Makayla Massie

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Turning Point Essay

Before going to Atlanta with this class, I felt like I had a decent understanding of what the city was like from all of the readings, research, and discussions we did throughout the semester. Even though I thought I knew what to expect from this city, I did not. Researching a city online and seeing it with your own eyes in person are two completely different things. You can read about Atlanta all you want, but you will never truly experience it or have a good understanding of the area until you see it for yourself and can form your own thoughts and opinions on your personal experiences.

Aside from the trip to Atlanta with this class, I had been to the city once before. Thinking about both trips, I saw Atlanta differently each time. The first time I went, I was visiting family and we were staying just outside of Atlanta. We only went in to Atlanta to go to the Georgia Aquarium and walk around Downtown, so the only neighborhood I really got to see was the tourist section of Downtown—which is such a small part of the entire city. From this little bit of exposure, I thought Atlanta was a nice, big city with lots of people and things to do. I didn’t know about all of the neighborhoods, what they are like, or what makes them different from each other until taking this class. My second time in Atlanta, we got to stay in the city, and saw a lot of places that most tourists would not choose to see, which gave me a whole new perspective. I saw a lot more of the true Atlanta the second time I went because I was not looking for anything the first time. The purpose of this class was for us to explore the city while we were there, and see things that most people who live outside of Atlanta do not see.

The differences between all of the neighborhoods I went to really stood out to me. We talked about and researched a lot of the different neighborhoods before we went, so I had some background on each one, but it was still interesting to see the areas in person and be able to compare and contrast your personal findings, instead of relying on someone else’s information from the internet. The first day in Atlanta, I saw a section of Downtown that I did not expect to see. As Downtown was the only place in Atlanta I had ever seen prior to this trip, I was expecting to see what I had seen before: the lively part of Atlanta filled with people, mainly tourists. Instead, what I was saw was tons of homeless people, abandoned buildings, and hardly any people walking the streets. It was upsetting and almost mind blowing that these streets full of homelessness were just a few blocks away from the energetic, busy streets full of restaurants, shops, and lots of people. The homelessness in the city was the main thing that stood out to me the first day, but I did not see much of this issue in the last two days. The next day in Midtown, I saw lots of Georgia Tech students and people in the area to attend Pride; I did not see any homeless people in Midtown. There was a lot more people and diversity than what was seen the first day in Downtown. Old Fourth Ward, the neighborhood I went to the last day, was similar to Midtown, as they were right next to each other. I saw very few homeless people in this neighborhood because there was a homeless shelter for them to stay in rather than the streets. This neighborhood was interesting because it was transitioning into a higher end, more wealthy area, but still had places with lower income homes. While these neighborhoods shared some similarities, it is crazy how each one of the neighborhoods in Atlanta can be so different yet make up one single city.

One of the biggest things I noticed was the homelessness. Even though we had talked about this some before going on the trip, I did not realize how big of a problem it actually was until I saw it with my own eyes. I was surprised that in such a big city, they did not have more programs and resources to help fix this issue. The entire time we were there, I only saw one homeless shelter; however, I saw quite a few abandoned buildings that could be used as homeless shelters or other resources to help those who need it. There were also tons of high rise hotel buildings that I am sure have plenty of empty rooms that they could fill with the homeless people who sit out on the streets a block away. Where I live, we do not have any homeless people—I have seen homeless people in surrounding counties, but never in my county. Because homelessness does not affect my hometown and is not something I frequently see, it is not something that I regularly think about or expect to see when I travel. However, I feel like if I lived in Atlanta and saw these issues every day, I would be even more upset and frustrated by this problem than I am as an outsider to the city.

Another issue that stood out to me was the food desert. While this was not something I could physically see while walking around the city, we got to learn about the food banks and food insecurity issue in the simulation we attended at the Civil Rights Museum. I think that while this issue affects a lot of places—even Farmville and my hometown, it is not something that you can see. Therefore, it is not a problem that many people are aware of. I think it is great that they do workshops for people to attend to get a better understanding of and be more aware of the food insecurity in Atlanta. Because the overall population in Atlanta is so big, there is a huge number of people who are affected by this issue, some of them being affected by the issue of homelessness as well.

This experience opened my eyes to issues of homelessness and food insecurity, and made me think more about these problems not only in Atlanta, but in the cities of Virginia as well. I really enjoyed seeing the different neighborhoods of Atlanta and being able to compare and contrast each one. Overall, going to Atlanta changed my perspective not only these issues, but also the city as a whole.