

## Why?

Why? That is a question that many of us ask ourselves and each other at least once a day if not every single day. Why is the sky blue? Why do our bodies depend on water so much? More importantly, as we get older the question becomes, why am I here, and what purpose do I serve? It is certainly a question I ask myself almost every day in many different aspects of my life.

I am Ebony Rempson and public service saved my life. I am a Black woman and I am fighting a battle with depression. In February of 2015, I was at a very low point in life. My struggle with depression became more difficult as my unhealthy coping mechanisms worsened, intensified, and led me to withdraw from college. Growing up, I was told that the only way for one's success to have intrinsic value was for one to go to college. Upon my withdrawal, I felt like I failed myself and my family because I could not do that one thing, that most do, on my own.

Luckily, I had a friend who saw I had a greater purpose. She convinced me that it was not too late for me to find it for myself. She recommended me to apply to the AmeriCorps program at the Latin American Youth Center. Though hesitant and self-doubting, I went forward with the decision. That was the start of such a pivotal moment in my life.

Being a part of AmeriCorps has given me an experience and access that I could not have gotten anywhere else. As a DC native, I thought I knew the struggles of the community where I grew up. I have always witnessed oppression but on a different scale than others. Through AmeriCorps, I have learned that witnessing is different than being part of the situation.

My experience with AmeriCorps has taught me many things, one of which is finding my purpose. Some people may not be able to reach their full potential on their own, just like I was not able to find my purpose or seek alternate routes without resources and the support of someone pushing me to grow and see things outside of personal circumstances.

In order to build healthy and growing communities, three resources must be available: accessible education, engagement with people of those communities, and people who are dedicated to serving the citizens of those communities. Education and connections between people are two things that cannot be taken away by any outside party.

Serving others in the way that I do has given me a sense of self. I have had the privilege to work directly with high school students at Cardozo High School. They consistently give their best effort in school from 8:45am to 3:15pm throughout the week but that does not stop them from putting their best foot forward for the time of enrichment activities during the after school program with me. My coworkers and I do our best to be intentional about the space we make for our students.

Outside of school, many of the students have obstacles they are fighting to overcome such as learning to speak, read, and write English, and being responsible for younger siblings due to working parents amongst other things. The fact that many of the students I serve make time for me pushes me to be as present as possible, giving them the care and nurturing they are worthy of. They may not know it but my students inspire me to keep fighting my personal battle with depression. In committing to my students, I have been able to adopt healthier habits and

coping mechanisms to better support them and myself. A morning where I have a hard time getting up and leaving bed is not infrequent but somehow I do it and every day, I enter the school and see students on their own path to betterment which in return, urges me to continue on my path.

After I finish school; I plan to start my own non-profit organization for Black girls. In doing so, I hope to bring awareness to the importance of emotional health and self-awareness. With depression being a taboo in the Black community, and many other communities of color, my goal is to validate young Black women's experiences with mental illness and emotional trauma through art and literature.

“Be the person you needed when you were younger.” I don't quite remember where I heard the quote but I carry it with me in every aspect of life. The affirmation reminds me that I don't only serve to support others but I owe the work I do to my younger self. AmeriCorps was what I needed to push myself into becoming a stronger leader and remind myself that I too have a place in the world.