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## Recovery as a Gift of Blackness: Epistemic Justice in Community Engagement and Learning

James B. Lin

*Glide Foundation / Glide Memorial Church, jlin@glide.org*

Isoke N. Femi

*GLIDE Foundation, ifemi@glide.org*

Barbara Lin

*GLIDE Foundation, blin@glide.org*

Lillian Mark

*GLIDE Foundation, lmark@glide.org*

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### Cover Page Footnote

The authors would like to thank the community creators of GLIDE's Recovery Circles, supported by Rev. Cecil Williams and Janice Mirikitani, filled by hundreds of participants working on their own healing, and facilitated by geniuses like Janean Sylvia Reed and Jacqueline Freeman who trained us. We also acknowledge the work of former intern June Lucarotti who wrote "An Invitation to Recovery Circle", the mentorship of Rita Shimmin (former GLIDE Executive Director and co-founder of the UNTraining), and the inspiration of Star Moore from the University of San Francisco and the Working Group on Epistemic Justice in Community Engagement. We are grateful for the support for this article from leadership at the GLIDE Foundation, where the authors work.

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# Recovery as a Gift of Blackness: Epistemic Justice in Community Engagement and Learning

JAMES B. LIN  
ISOKE N. FEMI  
BARBARA LIN  
LILLIAN MARK

*Glide Foundation*  
*Glide Foundation*  
*Glide Foundation*  
*Glide Foundation*

**W**e work in San Francisco at a community institution where, as at many community institutions, an enormous amount of the work and spirit of the place is held by people of color, and in our case, by Black folks. The Glide Foundation (GLIDE), alongside its affiliated Glide Memorial Church, is an extraordinarily inclusive environment—a historic haven for LGBTQ people (Stryker, 2008, p. 71), a resource for people in need of clean needles or overdose reversal (Associated Press, 2019), and an after-school youth program for immigrant families. Inclusion at GLIDE is a form of collective survival. For example, we run a dining room that serves over 700,000 free breakfasts, lunches, and dinners over the course of 364 out of 365 days every year. The underlying drive of the program isn't some charitable compassion for poor people. It's a fierce, Black belief that no one should go hungry when there's food in front of us.

## Here, inclusion and recovery have their roots in Blackness

We work hard to remember that our inclusivity is not some generic ideal, but a heritage of Black inclusion as an inherent survival principle. It is a legacy of a people who have carried each other through generations of slavery, disenfranchisement, and lynching, and who still came out with gifts for everyone. We are writing today to describe how this inheritance forms a keystone for our experiential education programs with a diverse range of college student interns at GLIDE. We also illustrate how maintaining a conscious legacy of Blackness—through our practice of “universal recovery” for all people and not just those struggling with substance use—is an example of epistemic justice in the transformative experiential learning processes within university-community engagement, i.e. the crediting of minority knowledge in collabora-

tive change. In this article we offer a real-life case of how BIPOC communities can apply their authority and expertise to an experiential learning model for university students across racial and ethnic identities

In his 1989 testimony before Congress on the root causes of drug addiction (Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, 1989), GLIDE Founder Rev. Cecil Williams said of our recovery program:

We discovered that recovery depended more than anything else upon a foundation of African American cultural values, traditions, and strategies that have sustained us for centuries. Chief among these were what I call faith and resistance, which are cornerstones of our program's spirituality. Faith and resistance are common to the African American experience . . . Faith and resistance is our spiritual contact with each other. It is where brotherhood and sisterhood form their faith to go through the trials and tribulations no matter how difficult, and to go through them without selling our souls economically, psychologically, socially, or spiritually.

Acknowledging the defining role of Blackness at GLIDE is not to ignore the contributions of others—our organization was led for over 50 years by an African American male minister from Texas *and* by a Japanese American woman who survived the WWII American internment camp in Rohwer, Arkansas. Our current CEO is a white woman, a global human rights lawyer who previously served in the State Department of the Obama Administration. We know injustice, and practice justice, through as many lenses as there are people here. But in a country that has worked so hard to erase its own knowledge of how Black spirit has nurtured its culture and its richness, we feel the call to honor our own legacy of Blackness by letting it name itself and speaking that name aloud. Our reach into

the diversity of San Francisco is wide, but we choose to remember how we got here—by adopting and extending some very specific gifts of Blackness, in a way that makes room for everyone. We manifest these gifts in how we hold meetings, how we argue, and the music we play and sing. Our policies for people who sometimes can't be served on-site reflect our drive to include: if you're too agitated or upset to safely eat with other diners in our Free Meals dining room, or you have a severe hygiene issue that is getting in the way of communal eating, we have bagged lunches and dinners for you to take with you, along with an invitation to come back another day. The shape taken by our practice of radical acceptance comes from a kind of Black realness that is quite different from middle class American politeness—we're not always nice, and we might even be loud, but we'll tell you the truth and let you know you're welcome back.

### **Recovery can be used as a model for student experiential learning and growth**

It is into this context that our college and graduate student interns in GLIDE's Emerging Leaders Internship Program come to serve, learn, and practice their skills in community. As part of their ten-week full-time internship, the students spend each Friday, one fifth of their total time, in reflection with each other about the impact of their work on their learning and their growth. Interns use a range of reflection modalities—including Euro-centric modes such as Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis, service mapping, and sociological systems critique—as well as practices drawn from the African American Extended Family Recovery Program that GLIDE founded in the 1980s to address the damage done by crack cocaine to the local community (Williams, 1993). The interns are introduced to Recovery as a human practice built on Black expertise and wisdom, and offered the opportunity to practice Recovery in their own context—recovery from histories of abuse, oppression, and even recovery from white entitlement. Students use the same principles and practices, GLIDE's Terms of Faith and Resistance (Williams, 1993, p.86), that were created by mostly Black community folks to take back power lost in the epidemic of crack cocaine:

#### **GLIDE's Terms of Faith and Resistance**

1. Gain Control Over My Life
2. Tell the World My Story
3. Stop Lying

4. Be Honest With Myself
5. Accept Who I Am
6. Feel My Real Feelings
7. Feel My Pain
8. Forgive Myself and Forgive Others
9. Practice Rebirth: A New Life
10. Live My Spirituality
11. Support and Love My Brothers and Sisters

The Terms of Faith and Resistance are a work of genius and love: used to save lives and then offered to others (like college interns) and to us staff, as a gift. It is an extraordinary generosity from those who were themselves given so little in a time of need.

The integration of a Black Recovery model into an internship program serves as a tonic for college-community engagement that could otherwise end up focused on the hegemonic needs and priorities of higher education institutions. Our model starts from knowing that there is enough wisdom and expertise within a community to address its own challenges, and that this wisdom subsequently offers a powerful gift and tools to people far beyond San Francisco's Tenderloin. This manifestation of an "epistemic justice," a linking of knowledge and wisdom to its source, is a natural outgrowth of Black practices whose inherent generosity and universality have been honored by those of us who receive and join the heritage.

### **Naming recovery as a Black transformational practice is a form of epistemic justice**

Epistemic injustice is a concept named recently by Miranda Fricker (Fricker, 2007) but shaped over decades by practice-philosophers and writers like bell hooks (1989), Carol Gilligan (1982), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010), and even 19th-century sociologist Anna Julia Cooper (May, 2014). The study of epistemic injustice looks at how knowledge in a society is generated, recognized, and canonized. In the context of community engagement and student learning, our focus is what Fricker (2007) calls "hermeneutical injustice," in which the traditional ways of creating knowledge are based in social and institutional power. Here, in a community engagement context, the power is often channeled through the faculty-guided student



analysis of the “raw experience” they get while doing service. Frameworks are usually pre-named and pre-figured by the theories and analytical approaches that the professor or university coordinator provides. Community-based Black folks and other peoples of color in this scenario are often seen as the anchors, the engines, and the rudders of the ship of engagement between universities and the communities that they sit in, but rarely as the navigators, designers, and captains—rarely as the creators, framers, and owners of knowledge. Even when students are attempting to listen for the authentic voices of the community partners they’re engaged with, they still usually are primed to filter their experiences through a set of pre-set questions, ideas about what they will experience and what problems they will seek to identify and solve. In work pointing community-engagement efforts towards a more conscious justice orientation, Cynthia Gordon da Cruz (2017) highlights the importance of where expertise and knowledge are located in the second of her four questions for Critical Community Engaged Scholarship:

1. Are we collaboratively developing critically conscious knowledge?
2. Are we authentically locating expertise?
3. Are we conducting race-conscious research and scholarship?
4. Is our work grounded in asset-based understanding of community?

The offering of Recovery to GLIDE student interns and other university students starts from a different place. The program was created in and by Black community people to address their own needs instead of adapting a model that was made by mostly white professionals or clinicians. Its very basis supports a Black- and community-based locus of knowledge and power that supports healing and change. There is no question from the outset about who created, developed, and implemented the work. And so, when students are first exposed to it, they are often startled (and sometimes profoundly moved) to be invited into our Recovery Circles for the purposes of their own healing, in whatever places in themselves that they most feel a need and resonance. And so students learn to sing the Spirituals and the songs of the Civil Rights era for their own liberation, working alongside the liberation of the communities who have invited them to take on the honorable mantle of “brothers and sisters.” We often hear from students that they

still keep a postcard with “GLIDE’s Terms of Faith and Resistance” on their refrigerators or bathroom mirrors, to inspire them to walk the path that they first were shown in the GLIDE community. The implicit basis of the Terms is in “enoughness”—that is, that people together are sufficient and powerful enough to address their own futures—and it brings life and resonance for the interns as well. “Enoughness,” which at GLIDE is known through our core value of Celebration, is an antidote to the deficit-based, problem-based, white supremacist way of controlling people (including white people) through shame and the implicit accusation that everything and everyone is a problem to be fixed, a commodity to be optimized. Interns find their own power and the emergence of previously suppressed brilliance as they navigate their own recovery process. The transformative power of recovery for the interns is rooted in the unique character of the Terms of Faith and Resistance and their power to undo the negative legacy of oppression that so many communities have been shouldered with.

In this way, the adoption of GLIDE’s Recovery by student interns is the receipt of a gift from a Black culture to the world, rather than its appropriation, assimilation, or commercialization by hegemonic process.

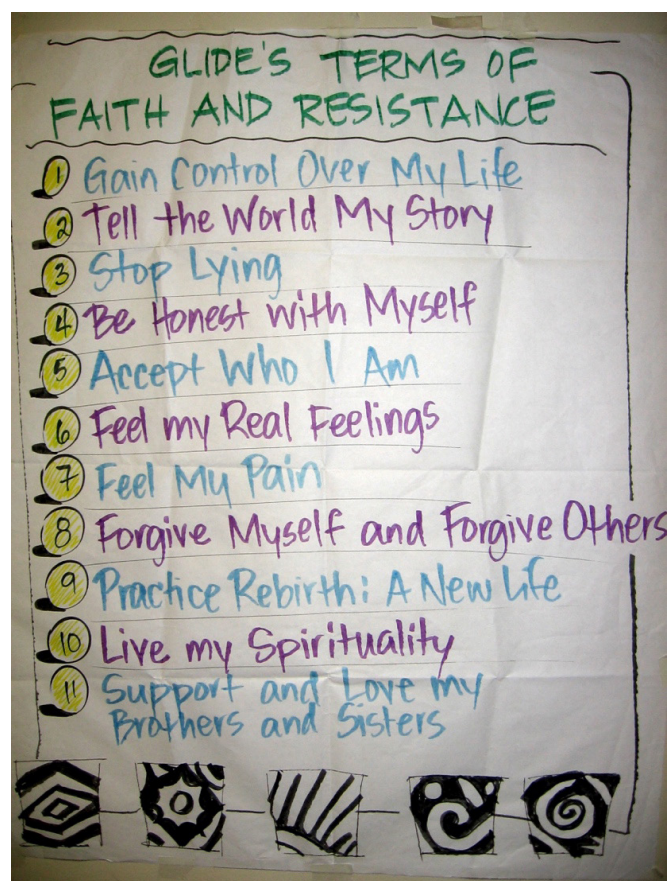


Figure 1: GLIDE’s Terms of Faith and Resistance (Lin, 2006)

## Centering community knowledge and expertise is a justice practice

Other writers in the field of community engagement (Irwin and Foste, 2021) have already pointed towards the ways that service learning can end up being a further capitalist extraction of value from communities of color and other people denied the material benefits of white supremacy. Students at majority white-serving colleges and universities are “presented” with community-based experiences where they believe that their goal is to learn about poverty or the “inner city” while developing and offering themselves as a much-needed resource (college-level academic skills, tutoring, research capacity) to shore up the perceived deficiencies in the communities that they are visiting. The people “served” by the students are in this frame just empty vessels of need that illustrate the failure of either the individual’s efforts to reach capitalism-prescribed self-sufficiency or, in a more progressive stance, the failure of the system to distribute its resources in a way that supports basic human needs for safety, agency, food and shelter. Knowledge, learning, and insight are generated on the visible material of poverty and racism, but are created and validated in the minds and analyses of the university-based faculty, students, and staff. This critique isn’t about all students in community engagement—there are so many examples of students or faculty (often those who have origins themselves in communities of struggle) who operate from a place of belonging and return, and who inherently respect the people and places they engage with. But they are not usually the framers who set the baseline, the culture, and the norms of engagement. Those framers who implicitly say to us as community partners: “All you can offer me is the demonstration of your suffering and need, so that I can learn better how to use my capitalist-adapted skills, e.g. documentation, analysis, and other interventions suited to white middle-class culture, to rescue you.” In racial terms, Black experience is still being used in service of white education and growth on terms set by white institutions. Ironically, many POC- and community-based institutions have adapted their missions to accommodate this stance—to see themselves as committed to upgrade white middle class mentalities about injustice, poverty, and inequity. We do this by telling stories, putting community clients in front of donors, volunteers, and students, and all the while hoping for validation from white institutions in the form of donations, partnerships, and more volunteers.

We believe it is a good, but counter-cultural practice for an inclusion-focused organization to acknowledge and grow its expertise that is based in

Blackness and manifested most clearly in Black folks. By staying connected to our roots, and knowing what we owe to the people who share those roots with us, we resist how American culture continually assimilates Blackness for its own uses and profit, and either claims it as a generic good or performs it as a kind of carnivalization that wipes out its sacred and creative origins. The erasure of visible Blackness in American popular music with a clear Black heritage is a known consequence of how the music industry works (French, 2019). We, writing as Chinese-American and Black people who have joined the GLIDE community, offer this story as our acknowledgment, respect, appreciation of the gift of Blackness into the public sphere and into the realms of higher education. We want even more people to be able to say, “Yes, I too see and honor this. I give flowers to this.” We invite you to join us in this honoring, as an alternative to practices that have attempted to ignore, appropriate and erase Blackness. We adopt and practice in exactly those places where there is the greatest need for social and spiritual solutions today.

## The Gift: GLIDE’s African American Extended Family Recovery Program

You can read about GLIDE’s original Recovery Program in Cecil Williams’ book, *No Hiding Place* (1993). In the late 1980s, we in San Francisco faced a vacuum of support for Black community members carrying the weight of the crack cocaine epidemic, and so those very community members, with support from GLIDE, built their own recovery program as an alternative to the 12 Step model of Alcoholics Anonymous, which had been designed by, and largely for, middle class and wealthy white men. GLIDE’s program posited an African American spiritual approach to recovery, expressed in the “Terms of Faith and Resistance.”

Key characteristics of the Terms of Faith and Resistance, and of the program overall, included:

- a. A focus on empowerment as a contrast to the powerlessness cited in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. “Gain Control Over My Life” is the first Term of Faith and Resistance; AA’s Step One reads: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001). Our Black brothers and sisters who survived multi-generational oppression cited Step One of AA as at best meaningless and more often a “kick in the pants”—why would they need a reminder of powerlessness in this world?

- b. A belief in self-determination and self-naming, again in contrast to the principles of anonymity associated with twelve-step programs. A belief that it is necessary and powerful to be seen in our fullness, to undo the invisibility imposed on us by others, and to declare ourselves free.
- c. A conviction that Black folks have the life force, the genius, and the love needed to help each other and themselves through great challenges without needing a rescue or metaphorical salvation from others.  
(Williams, 1993, 33–40)

The Recovery Circles at the heart of the program practice a longtime tradition of call and response —“Won’t you honor and receive my story by sharing a piece of your own, or by offering feedback to me?” asks Jacqueline, one of our Circle facilitators. Not to prove that you “understand,” but so that you can do your own work here alongside us, like the peers that we see you as. The practice of call and response includes the concept to “do your own thing,” Paul Carter Harrison writes, “an invitation to bring YOUR OWN THING into a complementary relationship with the mode, so that we all might benefit from its power” (Harrison 1972. p.72–73). Call and response as a practice creatively transgresses certain cultural taboos related to participation. Because call and response encourages animated participation, it transgresses norms of politeness, appropriateness, and privacy.

The Circle is built around feedback—a supportive, but sometimes intense opportunity to hear from one’s peers how they are receiving our sharing. Receiving feedback is always optional and follows the rule, “If it doesn’t apply, let it fly!” White participants in the Circle sometimes become anxious when witnessing the feedback process because it has a high spiritual intensity that can remind them of “the hot seat” group experiences that were popularized in the 1960s and 1970s. But the Circle’s modality comes from a different source.

## Recovery has its roots in both African American and African vitality

GLIDE’s Recovery Program draws strength from several underlying Bantu-derived epistemic underpinnings. One is vitalism, the idea that aliveness is at the core of Being and that when that aliveness is threatened, individuals (within a community context) must do what is needed to restore balance. This vitality is not quiet. Rather, it is outwardly expressive

and requires a matrix of acceptance within which to unfold and be alchemized. Restoration of vital life force is crucial in this world order. The Recovery Circle welcomes vitality. It therefore makes room for the many expressions of not only the vitality itself, but for what is hindering its manifestation. So in the circles various emotive forces are welcomed. This includes the force of *contention*, which points to another critical epistemic underpinning: conviction. Unlike many recovery programs based in white middle class ideologies, in which contention is more likely to be seen as a threat to connection, the Black way holds the idea that “We can—and some might say we must wrangle or tussle with each other to find our way to true connection.” Commitment—stated and implied—is our protection. We will not cast each other into “hell” by giving up on our brother or sister. We imagine this commitment to have been honed in the system of slavery, where folks had to learn to count on each other; where casting out could mean certain death. Commitment teaches us how to love “for reals,” beyond mere words or empty gestures. When commitment (here we use the word as we would under Bantu influence, as a personalized force) is present, the truth can more easily be spoken, and lies called out. To get a feel for this, imagine the speaker: “You mah brother (sister). I love you but you know you lyin’.” And everyone else in the circle is trackin’ to make sure that the speaker is not comin’ from a dishonest or hostile place. If s/he is, that too will likely be called out. In this way the circle becomes self-correcting. These relationships of commitment and contention characterize much of Black life, but when they are engaged with recovery as the aim, they are sanctified. It is critical to grasp that Black spirituality, psychology and being are founded on the epistemological understanding that soul force—which comes from beyond the human realm—is available to high and low alike, and that soul force is unleashed when people gather and share their individual gifts of wisdom, sass, upset and joy. All these forces, when engaged properly, result in more life for everyone involved.

## Recovery is a universal practice open to everyone

Among the first non-Black participants in the Circles to adopt Recovery for her own liberation was our executive director, Janice Mirikitani (Sandomir, 2021). She took the Terms of Faith and Resistance and understood that she too, had a hidden story, protecting her incest perpetrators from accountability for decades of abuse, and protecting white America for accountability in imprisoning her, her family and over 127,000 Japanese Americans in concentration



camps, stealing their homes and livelihoods, and then releasing them without so much as an acknowledgement for another almost 40 years. Her story was welcomed in the Circles, for as much as Recovery Circles are a Black invention, they are by nature also open to anyone who wants to join them—there is an innate openness and generosity to this practice that probably comes from a Black hospitality culture and the commitment to mutual survival referenced at the beginning of this article. It is an extension of love, a belief in an extended family that informed the naming of the program. Janice adopted “Tell the World My Story” and expressed her recovery through poetry and testimony and was named Poet Laureate of San Francisco in the year 2000. Through her own recovery, she unleashed a channel for women survivors that continues to this day and opened GLIDE’s public practice of recovery for everyone.

Eventually, even corporate CEOs and wealthy patrons found their own Recovery paths with us—a path of their own, to be sure, but one that took on the honesty and the celebration that is the hallmark of GLIDE. A senior executive at Charles Schwab Corporation, the founder of a boutique hotel chain, a philanthropist from Omaha all joined the Circles. And so, when we launched the Emerging Leaders Internship for college and university students in 2002, there was no question that we would center the intern journey around Recovery.

While our current drug and health intervention programs have evolved in recent years to lead the community in Harm Reduction work (Lurie, 2017) we also share our cultural practices with employees through a “Cultural Journey for Staff,” and with participants in our social justice transformational learning programs, which include, in addition to the Emerging Leaders Internship Program, “An Officer and a Mensch” trainings for police officers and district attorneys (Lelyveld, 2019); and “Healers at the Gate” for healthcare providers from the University of California, San Francisco; and New Bridges, an unlearning oppression and alliance building program, for any and all.

GLIDE’s Recovery Program originated in the community, and specifically in Black community. It is a product of Blackness, a gift of Blackness, and a practice of Blackness, that has turned out to have universal implications. Our invitation to student interns who come to GLIDE is to learn our model of community healing and change. This model is offered freely as a gift and an invitation to join a community that is open to all.

## **The Application: The Emerging Leaders Internship for College and University Students**

The Emerging Leaders Internship Program at GLIDE Foundation brings 10-15 students (mostly undergraduates, with a handful of seminarians and Masters in Social Work candidates) to San Francisco each summer for a 10-week internship in GLIDE’s community. Until 2021, about half of the interns were paid through an endowment restricted to students from the University of California, while the remainder are mostly sponsored by a university or foundation program: Northwestern University’s Practicum for their School of Education and Social Policy; the Community Health Worker Certificate Program at City College of San Francisco; Stanford University’s Spirituality, Service, and Social Change Fellowship; Birmingham Southern College’s Hess Fellows, and grants from the Beatitudes Society, for example. The first two weeks are spent in an immersion into both the Tenderloin community and in GLIDE’s wide-ranging programs and operations—daily free meals and food pantries serving 2000+ meals daily, domestic violence services for women and batterer’s intervention programs for men, harm reduction services for drug users and HIV/Hepatitis C testing and care navigation; a subsidized childcare program, a free K-5 afterschool program with over 75 youth, clinical services in partnership with local healthcare providers, policy advocacy and coalition work, and transformational training programs for external stakeholders like the previously-mentioned UCSF healthcare providers and reformist District Attorney offices from across California.

The remaining eight-week placement allows the interns to join one of the working teams in the organization, and each week ends with the interns together for a Friday of debrief, reflection, and recovery. The interns form their own Recovery Circle based on their experience joining the ongoing community Recovery Circles and with early facilitative guidance from community facilitators and from program staff. Sometimes there is a theme or question to open the Circle after check-in: “What blocks your light?” “What are you still holding in your memory or heart from this past week?” “What are you noticing about yourself and your connection or disconnection with others?” At other times the interns will direct the sharing time with the natural urgency of what is happening in the here-and-now for them. The format of the Circle—singing of a Negro Spiritual or civil-rights era song, check-in, sharing and feedback, check out, and recitation of the Terms of Faith and Resistance through



call and response— has ritual strength but can flex to meet the need of the day. What holds the energy of Circle is the commitment of each intern to their own growth and to support the growth of others through the legacy of realness, acceptance, and urgency that the interns learn from the community circles.

One former intern, Meilani, told us this about the process:

In honesty, my internship was not what I expected it to be. I arrived at GLIDE looking to help mend a community, when ultimately that community mended me. To be an Emerging Leader for me was not a linear process. I would find myself lost, then oriented then lost again the very next day. It was to cry tears of deep sadness and absolute joy within the same hour. To feel awkward amongst and yet empowered all the same by the women of my cohort. Truly it was to be simultaneously in both constant discovery of myself and a constant metamorphosis. Just as the original Recovery Circles were designed to support people struggling with chaotic drug use to look at themselves in new ways, the intern Recovery Circles help precipitate change in the interns' understanding of themselves and their special roles in the community.

Another former intern, James, described how the recovery sessions prompted a transformation in the work he was doing in a GLIDE-connected supportive housing complex:

I was placed as an intern at 149 Mason, the supportive housing community for formerly homeless adults, and also part time with the newly formed advocacy effort at GLIDE. Due to 149 Mason being physically located down the block from the main center, I felt a disconnect in my placement from my fellow interns and broader GLIDE community. I had only one consistent task per week and that was taking a resident to her GA ["workfare"] shift at SF General Hospital every Thursday. Besides that task, I spent my work time sitting watching television in the community room feeling antsy that I wasn't doing enough to take advantage of the opportunity at hand. Therefore, I was always eager for Friday reflections where the intern cohort and Isoke would get together and process our experiences together. Looking back I value those reflection sessions even more, and also recognize that reflection, especially when done with a room full of recent strangers, can be really uncomfortable. So that's what it was like for me as an intern, I was constantly being pushed outside my comfort zone. Lying within these somewhat odd circumstances were some of the most transformative learnings that I have experienced in a short window of time.

Sitting in that windowless community room, I learned how being is as important if not more important than doing. Being with the residents in the smallest ways was how I could be of service to them and also learn more about myself. I discovered the joy of connecting with people that I would have assumed would be too difficult. Being left to my own devices, I had to hone my initiative. I learned that programming for the community has to start with listening and relationship building with them first. In the Friday reflections, I was taught how to read the field, talk to my inner critic and also be vulnerable with my fellow interns. I learned how powerful group processes can be in terms of developing new internal norms shaped by compassion rather than contempt and judgment.

In James' story, one can recognize a classic encounter with what Jack Mezirow (1994) calls the "disorienting dilemma"— a challenge to established expectations that can lead to transformative perspective change. Mezirow and many others have outlined steps and processes that describe or facilitate transformative change in an experiential learning context — for James it is the internship program's Friday reflection process, centered on GLIDE's recovery principles, that provides the container for learning and growth.

Some interns also continue to attend the open community Recovery Circles (in addition to the intern-specific circles) throughout the summer as part of their own enrichment and investment. One intern named June, who stayed on at GLIDE for several semesters beyond the initial summer, became a regular facilitator of the community Recovery Circle and ultimately wrote a book, *An Invitation to Recovery Circle*, as part of her gratitude and gift back to the community. June wrote to us recently and said:

I would later go on to help with Glide's Martin Luther King Day youth contingent in speech writing and essays and work with the Seasons of Sharing rental assistance program in the Walk-in-Center, but it was Recovery Circles at Glide that completely altered my life path. And it was the way we dealt with conflict at Glide that would have me form my own editing and coaching business from an authentic space. When someone asked how you were at Glide, it wasn't water cooler chit chat. They really wanted to know how you were. When shit went down, no one complained or gossiped. They took it straight to you. They investigated the systems and cultures behind the misstep or miscommunication and discussed it from that context. We were all learning, all of the time. And that was OK, even encouraged. After being called on my privilege, my white fragility, entitlement, and assertiveness many times, I was unafraid to stand in the fire of conflict, to speak my truth, and to encourage others to do the same. To fall down,

learn, and get back up. You could say anything to me, and I to you. That is one of the greatest lessons I carry with me to this day, the powerful weapon of genuine discourse that can actually begin to change large systemic injustice.

The Emerging Leaders Internship Program utilizes multiple reflection and learning modalities over the course of its 10-week cycle. It is, however, Recovery Circle, the gift of a local Black community to the multiracial generations who have come to GLIDE since the 1980s, that remains the transformative hallmark of the program and is often the most treasured of the experiences that interns take away from their time working in the Tenderloin of San Francisco.

### **About the authors and the places from which we speak, write and love**

We raise up this story because of the debt of gratitude we hold to those people—the community members, volunteers, and recovery leaders, who have taught and mentored us, and who have gifted us with a journey to our own recovery stories. In a country that struggles every day with its propensity to denigrate (note etymology), appropriate, and kill Blackness and its People. We—three Chinese Americans and one Black woman—are illuminating an epistemic thread that credits the sovereign efficacy of Blackness and Black People in powerful responses to pressing issues faced both by their own communities and by peoples across the racial spectrum—including our student interns and ourselves.

The three of us who identify as Chinese American come to Recovery in appreciating it as a way of being, or acting, that we intuitively recognized as neither white-hegemonic nor Chinese in its approach and power. We experience the delight in joining a practice whose richness and effectiveness is distinct from our own cultural heritage. For us as authors who are Chinese to acknowledge Blackness also cements our own culture. Our Chinese-ness serves as the unique vantage point of appreciation and offers that appreciation back to the community as a shared pleasure. We practice the gift of recovery as we learned it at GLIDE. We are making a connection, not trying to front something about ourselves. It is not about trying to be Black, which is appropriation or can be, like how many youth in America try to mimic Black styles. Our love of Recovery's Blackness leaves us all the more Chinese. It creates expansiveness in participating in a multi-ethnic community that holds much more than a single stream of love. We can recognize and join in this legacy, celebrating its originating culture and creators while affirming our own unique joy in practice.

One unexpected outcome of joining GLIDE's culture of inclusion for the Chinese American authors is that we had an encounter with our own ethnicity along the way. Over a period of years, we noticed a recurring struggle to accept our programs' Chinese clients. We noticed how their differences in behaviors from Black, white, and middle-class norms set off feelings of discomfort in us. We and others sometimes labeled these Chinese clients' behaviors as "cheating," "double-dipping," "skipping the line," but we knew that these were labels that denigrated (and we use this word consciously) cultural context and motivation. We were discovering an operating limit to the inclusion that we had adopted so passionately in this community. As a result, and with the support of our mentor Rita Shimmin, then the Vice President of Organizational Integration at GLIDE, and from Ro Horton of the UNtraining, we started The Chinese UNtraining (The UNtraining, 2022), a group of ethnic Chinese folks, mostly active in healing and justice practices, who meet to work on issues of internalized racial oppression.

We began to identify and heal the ways that we had split our own ethnic identities in order to survive and fit into the larger extant dominant culture, and along the way learned to love ourselves, and our clients, more fully. This is one of the essential lessons we have learned in our own recovery process—that the work of inclusion is inherently ongoing, presenting new and sometimes even deeper challenges as we grow. There is a continual re-investment in one's individual and group growth required in order for an institution to sustain its commitments to act justly and in community with the people it serves. Equally urgent is the need to constantly re-inscribe into the organizational culture a reverence for and explicit acknowledgement of the Blackness in our traditions. As new staff and leaders in the organization come to GLIDE, they naturally bring with them perspectives from the larger culture that often seek to assimilate Blackness into more race-neutral terms. We realized we need to openly treasure this aspect of our roots against the trend of devaluation. This is one of the reasons why we increasingly name our values and practices as practices of Blackness, even when the practitioners are not ourselves always Black. We do it with thanks and credit to those Black community folks who went before us, who trained us and loved us.

There is so much of this story that is connected to positionality, context, and identity for us as contributors and writers. As four storytellers, we are part of the GLIDE Foundation and Glide Memorial Church in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco.

The Black member of our group, Isoke (Thrive East Bay, 2018), who is also our eldest, has led the Emerging Leaders Internship Program since 2011 and serves as GLIDE's Maven of Transformative Learning. The two authors Barbara and Lillian (Glide Foundation, 2020), who were themselves former Emerging Leaders interns are today the Director of Innovation and People Development and the Senior Director of Programs, respectively. And the fourth author (James), who ran the Emerging Leaders Internship Program from 2005-2011, is now GLIDE's Senior Director of Mission and Values, and identifies as a recovering addict who owes a debt of gratitude to the GLIDE folks who helped him recognize the need for a greater love and change in his own life. Some of us have also, as a result of our recovery, gone on to become leaders in other spaces, including our Chinese, queer, and faith communities.

Isoke writes: For decades (I am now 70) I so-journeyed through primarily white spaces giving and receiving love, gathering ideas about life and trying to make sense of my bifurcated life trajectory. At age 11 I was removed from San Francisco's Fillmore district and placed in a nearly all-white Catholic boarding school. My entire life can be seen as a process of reconciling the differences between those two worlds. After completing the requirements for the PhD in psychology in 2008, I was invited by Rita Shimmin to work with GLIDE staff as a consultant. Here was a place where both sides of my nature found home. I had written my dissertation on the African American ritual pattern of call and response. Here, in GLIDE'S lobby, one could see, hear and feel that Blackness was welcome. You may not think much of that, but believe me, it is rare. I owe a debt of gratitude to every soul that has worked to keep that oasis from being slowly but surely suburbanized. (I say this with no disrespect; I live in the suburbs myself.) The attempt to preserve and protect the Blackness that lives most authentically among the folks who we could say are "close to the bone," is a worthy one at a time when even white diversity goes unacknowledged. GLIDE's recovery program says to all, "come be your kind of white, your kind of Chinese, your kind of queer, your kind of person struggling with addiction. We all crazy. We all got unfinished business. We all came out of a world that don't know what to do with us, how be just with itself and others. And while we might look like we're serving people in need, we are serving ourselves! Period. Dot.

We wrote this article to tell our story, a community's story, and an internship's history. We wanted to shine a light on our creation story. It's about

how a local Black community built a reflection and growth practice—which we call Recovery—that came to be used by a generation of college and graduate students who engage in service and learning with us over the course of almost twenty years. Our Recovery practice is a practice of Blackness, from which elements are used today as a community cultural practice for the organization as a whole.

We are also writing this as a reminder to ourselves and our colleagues at GLIDE: We must remember. If an organization forgets itself and disconnects from its roots, it becomes vulnerable to the kind of genericization and loss of vision that accompanies the wash of dominant culture onto minority practice. The threat of a distinctive Black expertise is a threat to those of us who don't have our own identity, or who have an unconscious hegemonic identity. Minority epistemologies are too easy to forget or to erase. We as writers believe in the power of Blackness practice, this Black love we have described, to support the next generation of justice practices at GLIDE and in the world. So we write to remember, and to live. ■

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