in Flatbush!

He gives directions to some place where she is presumably looking for an apartment. She asks how to catch the 60 into Queens, and I tell her to catch it on 125th. There is some discussion between Kwan and DeQuisa about not knowing the Manhattan bus routes.

[This ongoing discussion around apartment hunting is exciting to me. Kwan is also encouraging DeQuisa to keep looking, offering support, exploring the mechanics and details of how to get from one place to another.]

Ms. Simons mentions Luisa Sanchez, some sort of broker. Kwan says, "They got really nice apartments." Ms. Simons asks, "Was she the one who kept falling through?" She rolls her eyes when he confirms. Somebody mentions Bed-Stuy. Ms. Simons tells DeQuisa that she found a bunch of apartments. "I just googled" with the search terms Section 8, 1 bedroom apartment, and under a price I can no longer remember.

1:12 Mr. Penn is sitting with Skinny Girl at the table. They are talking about her daughter.

1:14 Ms. Simons says "Oh no!" DeQuisa, Kwan, and I look up. Kwan asks, "Whatsa matter?" Ms. Simons, who is standing near the fax, says, "I have to change the cartridge." She mumbles something about "Everything... today." Ms. Simons searches through the filing cabinets to look for the cartridge.

At 1:24 Skinny Girl gets up to leave. Mr. Penn asks her, "Did you sign in?" After she leaves, Mr. Penn tells the room that her apartment is \$1400 and her voucher is \$1100 because she has a girl child. I ask what is the difference, and he explains the voucher logic of giving moms with female babies less money: if you have a boy child, you need a separate room soon. If you have a girl child, she can stay with you longer in the same room.

As Ms. Simons continues to work, DeQuisa sits quietly. I take the opportunity to strike up conversation again. I don't remember the order of our topics. Somehow we get to talking about job opportunities in healthcare. She is thinking of becoming a physician assistant, since she has heard it takes less time than become a doctor. She invites Ms. Simons into this conversation, since she knows that Ms. Simons has "dropped out of medical school." Ms. Simons details the grueling process of med school, internship, residency, board certification, on top of the college degree. We talk about the amount of debt people go into, but also the high salaries where they can pay off debt. I tell them my brother-in-law is a doctor, and he paid off his debt within a few years.

DeQuisa asks if she'll have to write a dissertation and I laugh and tell her no, only people who really want to stay in school and not make the kind of money doctors do have to write dissertations. I ask her why she thinks she needs to, and she tells me that her teachers all talk about their dissertations, how long it took. She asks me how much professors make and I say it varies, econ profs can make six figures, or people who have been working a long time, but people in my field start at \$45-50,000. [She seems to think this is a lot, and it is.]

She talks about the organization as a "relaxed" place. I tell her I like that Kwan was helping her, and she replies that people help each other. At some point De Quisa also mentions that it's the first time she's seen the door closed [to Ms. Jones' office].

Somehow we also end up talking about No Child Left Behind, I think after she mentions how teachers have it hard. She asks if I have seen it, and I say no but I want to. She says the ticket was kind of expensive for her, and I wait. She tells me it was \$55. I tell her there is a discount for students and teachers, and she says, "You should've told me that!" Ms. Simons tells her that many places have student discounts.

At some point I also say to her that it sounds like it's tough finding an apartment. She tells me that she knows that it takes as long time, but not everyone is looking for a Section 8 apartment. She says, "I'm always doing something wrong," alluding to the "lecture" she got earlier. We also talk about how landlords think they can walk all over people on Section 8 [my words, not hers].

At some point she also asked me if I liked to work with young people. I said sure, surprised at the question. I told her I used to work with young children, elementary school. She asked me if there was a difference. I said sure, the young kids are cute, but you can talk with young adults about the world. I amended it to say that I had some interesting conversations with the young kids, but different.

At 2:00 Pink Girl leaves. I don't know what she was doing. Mr. Penn, on the phone, says "My day job jus tended yesterday." He mentions something about a year-round job. [Not clear if these are the same.]

At 2:14, Mr. Penn offers me water. Ms. Simons gets up. I say no, thank you, I've got water. He offers me chips, and I say I have a lunch. I ask if it's okay if I eat inside. Ms. Simons says, "I'm not even thinking about food. God, [there's] so much to do." Mr. Penn tells me, "We don't really have a set lunch time, I try to eat between 12:20 and something before the end of the day."

Mr. Penn asks Kwan, "What kind of meals do you eat?"

Kwan: I eat heavy at the end of the day.

Simons: That's not good!

Penn: What do they eat? [this doesn't make sense, maybe I wrote it down wrong]

Simons: What do you put in your body?

Penn: Like what did you eat last night?

Kwan: Last night I had... spaghetti, and a sandwich.

Simons: *And* a sandwich?

Penn: What kind of sandwich?

Kwan: Turkey.

Mr. Penn is telling DeQuisa that she will need to pay the broker's fee. "ACS only pays for the deposit and first month's rent. *You* need to pay the broker's fee." He tells her that it's sometimes harder to get money back from the broker than landlords. He tells her, "We like to have everything settled before giving out large amounts of

money.”

I ask Ms. Simons if some people here work part-time and some work full-time, and she tells me that Ms. Jones is the only one to work full-time. Mr. Penn tells us, “Mr. Harrington, if he stays on, will be full time.” She tells me she works Tuesdays through Fridays and Mr. Penn works Thursdays and Fridays. Two people come in to run the Saturday workshops. “I don’t always go to the workshops.” “Friday is Ms. Jones’s day off.”

Mr. Penn says something about his other job extending his hours. Somebody mentions something about the importance of getting the paperwork done before they age out. DeQuisa tells Ms. Simons and Mr. Penn that they should have someone go to tell people about the organization. [To ACS? Where?] I don’t catch the response, but DeQuisa then responds, “Trust me, everybody I know knows about In the Spirit of the Children.”

I tell Ms. Simons that it’s so much better for me to come in so I can see what they do. She responds, “That’s how Ms. Simons prefers it.” I tell her it’s a good day for me to come in. She tells me that it is busy today, usually one youth comes in. “We call,” she tells me, but “only one or two come in.”

DeQuisa looks at the poster on the wall, and asks, “What is I.N.T.O.S.?” Ms. Simons replies, “In the Spirit of the Children. It’s an acronym. It’s shorter.”

Ms. Simons is on the phone. She says, “This is Ms. Simons from In the Spirit of the Children. I’m calling on behalf of DeQuisa Hines.”

At 2:50 Kwan gets up and puts on his jacket. He puts his chair in the row near the door. DeQuisa asks Mr. Penn, “Did you forget about my grant?” He says “No, I didn’t forget.”

At 2:53 Kwan says thank you to Mr. Penn. He replies, “You’re more than welcome.” Kwan says, “Bye everyone, enjoy your day.” Mr. Penn asks DeQuisa, “Remind me again about your grant?” They talk about how long it takes to get to school on the train.

DeQuisa tells Ms. Simons that the process for approving tenants is not fair. “It should be first come first served.” Mr. Penn tells DeQuisa, “When you finish with her, come sit over here.” He tells her, “Print out what you need to print out.” He tells the room, “I’m getting ready to leave.” He asks Ms. Simons, “Brandon didn’t call.” She confirms, “No.” He says, “Of all the people to call...”

He complains about cable and presumably Brandon. DeQuisa asks, “What’s wrong with cable?” Mr. Penn complains, “Sitting there glued to the television instead of taking care of business.” Mr. Penn also asks about Isaac, and Ms. Simons tells him, “I

tried to reach him.” Mr. Penn says he can only reach his aunt, and tells her, “Please, I need to see him, ‘cause Ms. Jones is getting ready to...”

At 2:59 Mr. Penn says, “I’ll be right back. He takes the key.” DeQuisa is getting ready to leave as well. “Where does this chair go,” she asks Ms. Simons, who motions towards the wall and replies, “Right there.” DeQuisa wheels it over, tells everyone, “Well you have a great weekend.” She walks to the door and says, “I almost forgot to sign out.” As she is signing out, she says, with pleasure in her voice, “Shatasia was here?” Ms. Simons tells her that she went to the money managing workshop. She was the only person to show up. DeQuisa leaves at 3:09.

It’s only Ms. Simons and myself left in the office. I ask her, Ms. Jones is coming back around three, right? She says maybe. I tell her I don’t want to keep her from her work, and she tells me most of her tasks are done for the day, as she looks at a yellow pad on her desk. We chat.

She tells me that their workshops include Money Managing. She mentions Shatasia, DeQuisa’s friend, who is a School Safety Officer. “She’s pretty secure, but she still has to budget.” She tells me that they refer people to psychological services covered by a grant. Youth sign a contract, an “MOU” that includes attending each of the workshops. Attendance is mandatory. [But only one person showed up to Money Managing. I wonder, if they work retail jobs, aren’t they working on weekends? When is a good time to have workshops?]

She talks about the network that normally a family provides. When I says something about some of them being through foster families or group homes, she says, “They each have a distinct story.”

She tells me that the organization helps the youth navigate NYCHA and ACS. “I mean, *we* play phone tag,” seeming to mean that it’s hard enough for educated adults to navigate the system, much less youth. She tells me that you need to call somebody [who?] right at 4:55 “because they’re in court all day.” If you miss “that window at 5,” you can try for 8am, but a lot of people don’t know these tricks.

She mentions that people don’t really understand the extent of the overhaul of ACS (mentioned earlier with DeQuisa). She asks if I remember the case of Nix Mary-Brown (sp?), maybe around 1985, who was released to her father. ACS was aware of abuse and released her anyway. Apparently he killed her. The commissioner, she tells me, is not discussing the details, but it seems that even unionized workers are being let go. I say maybe this is why they need to restructure. She tells me that they are gutting all the services, that everyone left will be required to have a master’s degree. I ask if equivalent experience can’t count. She tells me the people with Master’s degrees burn out, there is a high turnover rate with the social workers. Too many kids for too many workers, not enough training. I try to ask her about this, and she says something about the 621a form needing particular signatures.

She mentions that Ms. Jones will take youth grocery shopping, saying something to the effect that they don't know the new neighborhood or where to buy things.

She explains that ACS is an umbrella organization, the city administration for children's services. She mentions agencies, something like Heart Share and a house in Inwood. She calls the youth "resilient."

She tells me she used to volunteer for the organization, starting in January. It felt like she was making an "impact." Saving lives is important too, she said, referring to being a doctor, but she found she enjoyed the social work part of the job more than taking patient histories. She was recently hired at ITSOC as an office assistant, but she does a little of everything, helping people where needed. She says everything she knows she's picked up from the program specialists.

She also asks about me, and I tell her I'm a postdoc at Teachers College. She tells me that her mom got her degree at Teachers College, and that she knows that place better than she should. I ask what she means, and she says she went to preschool there. Her mom was getting her doctorate at the time. I ask what her mom is doing now, and she's the dean of a small college whose name I don't recognize. I ask if she knows any secret tunnels in the TC buildings.

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She also tells me that she's not much older than the youth. She says that she is 22, and I'm surprised. She explains that she went to college at 16, and I say I did too (technically 15). She says it's amazing how many people went to college early.

I tell her I enjoyed my time there and hope to come back. She tells me to call Pam, for something that sounds like a wrap-up, and tells me to visit again. She thanks me for visiting.

I leave around 3:40. At one point, she started at a noise, saying, That must be Ms. Jones. (It was not.)

On the second floor I see a door labeled, "Community Advocates for Educational Excellence, Inc." I am writing down the name on another door, "National Jazz Museum in Harlem Office," when the super asks me if he can help me. He is standing on the ground floor, looking up the stairs at me. I finish what I am writing, and tell him I didn't know they were here, especially since there are no signs outside. He tells me that some of these places move, so they don't want to put a sign up.

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Kinds of education:

- How to get and keep a job, apartment, and GED/high school diploma/college degree
- How to negotiate government and agency bureaucracies: ACS, NYCHA

- How to negotiate difficult relationships with family members, employers, etc.
- How to take care of oneself
 - o Cooking
 - o Shopping for food
 - o Money management
 - o Emotional health

In interaction between staff and young people, “youth”

Between young people

Between researcher and young people

Between researcher and staff

[I would love to get into conversations that the young people have with one another.
Where? How?]