



An Inside Peek at a Project Joy Retreat



Most people waking up just after the crack of dawn to head down to the Cape do so to beat the traffic as other New England vacation-goers and tourists make their yearly trips to one of Massachusetts most popular vacation destinations. My co-worker, Jenn, and I were certainly waking up early, but on the last chilly December weekend before Christmas, we were not attempting to beat traffic to get a good spot on the beach.

Jenn and I are teachers at the Linnaean Community School, an Enrichment program run by the Cambridge Department of Human Services. The city, who had been doing ongoing trainings with a local non-profit organization called Project Joy, sent many of its employees who work directly with children to this weekend training. Jenn and I were among them.

We begrudgingly packed our bags and piled into my car early on Saturday morning, first picking up breakfast to go from a cafe in our neighborhood, where the streets were still empty at 7am. Two co-workers who had yet to make a connection outside work, Jenn and I found ourselves getting in the type of negative conversation I hear many people having on the subway. We complained about work, the frustrations we find with particularly challenging kids. We also noted how absurd it seemed to be driving to a weekend retreat for our job when we had already devoted so much of ourselves since the school year started in September, and we were both ready for a break. We would find out later that these were the very same reasons we needed to attend this training in the first place.

We arrived at the Eastham hotel moments before the workshop was about to begin. Registering first with the Project Joy staff, I found myself a little resentful of their beaming smiles and upbeat attitudes as I sipped on my second cup of coffee. After we all gathered in the large ballroom and warmed-up with a game or two, Project Joy founder, Steve Gross, told our group of nearly one hundred city workers about Project Joy's philosophy. I began to understand why the PJ "Playmakers" seemed so happy.

Project Joy, whose mission is "to ensure that nothing stands in the way of healthy play for all children. Nothing," starts their training by having attendees identify what they need to do for themselves first to ensure their own lives are joyful before they can bring joy to the children they work with.

Our group was divided into four more intimate groups which would attend a series of workshops which focused on finding ways to enrich our own lives and reduce stress in order to become the best childcare workers we can possibly be. In the first workshop I attended, everyone in my group was asked to create our own "Playfulness Plan," which focused on the four ideas that are the core of Project Joy's method (Joyfulness, Social Connection, Internal Control, and Active Engagement). Taking a forthright and honest look at my life, I could not hide from the places that caused stress and anxiety in me, and by creating a plan for dealing with these issues, I felt reassured and comforted.

As the weekend continued, I found myself discovering more about myself as an educator, a leader, and a nurturer. Talking candidly with the other attendees and PJ staff, I noticed myself smiling those ear-to-ear grins and discussing ways to be happier, rather than relating to others about our problems and negativity. This glow that I found myself experiencing seemed to be shared among everyone I talked to at the retreat. Everyone agreed, Project Joy was providing us with the necessary insight and tools that would help us on the most exhausting days, with the hardest kids.

Needless to say, the conversation Jenn and I had in the car when we returned home was much different.