

Rebecca Loewenstein-Harting

Friend Inc. is a social agency that operates in northern Berks County. The organization provides counseling, training, and a monthly food pantry to their clients. They also hold several fundraisers, including “Friendfest,” a wine and beer festival where I spent several service-learning volunteer hours helping to prepare for the event. Unfortunately, the food pantry hours at Friend Inc. occurred during my calculus class, so I was unable to experience this part of the service. I have, however, participated in other service projects aimed at alleviating poverty, including hosting a charity ball to benefit Heifer International (an organization that provides farm animals to poor families). I have found many similarities between my fund-raising event and Friendfest, even though mine was on a much smaller scale. Both of the events also relate to our economics class in several ways.

To begin with, I was glad to be involved with both service events because I am enthusiastic about supporting organizations that actively pursue making a difference in people’s lives. I realized that both Heifer and Friend Inc. have a holistic approach to alleviating poverty: Heifer trains recipients in humane animal care and sustainable farming practices so that the families can become self-sufficient, while Friend Inc. provides diverse social services along with their food banks in order to help families break the cycle of poverty.

My service contribution to both agencies was to help raise funds so that they could continue providing aid to those in need. I didn’t make a very large impact at Friendfest because I was one of many volunteers performing small tasks such as unloading hoagies and setting up tables. On the other hand, I personally made a

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bigger impact with my charity ball because the event raised nine hundred dollars, enough to provide a llama, a water buffalo, and a cow to impoverished families.

Service learning has benefited me by allowing me to see that I can make a difference in people's lives, whether they are my neighbors in Berks county or children in Cambodia. Either way, I have contributed to making their lives more stable and hopefully more enjoyable. From my service with Heifer, I learned several organizational skills including event planning and how to maximize the amount of money collected. Participating in these service activities have also pleasantly surprised me because I noticed how generous people in this area are, as evidenced by both the contributions to my charity ball and the massive numbers of volunteers at Friendfest, plus the fact that Friendfest raised \$26,000. Had I not been in this honors class, I would never have known about Friend Inc. and the amazing number of people it serves every month.

I did not have any negative experiences or problems with my charity ball, but I had two minor issues at Friendfest. The first was that the service did not start at the designated hour, so they wasted a lot of valuable volunteer time. The second problem was that I felt there was a lack of organization, and I could have contributed more if I had been assigned more specific duties. I think next time a better way to handle the volunteers would be to have a list of tasks, and then have people assigned to each of the tasks. That way, people would not be wandering around with nothing to do, nor would they be bogging down the people in charge by asking what should be done.

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My service experiences with these two organizations have further convinced me that the best government policies for alleviating poverty have to do with approaches that teach people how to lift themselves out of destitution for good. I would propose that the three levels of American government consider supporting institutions that give micro-loans to people in the style of Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank. Just as Heifer gives one or two animals to families to allow them to pull themselves out of poverty, these types of loans are typically very small and give people just enough cash to be able to start their own businesses and therefore make enough money to provide for their families. It can also help people get back on their feet after natural disasters. The loans for this program are so small that skills training is not required; however, it is greatly encouraged. People are allowed to do whatever they want with the money. This allows them to capitalize on what they are good at. One of the most important parts of this micro-lending philosophy is the fact that the bankers have a direct relationship to the individuals they are lending the money to. In this way, there is a sense of the community-based assistance, just like at Friend Inc. This micro-lending approach would benefit poor Americans because many of them are so far into debt that they cannot get any loans or financing from regular banks due to their low credit scores. They may be unemployed or even have access to a job but not be able to work because they don't have transportation. A micro-loan would allow them to buy a vehicle to get to work without incurring a lot of debt.

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Because I did not visit the food pantry, I do not know whether the academic part of the course would have prepared me for that part of the service (which was most relevant to our course). I do not think that we learned a lot about poverty, though, and it could have been emphasized more throughout the semester. We did learn about unemployment, and I would be curious to know exactly how unemployment affects poverty (what percent of unemployed live below the poverty line, what percent of people living below the poverty line are unemployed, how does unemployment affect families, etc.). I want to learn more about the causes of poverty and, historically, what the most effective anti-poverty programs have been. I also think that we should have been provided with an opportunity to participate in an alternative service-learning project if we were not able to attend the food pantry because of our schedules.

My service experiences have allowed me to develop as a citizen by making me more aware of poverty around me and in the world. For example, according to Friend Inc.'s website, 7,622 people were able to eat better during 2010 because of the food pantry. I did not realize that there were so many people in northern Berks County who needed this kind of assistance. I think it is important to be aware of one's community situation and the agencies in one's community that are working to alleviate people's economic and social deficiencies. Now, I have increased my understanding by being introduced to Friend Inc. and the programs it provides. My experience with Heifer gave me a similar level of awareness, this time on a global scale. Before my fund-raiser, I did not realize how many millions of people live in

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poverty, nor did I fully comprehend how just a few dollars could change a family's life forever. Now I feel that I am a more conscious global citizen, able to contribute to eradicating poverty both at home and abroad.

#### References

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