Jason Silva

11:30 Class

Service Reflection Paper Part 1

For my social health class, my classmates and I were assigned a group service project. This group project was to serve a subordinate group of society for 10 hours. My group and I were assigned to pledge 10 hours of service to the subordinate group in society of the disabled. To begin our service each of us took time to contact different agencies that specifically work with those with disabilities to find one we would perform service for. Unlike some of the other subordinate groups, people with disabilities have several branches and tiers to choose from, such as physically or mentally handicapped. From physical handicaps it could be rehabilitation, physical therapy, or those who simply needed help outside their own capabilities. Down the road of mental handicaps it could be social working, those who are unable to take care of themselves such as autism victims, or even those who have been diagnosed “slow learners”. With all the different options available we began a wide search, but as time went by we found our availability decreasing rapidly, as our summer schedules for school and work weren’t quite agreeing with the open service hours that the institutions were prepared for.

Finally, after weeks of searching hopelessly, my group found the St. Joseph’s Marian Center, a psyche ward who wasn’t quite used to volunteers but nevertheless glad to have us. The Marian Center wasn’t too large. There was a single social area, where a television and eating tables could be found. On all the edges of the social gathering room there were bedrooms for the patients to share. To even enter the main room from the outside I had to pass through a long corridor with two locked doors, each door needing a special key to open.

Before my group could even enter the Marian Center, there were two requirements we had to meet. The first was that we had to sign a confidentiality agreement; simply a document stating that any personal information we learned about patients in our time there was to be kept secret. The other requirement, which made sense but I hadn’t given thought to until they told us, was that my group had to wear either scrubs or plain jeans and a solid t-shirt. This requirement almost stalled my own service hours by a while, because about 97% of my shirts had a design or saying across them, and nobody I knew owned a pair of scrubs, let alone a pair my size. I was in luck, thankfully, because at the back of the closet, beyond countless hangers where you feel if you take one more step you’ll find yourself in Narnia, there was a solid dark blue shirt I could use for my hours. With boringly plain clothes on and the agreement signed, I stepped through the fidgety door and into a different world.

This room had a certain aura, an environment I wasn’t familiar with. On my first visit it was eerily quiet, as all of the patients were enjoying lunch. My first visit I had two groups members with me who had been there previously, Ben and Brendon, and one of the workers showed us all of the puzzles, games, conversation cards, bird feeders, movies, etc that we could do with the patients. However, because the patients were eating lunch, we were told to spend the first hour in the waiting room until they were done eating. Once lunch was over, each patient found their way to their rooms, and proceeded to take afternoon naps. This left my friends and I to spend another hour and a half just conversing amongst ourselves.

Nap time ended around 2:00, and the patients came back out. Earlier the worker had told my group that most patients didn’t have enough cognitive thought to really do much, with incredibly short attention spans to add on. However, there was one patient who had a great deal of his mind left and wanted to build sculptures. Once the patients had all returned, we were introduced to this sane patient, Joe.

Joseph (who preferred to be called just Joe) was a large man, with a silk grey ponytail, a cast on one leg and resigned to a wheelchair. Because Joe still had his mind, he disliked any contact with the other patients. Ben, Brendon, and I grabbed a few wooden sculptures, introduced ourselves, and began to proceed to building a motorcycle. Joe was friendly, and loved having someone to talk to. After an hour we stopped, as Joe wanted to roll his own cigarettes. The head nurse brought the materials, and Joe showed us how to roll cigarettes, which was a unique experience I had never known to be done before. Shortly after my hours were finished, and I left to go to work.

The next day (Saturday) I returned at 9 in the morning, only to find the patients who weren’t eating breakfast were turning back in for more sleep. An hour later Joe woke up, glad to see I was back, and after smoking his cigarette outside, he taught me how to play Gin Rummi. This kept us entertained until lunch, and after he ate I found the wooden sculptures and we started building a wooden eagle. This filled the remainder of my service hours, and I left to once again go to work. On Sunday, I returned to fulfill my last couple of hours. Joe had the eagle, which we had left to glue overnight, and we worked on finishing it. We stopped to play more Gin Rummi, and finished the eagle soon after. Once this was over, Joe stepped outside to smoke his cigarette, and I went rummaging through the game closet, surprised to find a chess board. I set up the chess board, and Mark came running over with astonishing speed (I found his walker in his room across the way!). Mark had a hard time finishing sentences, or even forming words correctly, but his decades of playing chess were still well refined, as I’m sure it was less than 15 turns to beat me. Joe finished his cigarette as I finished my match, and I said my final goodbye. Joe gave me a firm shake of the hand, then signed the wooden eagle and gave it to me as a parting gift. This eagle still sits atop my dresser, and makes a nice addition to the room.

I had completed my 10 hours of service within that weekend, and I certainly had interesting experiences to reflect on. I naturally am very comfortable in most environments, and can talk to many people without shyness. At this hospital though, I found it difficult to talk to anyone besides Joe. The patients all blended very oddly. One elderly woman was the meanest old woman I’ve ever met, yelling at everyone for reasons unknown. One other women began screaming suddenly very loudly, startling several CNA’s. The CNA’s too were odd, as they disliked working there severely, often getting agitated or “displeased with the entertainment”. It’s hard to work with “crazy old people”, but I had expected some compassion or at least more tolerance. Though I’m not one to judge, and everyone is entitled to their own opinion, so I’ll leave it at that.

Of course, good came out of doing the service as well. I don’t believe it will be community wide like I had expected, but the service my group did had an impact on many patients’ days and one man’s life: Joe. Aside from a high gas bill, a couple stories, and a wooden eagle, I came out of the Marian Center with something I had really not been expecting. I had walked out those two locked doors having made a new friend. In only 10 hours I had learned several new things, I found myself feeling a little better about what I was doing, and I could see with each moment Joe was enjoying my company, that he too was enjoying the moment. Overall, my goal was accomplished. I had learned a lesson, I had finished feeling accomplished, and most importantly, I had made a difference.