

Spring 2008
Service Learning Essay: Union Station

Union Station is a historic and cultural center for the Kansas City area. During World War II, it is estimated that one third to one half of all of the soldiers passed through Union Station. The restoration of Union Station made history, being the first cause to propose (and pass) a law for a bi-state tax, showing that it is a cultural center for the entire area. Because I'm not from Kansas City, I thought that doing my service learning at Union Station would be perfect to help me to know more about such an important part of the city. I didn't know what to expect just walking in, but basically the whole Station is run by volunteers, so there are many different opportunities. I was hoping to do some work with Theatre for Young America because I'd heard such good reports from one of my classmates, but that didn't work out because there were so many other things to do.

My timing was almost perfect. Right when I enquired about doing my hours at Union Station was when they were really looking for helpers because the Bodies Revealed exhibit was coming. The exhibit can allow in 100 people every 15 minutes, so directing traffic and just generally having people around to answer questions and chat with the patrons is necessary. In fact, they brought in new volunteers specifically for Bodies, whether they planned to continue after the exhibit or not.

I went in to meet the volunteer coordinator to see how it would work out and if I could volunteer for them (and if I would enjoy it, etc.) That meeting was my first time inside the Union Station building. I entered the building and walked

up the stone stairs that were straight ahead. At the top of the stairs, looking into the grand hall was fascinating and an impressive first impression. Imagining people waiting there for trains and walking around was easy and really cool to think about. She came upstairs and we went down to her office.

There were a few different forms to fill out: background check release, personal information form, and so on, but it wasn't really an interview type situation. The coordinator told me about all of the different potential positions in Union Station. This included tours of the building, helping with theatres, working the entrance to Science City, helping at the information booth, and so on. I am just interested to be involved however I can, so pretty much everything that she talked about was something that sounded like I should try.

Because the Bodies Revealed exhibit was coming so fast, and there are so many people there, I worked mostly there. There are a few different positions there. Firstly, at the top of the escalator is a guide to point people to the exhibit but also serves as a resource for anyone there to direct them to where they need to be in the building. There are then people around the corner downstairs who check tickets which makes it much easier for people working the entrance. The next position is the "queue position." The person in that position's job is to chat with the customers while they wait and to make sure they get where they need to go and in what line they want to be in to get in during their time slot. They also direct them to the restrooms and the drinking fountain, or the gift shop if that's where they want to go while waiting. This job changed a lot from when the exhibit first arrived to the end of the semester. At first it was very important

because there were so many people, but the longer it stayed and the nicer the weather became, there was less need. People buy fewer tickets when it's not as new and when they would rather be outside. When there aren't as many people there, this position and the position right at the door can be merged. The door-guarding position is there to make sure people go inside the exhibit at the right time and to explain the rules to the customers – no gum, food, or drink. No backpacks, strollers, cell phones or photography is allowed or security *will* escort you out without a refund. The person at this position also talks (sometimes, depending on who is doing it) about one controversial room that people may want to skip and to carefully read the sign outside of it before entering or bypassing it.

The last position is the person at the end of the exhibit. They are there in case anything should happen and to instruct people who had purchased audio tours where they could return the handset. When I worked that position, I also felt it my job to wish people a good day or weekend or whatever, and ask if they liked the exhibit. Just little things sometimes leave a very lasting impression. This position is also to enforce the “no re-entry” rule. It is clearly posted right on the door, but most people just don't pay attention and so some of them attempt to come back in.

I worked at the end of the exhibit twice. It was okay, probably my least favorite of the different jobs I had because there wasn't a lot to do, often I was just sitting there by myself. There was some good people-watching though I must admit. I am very interested in human behavior and just sitting and watching

people interact with each other can teach you a lot about them, about the person with whom they are talking, and even about people in general. Another thing that was not thrilling about this position was that it was always cold. First of all we were in the basement, and secondly there was just something about that entrance that made it perpetually breezy. That sounds like such a small thing, but when you have to sit there for three and a half hours it can get kind of miserable. I didn't learn my lesson the first time; I came back in a T-shirt the next time. On my last day I remembered to wear a sweatshirt, but then I didn't work that position. It seems like that is just kind of the way things go.

I worked in the Bodies Revealed exhibit almost every time. However, one Saturday they had enough volunteers down there, but they still needed someone to work at the entrance to Science City. I really enjoyed that job because it was fun to talk to the people, but even when there weren't any people, I could do some work or read. When I arrived, I asked the volunteer I was relieving to clue me in on what to do, since I'd never worked there before. She spent over an hour explaining everything to me! It was good to have company, and I did feel very prepared. I felt bad though because I kept her from going home for that long.

Meeting new people was really the best part. I got to meet other volunteers, who were very friendly. Most of them are older, retired people that just want to get out of the house but are very interesting to talk to. I also got to "meet" the customers. I put it in quotations because I didn't really get to know anything about them but it is fun to exchange small talk with people. Short little

witty conversations give me energy. One day when I was working at the entrance to the exhibit there was a group of about four people, and two of them were in their early teens. It was fun to chat with them and cool to see how excited they were about seeing the exhibit. Working at Science City was fun, in a different way. There are a lot more smaller children there. I love small children (that's why I'm a nanny) so I loved that experience. I remember one little girl in particular, she was with her family and riding in a stroller because she was so small. I don't make the really little kids get their hands stamped usually, but if they want one I will. This girl seemed entranced by my stamp, so I gave her one and then she got all upset. I felt bad, but the parents were really nice about it and they had been excited about the stamp too. Then when they came back out she wanted me to stamp her hand again because it was coming off a little, even though they weren't going to reenter the exhibit.

I don't know if I could pinpoint one specific thing that I learned most by volunteering at Union Station. I know that I had a very enjoyable experience and I already have signed up to volunteer again this summer. One of the major things I liked and learned about was people watching, and learning more about human behavior. I also got to learn about Union Station and how it operates and what all is there. Learning the historical background of this city was certainly one of my aims and I feel that has been accomplished through this service opportunity.