

Go There! When you can't get up anymore...

Jessica Pettitt, I am... Social Justice and Dr. Candace Wannamaker, Drexel University

It is important to remember that Social Justice isn't just an intellectual endeavor. No matter what classes you take or even teach, what books you read, conferences you attend, or trainings you lead, you have got to have support and a safe space to challenge yourself and be pushed into new learning.

While working at the University of Arizona, there were a number of colleagues on campus charged with doing Social Justice work. Prior to my arrival, these over worked under paid professionals didn't seem to connect with one another outside of co-sponsoring programs with one another. When I came on board, I listened to these hard working folks and decided to hold a space for us to support and challenge one another in our own social justice development. Most of us had attended a Social Justice Training Institute, so we had a base language of understanding even though our experiences varied widely. What this space was to provide was a place for us to learn instead of being viewed as THE expert, we each had areas of expertise and could really connect with each other to keep us in the work and just pushing paper.

As my colleagues and I met, one Friday morning a month for 3 hours, we didn't have a facilitator, safe space rules, or even a given topic to discuss. We just promised to talk, share, listen, and really challenge one another and – Go There! These monthly meetings became the highlight of my month for both professional and personal development reasons. For the first time, I felt connected to my campus and our social justice programming efforts instead of heading on the fast track to burn out and resentment. I truly believed that together we were affecting campus climate without spending a dime. Individually, we were holding each other accountable for our own social justice development and giving each person the support they needed to go to the next level wherever and whatever that might have been.

After leaving that position to do social justice trainings on campuses around the country, I found myself missing this connection. I missed this connection so much that I decided to host monthly conference calls for just one hour. These Go There! Calls lack the face to face support, hugs, tears, and tangible Now What? Action steps for a given campus, and yet they provide a space for participants to share, ask, learn, and grow. These monthly calls have been going on for over a year now, and I find myself looking forward to them as much as the original face to face meetings.. As a consultant, I find myself being paid to know all of the answers. I long for a space to explore my own ignorance, share lessons I have learned with others, and develop a network of social justice agents across the country.

I was originally asked to write this article three editors ago and I just left it on my to-do list. I wasn't sure how to explain what happens on the calls because the group dynamic isn't transparent. At times folks call in from conference rooms on speaker phone, others are individuals in their cars or at their desks; sometimes it is just me and one other

person, and other times it is just me. I wasn't sure that the calls brought something important enough to share with others yet I knew that Go There! calls are better than nothing – at least for me now that I am campus-less.

Several months ago, I mentioned to participants that I had been asked to do a write up on the Go There! calls and asked for feedback. As comments filtered back I still struggled to find the angle for this article. Then a few things happened and I realized that Go There! calls, monthly meetings, and the like need to happen and happen everywhere.

A couple of months ago, the Go There! call consisted of me and one other person. I typically start off with introductions, name and institution, and then ask if participants have a topic they want to start with or if I should bring something up. The participant stated that she was really just there to listen and was interested in my topic. I decided to talk about gender expectations, dress codes, and Morehouse's new policy. As I began to ask questions, I made a sarcastic comment embedded in a rhetorical question, saying, "If we can't clarify gender roles into one tight form of expression – then we might as well just stop the conversation." The participant responded by hanging up the phone. Immediately, I was struck at how comfortable I have become in these monthly calls and that I took for granted that the participant was sitting around having a casual conversation like me. Quickly I used my networks and Google and managed to actually find her direct line where I apologized for taking the Go There! space for granted. She laughed and said that she was really interested in hearing a conversation but was totally out of the habit of actually engaging in social justice conversations. My sarcasm and rhetorical question mirrored her campus experience so she just disengaged. This is why Go There! groups and calls must take place.

One participant in particular really made it clear, why I needed to have these monthly calls. Upon request, Dr. Candace Wannamaker, Director - Victim Support & Intervention Services, Office of Counseling & Health shared the following thoughts.

*As a member of the Drexel University Division of Student Life I was asked to co-chair the Social Justice Committee. Our committee was one of four committees charged with fostering personal development for our division. The Social Justice Committee was individually charged with increasing the members' knowledge of Social Justice as well as increasing the knowledge for the entire division. The Social Justice committee was to work in conjunction with Professional Development committee and the Office of Multicultural Programs, to identify, plan and implement opportunities to enhance division-wide understanding of Social Justice and to incorporate social justice into the daily work lives of all member of Student Life. A daunting task.....until we participated in a "Go There!" call.*

*Before participating in the GoThere! Call, our committee met every two weeks to talk about social justice issues. I enjoyed those conversations, but I knew that we were only reaching a small spectrum of the professionals that we wanted involved in our discussions. We talked, we planned, and we talked some more. One member of the committee received an email through a listserv about the GoThere! calls and suggested that instead of holding our hourly meeting, we could call in from our individual offices. The experience was profound. We had been meeting for several weeks and I truly think*

*that I got to know my co-workers and myself more intimately on that one call, then during our face to face meetings over the past several weeks. It was a safe place where we all opened up a little more, and listened a lot more.*

*During this call we shared backgrounds, stories and listened as others did the same. Jessica helped us regain our focus to expand our knowledge. GoThere! gave us an opportunity to speak in a way that we had not experienced previously. Her ability to help us “go there” renewed our fire and passion and once the call was over, we wanted to hit the ground running and bring that excitement back to our division. The personal energy of the group was drastically different after that call. We challenged ourselves to talk about social justice issues more frequently, more openly and with a bigger audience. After that first call, our committee created an electronic “Tuesday’s Topic” forum to address 48 unedited “unspeakable diversity questions” that were collected at our professional development retreat from a previous year. Questions that were important at the time, but now seemed to be fading without answers. These questions..... “went there!” Posting these questions on the forum allowed members of the division to comment anonymously on topics that were previously “unspeakable”. We were excited that we were providing the venue to talk about difficult issues and opening up discussions for our staff to consciously become involved in authentic social justice communications. The degree of participation didn’t matter. The significant aspect was that we were participating.*

*We were taking the opportunity to expand our awareness so that as a division we could assist our student population with the challenges they face every day. As student affairs professionals who consciously try to make a difference in every student life that we touch; if it doesn’t start with us.....why not? I can personally attest that each time I have participated; I have grown as a professional, and also as a person.*

It is overwhelming to me that my providing the Go There space that campus dialogs can be transformed. It is a privilege to get this feedback and you bet – there will always be a monthly call.

I have been asked if student can join the calls or groups. I don’t see why not other than our own adultism in that we fear looking ignorant in front of those younger or that are in a subordinated position. Isn’t this social justice work itself – being authentic? The calls are anonymous as participants can introduce themselves with whatever information they like or not at all. Occasionally, a resource is mentioned that I offer to email folks that send me their email address, some participants RSVP prior to the call, otherwise, I have no idea who is listening in or who is actively participating. It was suggested once that I record the calls and make them available for download on my website. I asked participants that month and was given immediate feedback not to do this. The participants that month said that the call is a safe space for conversation about different workplace and campus climates. This was particularly interesting to me because there isn’t a facilitator or safe space rules that are agreed to in the beginning of each call. I think collectively the participants trust that they will be met and will meet others where they are at and teach as much as they will learn. Participants also talk about using the calls during social justice committee meetings to prompt future conversation or programming. Participants are able to refer back to the resources and conversations as a

common experience. Lastly, one participant said that by calling in during the monthly “Go There”! call, he is able to “make a connection between his heart and his head” in his office while at work. This helps him make social justice a part of his work life and not just something he does when he is off the clock. I would add that it is also personal work instead of providing the space for others to do their own social justice development work.

It is important to remember that to keep "doing" social justice work externally you need a solid support network so that you can extend your knowledge to others. Some of us are fortunate to have these folks in our immediate presence. Perhaps your schedules get full, unofficial gatherings get skipped, or you're torn between a work obligation and a personal development opportunity. Others may feel like they are the only one and have no one to talk with or better yet with regarding trends at work, in your personal life, or even just current events. I challenge you to Go There! and Go There! often in person, on campus, in your neighborhoods, with your friends – Just do it! If you are unable to start something, use a pen and schedule in one hour a month.

Join in for the next Go There! call as a jump start, renewal, or as part of your on-going self work towards authenticity.

Join the Facebook page for Go There!

<http://www.facebook.com/search/?q=go+there&init=quick#/group.php?gid=30276282321&ref=ts>

#### Author Information

Jessica K. Pettitt, M.Ed., Consultant and Speaker, I am... Social Justice, CAMPUSPEAK, jess@iamsocialjustice.com.(917) 543-0966, www.iamsocialjustice.com

Dr. Candace Wannamaker, B.C.E.T.S. Director - Victim Support & Intervention Services, Office of Counseling & Health, 3210 Chestnut St., Creese 215, Philadelphia PA, 19104, 215.895.0353, 215-895-1096 – fax, cms38@drexel.edu