

Service Learning Reflection Report

The service site I chose is Boxing Strong, a specialized boxing gym located in Monterey, California. It was founded by Masha, a former competitive boxer and USA Boxing Silver Level Coach who is also certified in Rock Steady Boxing and personal training. Her mission is to make boxing accessible to different demographics, from the general population to individuals with specific needs, by offering non-contact boxing programs for children with autism spectrum disorder and people living with Parkinson's disease. The gym primarily focuses on boxing but also offers wrestling. The goal is to help clients build motor skills, discipline, self-confidence, stress relief strategies, and social connections.

I connected to this site more than I expected. At first, I was just excited to be involved with a boxing program and help teach, but the service experience helped me realize I'm better at working with people than I gave myself credit for. On a typical day, I would participate in the boxing class, help demonstrate movements, assist individuals one-on-one, and help others understand the techniques. I would also offer encouragement and ask questions when I needed to clarify form or drills. During the last week of service, my role shifted. I helped co-coach a youth summer boxing camp for kids ages 7 to 10. We played games, did some light film study, and ran drills. What stood out most was how much more attention these younger participants needed. The youth group required consistent focus, patience, and a playful tone to keep them motivated.

I drove about 30 minutes from Salinas to get to Boxing Strong using Highway 68. It is located near the Monterey Regional Airport in a plaza with plenty of parking. The gym opens in the evening so there is usually little traffic, and available parking. The gym itself is clean,

organized, and well-lit. It feels like a private facility but not exclusive. Unlike some boxing gyms in Salinas that are crowded or focused mostly on maximizing memberships, Boxing Strong offers a more focused, personalized experience. There is a lot of personal attention from the coach. When I first arrived, I noticed how well-kept the space was and how challenging the class was. After the first session, I realized that a single class would undoubtedly level up anyone's fitness.

One big issue that Monterey county faces is chronic disease, especially diabetes. According to the latest county health report, about 12.5% of adult residents in Monterey County have been diagnosed with diabetes, which is higher than both the California and national averages. Rates are even higher in places like Salinas, and trending upward (DataShare Monterey County, 2023). There are several contributing factors to this issue, stemming from poor diet options in low income communities, exercise not being emphasized early on, and long commutes. However, an unusual resource in Monterey County may slow the rate of diabetes incidences, and it's found in the natural beauty of the environment. Studies have shown that being around green spaces, like the large expanses of Toro Park or the stretches of beach in Seaside, can help lower stress, improve heart health, and reduce the risk of conditions like diabetes (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018).

Another concern in Monterey County is healthcare access for undocumented residents. For years, people without legal status were excluded from full-scope Medi-Cal and often had to pay out-of-pocket or rely on emergency rooms for care. On top of that, researchers from the CHAMACOS Study found that even the stress of deportation was tied to physical health issues: more obesity risk, larger waistlines, and higher blood pressure (Torres et al., 2018). In 2024, California expanded Medi-Cal to income-eligible adults regardless of immigration status

(California Department of Health Care Services, 2024). This was a big win for many latinos and a huge resource for undocumented people; however, a 2025 budget proposal could limit this progress by freezing enrollment and adding monthly premiums (Ibarra, 2025). As of now, undocumented immigrants have access to healthcare, but there is still work to be done to support this group that helps keep the county's agricultural economy running.

Another challenge is the area's frequent overcast skies which can impact health. People living in places like Monterey often go days (I have personally experienced weeks) with little direct sunlight. This matters because low sun exposure can reduce vitamin D levels. From my nutrition class at CSUMB, we learned that vitamin D deficiency is especially common in people with more body fat since this fat-soluble vitamin gets trapped in fat tissue, even if consumed frequently. This puts some of the Latino population in Salinas at a higher risk, as their BMIs are generally higher, they are more prone to diabetes incident as mentioned, and fog gets trapped in the Salinas area where many latinos live. Furthermore, one study found that lower outdoor light exposure adversely affects mental health, having been linked with a higher risk of depression (Jiang et al., 2023). On the bright side (no pun intended), a natural atmospheric resource that Monterey County offers is clean air which supports physical and mental health. Millions of people live in areas where pollution causes serious health problems but Monterey usually ranks higher in air quality reports. The Air Quality Index tracks pollutants like ground-level ozone and particle pollution. These are known to affect respiratory and cardiovascular health, so even when the skies are gloomy, spending time outdoors in Monterey county is still beneficial (AirNow, 2024).

As mentioned before, Boxing Strong fights able-ism by creating a space where people with autism or Parkinson's can prosper without being treated like patients. This helps them feel more in control of their health and day-to-day life. It reminds me of "Helping, Fixing, or Serving?" by Rachel Naomi Remen (1999), where she explains that serving is different from helping because it honors the strengths of others. That's what this gym does. Everyone is there to grow, not be fixed.

I think my ability to speak both English and Spanish helped make the space feel more welcoming to different groups too, especially for people in Monterey County's large Latino community. I also tried to learn from others. For example, there was a boy from a Russian background, and I would ask him how to say different words in Russian. It helped us connect and showed that I was willing to learn from him too.

This gym is necessary in Monterey because it's the only one focused on boxing as a therapeutic tool for special populations, while also providing high-level training for the general public. It's inclusive and it meets people where they are in their health journey. There's nothing else like it in the area and I can't recommend it enough.

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