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### How Do You Walk Next to a Friend?

The definition of community service is defined in the dictionary as, “a service volunteered by individuals or an organization to benefit a community or its institutions”. This definition in my opinion seems to place emphasis on its physical outcome. For example, community service may consist of an individual noticing and seeing that there is a problem or injustice in the world. That problem or injustice can be affecting an individual or a group of people. Then, the individual who notices the problem makes a moral commitment and contract in his mind and heart to try to do whatever he can in his power to somehow change it for the better. The other side to this same definition is, that for the person or group of persons who are the ones in actuality going through the affects of this problem, they in turn may teach those helping them such attributes as courage, strength, compassion, kindness, and friendship.

Community service really is a two-way street because it illustrates that neither side of community service is a “taker.” For example, as stated before, there is the individual who sees the problem and then there is the individual engulfed *in the problem* waiting for a helpful hand. However, neither side ever *takes* anything from the situation. Both sides, in perfect harmony, *give* to each other. Giving to each other without wanting to get anything back is where in lies the beauty of community service. Because both sides of community service give at the same time, they are able to achieve amazing outcomes creating solutions to fix certain problems.

The way I came to learn how community service works began when I was a freshman here at UMass. While trying to find my niche at such a large school, I looked for programs and Registered Student Organizations (RSO's), that I felt were fun to participate in, but in the end, also served a greater cause. By my second semester at UMass I found The Boltwood Project which has changed my life; but, more importantly, it has changed the lives of many individuals who are still, for the most part, neglected and ignored by our society because of their mental, physical, and social disabilities.

The Boltwood Project is a community service outreach learning program offered by UMass within the Department of Landscape Architecture & Regional Planning; and, also having Registered Student Organization status. The Boltwood Project currently consists of fifteen groups of students who work with individuals who are mentally or physically challenged who live in the greater Amherst area. Each of the fifteen groups of UMass students goes to its group location once a week and provides a planned program for the participants who live there. While working with the participants, the student led groups do multiple activities such as potting plants, making caramel apples, games, crafts, music-related activities and various seasonal parties. They also partake in off-site fieldtrips in and around Amherst such as hayrides, bowling, visits to the mall, Yankee Candle, the Butterfly Museum, and Look Park.

The purpose of The Boltwood Project is essentially two-fold. The first goal is to provide opportunities for recreation and social-oriented activities as well as general skill development for individuals who are mentally and physically challenged (one group works with children of families temporarily displaced). Secondly, it provides university students with the opportunity to gain experiential education with human service organizations. The end result is a mutually beneficial experience for students and

residents of the surrounding communities. The Boltwood Project was started over thirty-five years ago and has offered students a chance to work with some very deserving people over those many years.

From the second semester of my freshman year to the present time as a junior, I have participated in every leadership position The Boltwood Project has to offer. I started as a volunteer leader at what is known as The Hollow (a Department of Mental Retardation sponsored Group Home for adults), volunteering once a week with some folks who became very special friends. I then served as the Supervisor of the Group working at The Hollow, and was responsible for planning and directing the activities for participants and student volunteers to take part in. I next interviewed for, and was selected by the Faculty Director to serve as the Assistant Coordinator for The Boltwood Project (i.e.- responsible for budgeting and assisting in directing the entire program of approximately 125 students each semester).

In the fall semester of 2005, I became the Coordinator of The Boltwood Project, responsible for directing (under the auspices of the faculty director), all aspects of this community service learning program. Each of these positions that I held had different responsibilities and therefore demanded different learning opportunities - such as organizational skills, developing management strategies, directing peers, and funding and program creativity. I loved being a Volunteer because I got to work one-on-one with newly made “friends” at The Hollow. It taught me how to communicate in ways other than verbally, and to guide and not take over a project for someone who has special difficulties. By working as a volunteer, I also learned a lot about myself - and how fortunate we are in our society.

As a Supervisor, through organizing and preparing program at The Hollow, I learned how to adapt the program to the disabilities or challenges faced by the participants, as well as to recognize the importance of providing age-appropriate activities. In our society many people feel that mentally challenged adults should be playing with children's toys because it keeps them occupied. However, if that participant is 52 (chronological age), he should have age-appropriate activities that do not degrade his or her character because of his disability. As mentioned previously, The Boltwood Project strives to provide interaction with people with disabilities who have limited interaction because of their life situations.

Coordinating The Boltwood Project has helped me to learn why programs such as this (which are based upon the purpose of community service) are so important. While leading this student organization in volunteering with people who are mentally and physically challenged, I have learned how to organize, implement, and follow through on projects that serve a greater good, whether as a volunteer leader planting flowers for the first time with someone who has never been able to partake in that activity, or as the student coordinator recruiting new volunteers to join The Boltwood Project.

The personal learning that I have gone through in The Boltwood project has been immensely eye opening. I learned as a volunteer that those among us with disabilities are just the same as anybody else and want to be thought of and treated like normal people. Just because they have a certain disability or disadvantage doesn't mean they are any less a person than you or me. All of the participants we get to work with through The Boltwood Project let us into their lives and also teach us a great deal about ourselves. Some wise person once said, "When someone allows you to bear his burdens, you have found deep friendship". As a result of working with the program participants through

The Boltwood Project, I have learned how to help them, and more importantly how to appreciate them. Sitting with someone who can only communicate through his or her eyes helps you learn to bear their pain, joy, and happiness through their eyes. Then, when the connection of friendship is made, they allow you into their life so that you may bear all they have to bear alongside them.

Unlike a lot of volunteer programs, The Boltwood Project requires that its volunteers reflect weekly on their experience in a submitted weekly journal. Through these journals, students are able to see what they did and how it affected the participants with whom they spend time. We learn what activities they like, what they dislike, and what they would rather do. Each day we spend time with them, we learn a little about them (and perhaps even more about ourselves). Each day, you progress further, closing the gap of ignorance towards those with disabilities. Walking away from The Boltwood Project, you can apply your experience of learning to communicate non-verbally, how to soothe pain that cannot be explained in words, and how to be a friend to those who want nothing more of us.

My experience with The Boltwood Project and what we strive to do through community service illustrates what compassion can resolve. In my life personally, community service is now a daily activity. Coordinating The Boltwood Project is a part-time responsibility that I take with extreme seriousness and tremendous personal satisfaction. Taking an academic load of over eighteen credits a semester; working an internship at Fidelity Investments, Inc. during all of my vacations and semester breaks from school; working part time at the Undergraduate Admissions Office at UMass while also attending classes; and, reflecting on all of my other activities here at UMass, I can

truly say my most rewarding accomplishment has been working with The Boltwood Project.

I would like to share a story that was told by an invited speaker for one of our seminars from The Boltwood Project. The story was of a boy in the 1950's who got a bad cold, which attacked his brain and left him paralyzed and immobile. The doctors at this time said in his medical records that he was “retarded”. And, because his parents couldn’t take care of him in their home, they sent him to Belchertown State Hospital, essentially an institution for those labeled as “retarded”. He stayed there until it was closed down in the 1990s; however, one day a volunteer saw in this boy’s eyes that he wanted to communicate with him. The volunteer created a placemat which you would see on a kitchen table, but put pictures on it of food, water, a happy face, numbers, etc. The boy who was labeled as “retarded”, communicated for the rest of his life by pointing to pictures on his placemat laid out on his wheelchair.

Because, there was one volunteer who took time out of his life to spend time with someone who had no one else; he created the opportunity for that boy to communicate and have a conversation again. The challenge that anyone faces working in this type of community service is how to create a “placemat” for those who are challenged, and to teach them how to use it. I believe that one must learn to walk, not in front or behind, but beside those who need help. By doing this together, you can create a “placemat” of accomplishments! What better reason for community service learning opportunities?