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Synergy Services

Service Learning with Synergy Services

Raised as an Army brat, I traveled to places all over the world and met new people with many different backgrounds. Some of my friends lived in wealthy environments and traditional households, some lived comfortably in middle class like my own family, while some of my other friends had a hard time getting by everyday in a dysfunctional home. Since I was young, I always gravitated to those who were not as lucky as I am and had harder times at home. I felt that I should try my best to help them with some of their tribulations or at least be there for them when they were having a hard time. Many of my friends growing up either had a meager amount to live on, had broken up families with a single parent, or ongoing issues of abuse in all forms. It seemed like people did not always pay enough attention to them, when they were really the ones needing it the most. Seeing all this and hoping to make some kind of difference by helping them, I was interested in social work; however, after much research and reflection, I decided that having an occupation in social work would be too stressful and unsuitable for my lifestyle. I still wanted to help people, but I didn't want to hurt myself.

With this thought in mind and the service learning requested, I knew that I would love to work with some kind of social service group. During the service learning presentations that were given in class, I was immediately attracted to the description the director of volunteering gave of Synergy Services. Synergy offers services for those of all ages, genders and situations who are in bad home situations, abuse cases or are simply in need. There are shelters for those with no or unfit home and havens for those who are in trouble. Here was a way that I would be able to help people who were in need, without having social work as a career.

I immediately scheduled an appointment with the director of volunteering, and by looking at my strengths and Synergy's volunteer needs, it was decided that I would be a tutor at Safehaven, a shelter for women and children. Safehaven has a children's center where school age kids can go for help. These children that are already having a hard time as it is, can sometimes struggle with their school work and need someone to help them, even if it is simply by providing encouragement and setting a good example. I was both excited and intimidated at this; on one hand I would be helping children by using my strengths, while on the other hand, I was not used to working with many young children and I was completely ignorant of the environment of a rescue shelter. I expected to be fairly accustomed to working with younger children fairly quick because I can adjust to new environments very easily with my military background, but I had the notion that the center itself would be a little hectic because people with troubled pasts would be coming in. Overall, I was pretty confident with this new mission because ultimately I would be able to help those who were in need.

My first tour of Safehaven was a good one, and made me feel a lot more comfortable with tutoring there. The entire building was incredibly secure and the workers were responsible and close at hand if anything were needed. Even with their hard situations, the women and children surprisingly seemed happy and comfortable, making me feel even better. As I expected, the location of the site is confidential due to the situations that these people are dealing with. The center itself was a lot nicer and more comfortable than I expected due to everyone's attitude and the heightened security. I also went to a presentation on forms of abuse, which really exposed me to exactly what these people were going through. After the presentation and tour, I was much more excited with the work I was soon going to be doing.

The children that I was tutoring were between the ages of five and ten, with the exception of one girl who was sixteen and a junior in high school. For the first couple of weeks everything went very well and the children were very easy to work with. Getting used to working with younger children was not as hard as I expected, and it was very rewarding to see their reactions to getting things accomplished. They were eager to get their homework finished and I was ready to help them which made the whole process a lot smoother. There were not many discipline problems that I encountered other than a few young children getting distracted and excited at small things like young kids usually and should do.

After the first month, there was one tutoring session that did not go so well. There was a young girl around five years old that needed help with her homework, and seemed absolutely miserable the minute she walked through the door. She looked exhausted, sick and incredibly irritated, making the homework she needed to get done extremely hard. After two minutes of helping her, she lost patience, started whining, stopped listening to directions and completely refused to do her homework. All of this was followed by a terrible temper tantrum of throwing herself into the chair she was sitting in and screaming. I had absolutely no idea how to handle the situation and tried to calm her down as best as I could, but almost immediately after hearing the situation, a member of the Safehaven staff came and pulled the child off to the side trying to solve the problem; however, that was unsuccessful and resulted with the young girl being pulled from tutoring for the rest of the afternoon. As a tutor, I had learned how to teach and help young children; I did not learn how to discipline them. It is good that the employee came to help, because for children with complicated and terrible pasts like those at Safehaven, it is best that disciplinary actions be done by those who know how to work with these children the best. I truly

learned a part of how much of an affect a child's family life can have on all other aspects of their life, and how there is only so much that I can do to help them.

Once this startling session passed, tutoring went well again. The children seemed pretty excited to get help and be around a new person. There was a different group of children, because many had already left to new and more permanent homes. One girl around the age of ten had been really challenged with her multiplication tables, causing us to work on them together for a couple of weeks straight. Around the end of the second week, I tried a new method of helping her memorize them and it worked! Not only did she feel proud of her accomplishment, I was extremely excited to finally see some well earned progress and see the results of my help. It really made her day, as well as my day, great because we both truly saw how far we had gotten.

With the holidays coming near, it was very hard to find children who needed to be tutored. Many had already left the tutoring center to go home while most of the others were way too young to tutor and were not even in school. There were two to three weeks where I showed up and no children were there. One of these times, I helped make dinner in the kitchen for the women and the children at the center, which was absolutely fine because I knew they needed my help, but not nearly as rewarding. In all honesty, I began to become irritated with traveling all the way to the center, just to have to turn around again because there was nothing to help out with.

Just as I was beginning to give up, I heard that a little five year old girl needed lots of helping recognizing and working with her alphabet. Even though it was just one child, I made the trip out to the center and worked with her. The young girl, seemed excited to see me because we had worked together before, which made me even more excited to be there. I had been told that she could not recognize letters from the alphabet out of order, so my goal was to correct or at

least improve on that. I spent an hour and a half just one on one with her, going over letters again and again and again on a dry erase board, letting her help write them and erase them to keep her attentive and prevent her from getting bored. With her eagerness, she caught on very quick, and recognized almost every single one of the letters individually by the end of the session. The next day, I heard back from the women and children's center who said that the young girl's teacher made a comment on her incredible improvement in her alphabet skills. It was absolutely wonderful to hear that she had improved because I knew that even something small like the alphabet will make things much easier for her in the future. This was truly the most rewarding part of my tutoring at Safehaven.

My tutoring session with this young girl was my last one, unfortunately due to finals and lack of children needing to be tutored at Safehaven. To make up for hours that I needed, I volunteered at the Synergy Services Office on Park University Campus and transferred data for the financial department. Although I was not able to work with anyone one on one, I knew that synergy needed a lot of help in this area; if this was going to make things easier for them so that they would more successfully help other people in need, then I was willing and ready to help. Even with the accomplishment I felt tutoring at Safehaven, it was quite relaxing to do something that required little thinking, but was still helping. It was also very nice to see what it was like to work in an office setting, to expose me to anything I may want to do in the future.

One of the best things I learned was how to work with young children. It requires a lot of patience because one has to realize that it takes much longer for them to learn what you already know. Also, in order to work with kids with rough upbringings, one must be understanding of the situations they have been in which can explain some of their idiosyncrasies and behavioral problems. Finally, you can never be judgmental until the day that you have been in these

children's circumstances. All of these things are incredibly challenging, but once they are mastered, things turn out very successful and worthwhile. I think that all of the decisions I made were well thought out and worked very well, assuring me that if I take the aspects I described earlier in mind things will turn out well.

I expect to return to Synergy Services next semester, hopefully at both Safehaven and the Synergy Offices so that I am able to help in more than one aspect of these social services. I may also try to help at the shelter for young adults on Park University campus if I feel confident enough to move on to another age group. Even though there was a period of unsure volunteering with Synergy Services, I was extremely pleased with what was accomplished in only one semester, and am very excited to return again next semester. This service learning was one of the most educating points in my college experience so far, and it is beyond any doubt that I have learned more about myself and life as a whole from these children, than they have learned from me.