Service Learning at Plymouth Place: Not The Average Retirement Home

I used to believe that retirement homes were solely for ill and elderly people. That is, however, until I realized that there are so many more activities that take place in retirement homes, not just the typical eating, sleeping, and occasionally watching television, often associated with retirement homes. I have always had an outstanding and solid relationship with my grandparents so I wanted to outwardly do something to help them more readily ease into the aging process. I would play cards with them, do puzzles, and talk, for what seemed like eternity with them. Although one of my grandparents has passed away, and another is ill, I noted that I wanted to bring the same joy to other elderly people as I did with my grandparents. Therefore, when I was given the opportunity to do Service Learning for the Scholars Program, without hesitance, I knew a retirement home would be completely ideal for my participation in this event. The retirement home I chose to do my Service Learning was Plymouth Place, located in LaGrange, Illinois. In high school, I had experience with this specific retirement home because I informally volunteered through my best friend's mother, the Director of Services at Plymouth Place. Furthermore, I chose Plymouth Place because I was familiar with the environment. I knew I could make a difference in someone's day. However, before I started to do my Service Learning at Plymouth Place, my preconceptions included helping the residents and being as attentive to them as humanly possible. I anticipated that I would make someone smile every day I was present.

When I arrived for the interview in early September, I was approached by a woman named Susan Wensel. She mentioned to me that my previous experience at Plymouth Place was never officially recorded, and I never filled out an application. Therefore, during the interview, I filled out a volunteer application, and from there, numerous questions were asked, both on her part and mine. The interview felt like a job interview because I had to give information that an employer would need, including my address, previous work experience, school experience, and why I wanted this position. After Mrs. Wensel and I discussed my schedule and hours when I would volunteer, I immediately felt welcomed at Plymouth Place. The vibe that the retirement home gave off was one of comfort and security. My overall reactions to the interview, interviewer, and site, were positive because I felt that Plymouth Place was a retirement home that truly cared about its residents. Furthermore, an interesting and physical aspect of Plymouth Place is that it is enormous. It looks like a gigantic mansion and feels like a home because people care about other people here. There is even a wonderful gift shop, beautiful dining areas, a rather large activity hall, balconies, and patios. The residence is massive in size and there are numerous occupants.

Since I volunteered on every Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday, between September 9, and October 21, I had set days to do certain activities. On Tuesdays, I would normally play Scrabble with a few women who I later dubbed my "Scrabble Buddies". They noticed that my vocabulary skills had improved tremendously because I started to beat them by more than fifty points a game. Also on many Tuesdays, I would visit in the "Mezzanine unit", where the majority of the Alzheimer's patients reside. I particularly liked this floor because I found some extremely interesting people with whom I could talk about a variety of topics.

On Fridays, I bowled with the residents, made root beer floats, and served them. This is not the typical bowling style; since the residents could not go bowling every Friday afternoon, we brought the bowling to them. It consisted of a long table, plastic pins, and a rubber ball. Everyone would smile and clap along with me when someone bowled a "strike". At one point, they even asked me to bowl. I bowled a "strike", and all the residents who participated in this activity, had smiles on their faces and cheered me on. Many of them looked forward to bowling every Friday because they knew that they would get root beer floats once bowling ended for the day. Making root beer floats for hundreds of people was quite an experience. Even though the ice cream was too hard and cold most of the time, and the demand for root beer floats increased every week, I continued to feel good about making the residents happy, even if it meant having a cramped hand and wrist for three days.

On Saturdays, I would do a number of different activities. One Saturday afternoon, there was a ninety-fourth birthday bash, in which I served refreshments to the residents. However, many Saturdays, I painted the nails of women residents. The first brave soul that had her nails painted by me was impressed with my talent. She thought I should pursue a career in nail painting, yet I told her my future aspirations were to be in the Journalism field. She thought that might be a better idea.

I felt that all of the activities and duties I participated in were eventful and purposeful. Mostly everyone had fun, including me. As time progressed, I felt that the Service Learning hours were less and less like work, and more and more of a wonderful opportunity to experience helping others. There was not one duty I did not like. I even enjoyed wheeling residents in their wheelchair from floor to floor, despite my fear of elevators. I thought I did well at every activity with the residents because I never received a complaint, only a smile or a hug. In addition, my reaction to the site's clients and visitors was what I expected it to be. The clients and visitors were friendly (being as many were the children or relatives of a resident), and they produced an overall positive effect. I knew that a safe and welcoming community, such as the community of Plymouth Place, would nevertheless accommodate any and all clients and visitors. My reaction was not something other than I expected it to be. I knew Plymouth Place had welcomed me and it would likely welcome everyone else that walked through its doors. It was intriguing to see that the foundation of Plymouth Place is in the happiness of the residents. However, when both employees and residents come together, it is evident that they truly care about what they do, and special bonds are formed. It is almost as if Plymouth Place is an undiscovered city; once the sliding entrance doors open, it is a whole new world. It is a world of chance, opportunity, and new experiences for

residents and employees.

There are a number of examples in which I worked with the clients (residents) of Plymouth Place. However, there are two specific instances that stick with me. The first instance deals with being introduced to a woman who was hard of hearing. I began to speak with an elderly woman on my first Friday. She refused to bowl after I asked her on several accounts. She said she did not feel well. So I talked with her and she told me how nice it would be if there were a dance (or "ball") she could go to; she would wear a ball gown and dance all night. Within the next couple of weeks, I would see her and ask her how she was feeling. From then on, she would tell me how great she was and how well she was feeling. Also, I asked her if she would like to bowl and she said yes. The employees were impressed because they knew she never bowled, but somehow she suddenly wanted to. She was good! She bowled a strike her third time up. Needless to say, this is something she will most likely carry on every Friday afternoon. This affected me because I realized that by talking to one person, I could learn so much in so little time. I had helped her to see that it was indeed possible to be happy and still enjoy simple activities in life.

The second example of working with a resident dealt with the woman whose nails I first painted. She was my first "customer" and she did not know what to expect. I let her pick out her nail polish color, and from there, we got into a variety of different topics such as Chicago baseball, the weather, and our families and friends. Before I knew it, I had finished painting her nails. She was so happy with her nails that she asked me if I wanted money and how much she should give me. I simply told her my services were free and how I was glad that she liked her nails. They did indeed look lovely because they were a brilliant shade of pink. Every time after that, she flashed me her nails and told me how many compliments she would get. I saw her almost every time I went to Plymouth Place, and she always thanked me for brightening her life. This affected me because I saw the way in which I impacted her life, even if it was only for a short time. She was truly sincere and grateful, and I began to understand just how important the little instances in life are.

Based on my entire fifty-one hours of Service Learning at Plymouth Place Retirement Home, I decided that I could change a small portion of my life in future decisions and behaviors. I have learned to appreciate small experiences since they too have important lessons and meaning behind them. In the future, I will aspire to be more appreciative and patient, two aspects, which are important in a retirement home community. Small experiences are significant because they have the power to impact large decisions and actions. They may be either positive or negative, but there is always something to gain in every experience. I intend on returning to this site because of the positive outcome of the entire Service Learning process. When next year comes, I will continue to stay in contact with the Volunteer Service Coordinator and try to attend any activity that I can.

Ultimately, reflecting on my entire Service Learning participation, the overall effect was positive for both the community and myself. I dedicated time to the

community while the community taught me patience and how to appreciate life. Through my experience, I saw that the benefits were quite rewarding because everybody gained from Service Learning. Furthermore, I did not expect to learn the names and faces of the residents, but they have certainly remained in my memory. Every resident was unique, had stories to share, and wisdom to learn from. A handful of the residents were even over the age of one hundred! That was fascinating to me because they were still able to function and be typical human beings despite the fact that they had over a century of history and experiences to share. I further learned that simple events in life, such as playing games or having a conversation with someone, are extremely important. Plymouth Place is not the average retirement home. Many people believe that a retirement home is the same as a nursing home because some residents are not able to independently perform tasks. While that is true in some cases, it is certainly not true in the Plymouth Place community. Residents are encouraged to independently do as much as they possibly can, in a positive atmosphere, where employees and other residents encourage the individual. There is a birthday celebration once a month for every birthday during that month. Dancing and singing are generally essential, and employees genuinely establish friendly relationships with the residents. Looking back at all my hours of Service Learning, I can truthfully say that I will remember this assisted living retirement home for its good values and warm greetings. There will always be a place in my heart for the entire community of Plymouth Place Retirement Home.