

Laura C. Hritz; Service Learning Report

In the spring semester in 2011 my honors economic class participated in a service learning experiment. My total official hours completed were twelve-and-one-half. My first service learning experiment was approximately five hours at Friend INC of Kutztown's food pantry. Here I organized canned goods and arranged items to ease flow for the clients. My second volunteering venture consisted of approximately 8 hours at FriendFest 2011. Here, I did almost everything from working the front desk, running for ice, hanging signs, returning stands to the local police department, and several other tasks.

I overall enjoyed the experience of service learning. I like volunteering and assisting those in the community in need. It was great to be able to link my love for service work to the classroom. It was very demanding to require an additional 15 hours of service work in specific windows on top of already outstanding expectations from other classes, work, and home. It is a good concept, and it should be continued throughout the years to come. It is a good experience for students to have.

The service community I worked for was FriendINC. Their first benefit from my participating in service was organization. I spent a lot of time at both the food pantry and FriendFest arranging things to where they need to be for maximum efficiency. I am really thankful that I brought my truck to FriendFest. I think that is where they benefitted from me the most. I was the only volunteer who had a truck and I went for ice several times, carted signs all over Kutztown, then returned the

sign stands at night to the local municipal building. That day, I felt as though I really made a difference for FriendFest.

I love to serve the community. The experience gave me insight on how some families are really living and made me feel very fortunate to be in my current situation. No matter how bad it is, I've never had to walk through a Food Pantry to feed my family. A professor could spend hours lecturing in a classroom about poverty and how sad it is, or how big of a problem it is, but until it is experienced, through service learning, the student will not be able to understand the severity of the problem. Probably one of the most important things I learned through the service learning project is not to judge. So often I picture those in poverty as a family living off welfare forever and having children just so they can continue their benefits. It was a very harsh stereotype. But as I met the clients who walked through the food pantry, these were regular people, most of them very nice. They are trying to better themselves and by no means were they what I had envisioned the term "poverty" to be. I have volunteered many times before, but I have never had hands on experience with working with actual clients in need. It was a very important experience in shaping my character to be a better person and learning to leave judgments aside.

There is always a bad apple to ruin them all. A few things I did not like about the project is people abusing the right to be there, on both ends. There were volunteers standing around all day who were only there to collect required hours for their club (from other institutions, not Penn State). I was offended. If It were up

to me, I would've kicked them out and wrote a note to their institution about the poor example they set. Unfortunately, it is not my place to do that, so I refrained. The other part of the experience I didn't like was there was one or two clients out of 200 that walked through that exactly fit my previous stereotype for what I believed poverty entailed. I wish I could have not served them, I didn't believe they deserved it, and they probably didn't. Turning the negative into a positive experience, I concreted the fact that the 1% of people out there are those that I lumped an entire group into. It made me realize how wrong I was.

I thought for a long time about policy suggestion to try to determine, "What can the local, state, and federal government do to alleviate the poverty?" Now that I have come to really understand poverty is a problem and they do need help to get back on their feet, I do strongly believe our government should be more involved. There is very little money in the government, let alone extra money to be able to allocate to people in need. They have current programs like welfare, food stamps, heating oil assistance, health insurance assistance, WIC, and other government programs. But I have not come across any branch of government that conducts fundraisers. This could mean one of two things. It could be that they are out there and they are extremely difficult to locate, or they simply aren't doing any. The best way to split up responsibility between the three different places in government would be this:

The local government should be responsible for hosting fundraisers, donations, and food banks. It would be much easier to do this on the smallest level

and distribute the earnings locally to make participants feel like they are really giving back to their local community. Next I believe the state should assist in organization and help with a website to coordinate these events and help let the people know where and when they can participate. There are so many volunteers out there and even with existing websites including Penn State's service website, there are so many opportunities that are missed out on because people are unaware of how to help. If the state had a branch on their website broken down by county or even township about how residents can be involved in their community I think it would take off like fire. Finally the Federal government has so much responsibility, I think most of these actions should be taken on by state and local governments. Once these programs could get going, then I believe the federal government should step in and help fund these events. Not only will this help elevate poverty, but it will bring the community closer.

There are several topics that tied our classroom teachings to our service work. The biggest one for me was outsourcing because I spent so much time researching it. I thought about if any of these families we were helping were ones effected by their job being sent overseas. I also considered that if the dollar wasn't so weak (inflation) if some of these families wouldn't need to be there. I think poverty increases by increased unemployment and high inflation. It would seem to be a logical thought process. Overall, our classroom studies gave me a new perspective on the clients I was helping.

From this experience, I feel as I've become a better person. I am going to continue to volunteer at FriendINC for the purpose to help out, not for school credit. Also I've went even more local and am donating time to the Hamburg OurTown Foundation. They are responsible for the beautification of Hamburg, PA and helping residents clean up their houses for a cleaner safer environment. Finally, at the next election I intend to run for a board position in my locality. This volunteering project made me want to get more involved with my community. It taught me that I can make a difference. I hope to continue to make a difference for many years to come, and if you live in Upper Bern Township, vote for Laura!