**Wednesday, October 19, 2011**

A couple of weeks prior, we sat as individuals in MATE-110. That day, each member of the class raised his/her hand in order to select an organization to visit to find information for the upcoming “service project”. Professor Rob Carter stood in front of the white board, pen in hand, when he announced “Maxine Lewis” to the class. A hush fell over the crowd. I wanted to raise my hand but the lacked boldness. After a few awkward seconds, I decided to take action. At the same time, Max Kellogg did the same. We were soon followed by three more (Thomas Kilkenny, McKenzie Kirkpatrick, and Tyler Schelling) and met up in this inaugural group to discuss the upcoming weeks which included a visit to the homeless shelter. Tyler emailed Della, the shelter manager, and the stage was set.

The fifth week of MATE, October 19, was dedicated to visiting the sites we had chosen. At 9 A.M., our group of six (we picked up a stray Kevin Ottino) boarded the bus at Kennedy Library and headed downtown where we transferred buses. We got off at an Orcutt Road stop (the shelter’s on 750 Orcutt) and proceeded the rest of the way via foot.

It took us a little while, but we eventually found it. It appeared to be a small area of property with a little parking lot and only two small buildings. We walked to the middle of the parking lot and Della appeared. Thomas stepped up, took the lead, and introduced himself. Before the rest of us could follow suit, she took control of the conversation and inquired as to exactly why we wanted a tour. We didn’t exactly know yet so Max just told her that we were there for the same reason that the group that had come two days earlier was there (our sister team in the Monday section of MATE). I don’t know if she knew precisely why they were there either, but she didn’t seem to care and continued on to the tour.

We first walked up a half-dozen steps into the main shelter area that contained all the bunks, the kitchen, and the bathroom. This is where clients came to eat, sleep, and be merry. Della described the basic operations that took place in here on a daily basis. Clients walked through the front door, signed in with a volunteer that sat at a desk beside the entrance, took their place in the dinner line, got their food, sat at one of three tables on the other side of the room, and enjoyed their meal among fellow clients. This room, “the fishbowl,” measured about one thousand square feet and connected all the rooms in the building. It contained a dozen beds with another long dorm in the back of the building having forty or so. In the middle of the fishbowl was the office, where volunteers and staff stayed during operating hours. There they handed out toiletries and supplies that clients requested. Also connected to the fishbowl, the bathrooms sat on the right side of the building and the linen room, a sea of mismatched bed sheets and blankets, sat on the left.

While we were in this building, Della also filled us in on the daily routine of the shelter. Clients come every night beginning at 4 to eat dinner. After dinner, which is provided by a business in Shell Beach Monday through Thursday, women and families are taken to the overflow shelter to stay the night. The men stay back, clean up dinner and mop the floor. Then, they receive bed assignments, take showers, check out bedding, and relax. Lights are off at 10 P.M. and most wake up the next morning by 6:30 A.M. They eat a light breakfast of coffee, cereal, and possibly fruit and must be off the shelter property by 7:30. After all the clients leave, employees start getting the shelter ready for the next night. This is Della’s primary function.

We then exited the building onto the patio on the right side. There, Della told us about the sheds. They were two of the main violators of the shelter’s organization. All reserve supplies – toiletries, clothes, etc. – had been thrown in to them to the point where items were blocking the door.

This problem of lack of organization manifested itself several times in our tour: the linen closet, the two sheds, and the office. This was a separate office, not the one in the previously discussed building. Della and the rest of management had a small office building to the side of the shelter that was jam-packed with client paperwork. It sat on the floor in stacks making it difficult to maneuver inside. Our group, the six of us plus Della, walked into the office. I didn’t think we’d all fit, but we made it work. Since Della had gone in first, we all had to exit before she could leave. This didn’t bode when well a lady came by with a donation. We all had to flatten ourselves against the wall so that Della could get by.

Despite all the small problems and the fact that she was working at a homeless shelter of all places (not to most sought-after job), Della remained positive about her work. During the tour, she told us that helping people suited her and that she belonged at the shelter. She clearly had the dedication. She told us stories of how she couldn’t even remember her drive home from work some days because she was so tired. Eighteen hour days’ll do that to you.

Due to her pressing schedule and lack of places to tour, she ended the tour after the office. We exchanged good-byes and told her that we’d be back. The whole activity took just over an hour, which meant that our bus wasn’t coming for a little under an hour, so we walked a few miles back to the downtown transit center. We got what we needed to present to our class about Maxine Lewis and present we did.