The Sun Does Shine on Shriners Hospitals for Children

I definitely began with such a tumultuous start. At first I thought about the convenience of doing community service. This project should be fairly simple considering the amount of community service that I had previously done. All I needed to do was to complete twenty-four hours. My main mission was to finish and never look back. Consequently, I looked for the easiest outlet. Originally, I was referred to a program on campus known as the Access to Literacy-Adult Basic Learning. Naturally, I wrote the required essay and completed my application on time. After my submission, I had the pleasure of speaking with an Access to Literacy administrator who kindly assisted me with the process. She clearly indicated that training would begin no later than November and ensured me of the plentiful hours I would receive. The whole process could not have been any sweeter. I would simply maintain my usual routine of working, studying, participating in extracurricular activities, but with the additional community service.

However, as time passed the cooler weather of November approached, and I still had not heard any updates from my service-learning partner. Naturally, I marched myself to the office and requested to speak with the administrator. To my unfortunate luck, training was not offered this semester. Somewhere in between bureaucracy and its unavoidable blunders, my service hours were lost in translation. By this time, mid-November arrived, and I desperately needed to find a new place to volunteer. As result, I stumbled upon a hidden gem just fifteen minutes away from school. If it was not for what my mom would call “a blessing in disguise,” I would not have become a caring volunteer at Shriners Hospitals for Children-Chicago.
The first day I volunteered compares to a kindergartner’s first day of school. I perceived the new experience with an inquisitive, yet cautious, mind, observing all around me. I was not too sure of what to expect that day, but instantly, I walked into a colorful hospital that only a child’s imagination could possibly invent. To the left of me was this large cubical mass decorated with exotic animals such as zebras and elephants. I thought, “The kids must adore it because of its zany patterns.” I felt calm and relieved to be in such an open environment. The interior designer did an excellent job of creating a clean and kid-oriented space. The atmosphere of the hospital truly welcomes its patients.

After my eyes quickly surveyed the lobby, Joanne the receptionist warmly greeted me and paged “Elise to the front desk”. She then introduced me to the Director of Public Relations and Volunteers, Ms. Elise Wachspress. Ms. Wachspress appeared as a quirky and happy lady eager to please, yet purposeful with her every move. I smiled, shook her hand, and replied with how nice it was to meet her too. We then proceeded into the administrative wing of the hospital. At this time, Ms. Wachspress was expressing how wonderful it was to have a new volunteer and how much there is to do. I was already excited and could not wait to start.

She began with a brief tour of Shriners and explained the different areas. Shriners Hospitals for Children consists of a two-story facility that promotes its mission through quality health care and a family-oriented environment. The hospital is fully equipped with four operating rooms, an outpatient clinic examination area, and a comprehensive rehabilitation center. The atrium, one of my favorite places, overlooks the hospital backyard through floor to ceiling windows that truly embrace the day. On one side, the towering castle stands where children can play with plush pillows and a complete train set. Behind it is a beautiful animal mural created by art students of a local school. This room, known to the Shriners community as the “mall,” hosts
various activities for the children such as games, wheelchair basketball, and other daily events. Other features that the hospital includes are its fully staffed café, game room dedicated by Britney Spears, and a wing with other rooms designed just for the patients’ parents who want to stay overnight. The facility is beautiful.

Viewing the place, my zeal and confidence grew. I was excited to volunteer because the environment exudes “home” and especially to the young patients. It is no wonder why so many dedicated employees and fellow volunteers continue to work there.

After my tour, Ms. Wachspress and I sat down to complete the rest of the application process and to go over some of my training. She initially handed me the “Mandatory Inservice Review Information for Volunteers” training guide. My first line of duties was to read this and make sure that I am knowledgeable of standard precautions (SP).

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), healthcare providers, volunteers, and remaining staff must implement these standards to reduce the risk of contracting blood-born disease (e.g. Hepatitis B, AIDS, etc.) Open cuts, accidental injury by a sharp contaminated object, and indirect transmission (i.e. transferring material to eyes, nose, etc.) can all cause contract of these diseases. Following the proper procedure of hand washing represents the best way to prevent the spread of infection. I actually apply this technique whenever possible. Perhaps this has made me slightly compulsive, but one can never be too cautious; germs are everywhere. More training consisted of how to respond to hazards such as fires. Always apply RACE. Rescue patients from immediate danger if possible. Pull the nearest “Alarm,” Close all windows and doors, and “Extinguish” the fire. R, A, and C, are the ones I truly need to know since the professionals (firefighters) would extinguish the fire. Other
precautions included when to notify security and injury prevention, all of which I was reemphasized in my training exam. Already, I felt responsible as a Shriners volunteer.

She then continued to explain the different patients. Since the hospital specializes in pediatrics, the patients range from infants to adolescents. Shriners Hospital usually treats any child with spina bifida, limb deficiencies, and other neuro/orthopedic disorders. The hospital’s expertise encompasses virtually all reconstructive, plastic, and orthopedic injury. Race and socioeconomic status does not matter; Shriners only desires to give the best healthcare to a sick child at no cost. Shriners Hospitals for Children represent the only hospitals in the world that are funded by complete philanthropy. I gradually realized the magnitude of this service through my responsibilities.

Ms. Wachspress put me in charge of different activities. As the Director of Public Relations, her main focus entails writing and handling all of the hospital’s media. She frequently writes articles for publications, conducts interviews, in addition to her role as the essential link to all the donors. I edited the copy for the volunteers brochure. As an ongoing project, the volunteers and I signed hundreds of Christmas cards to Shriners’ donors. Every year Shriners produces a new Christmas card, designed by a patient, and sends it to each of their benefactors, including patients’ families. Indeed, the repetition of labeling, stuffing, and sealing envelopes can have a droning effect over time; however, the spirit of gratitude surpasses its monotony. The cards are actually cute. They usually depict the kids in a fun and wintery scene.

I consider myself a nomadic volunteer. I am the volunteer that does the odd jobs. Most of my hours were dedicated to the Christmas cards. Sometimes I would migrate to other departments and partake in clerical work. For instance, I filed spiral bound synopses of the hospital’s renovation plans. The hospital was established in 1980. The facility represents one of
I also completed some accounting. I was given stacks of food tickets and receipts from the cafeteria. I sorted them according to the payee and the date and ultimately calculated the tabs for the entire month. This was definitely a tedious task, especially when using an obsolete calculator with a paper scroll. I would have preferred to create a spreadsheet with the tabulations. One, this action would preserve the data on a hard drive and secondly, it would alleviate any possibility of losing receipts compiled on one sheet. Instead, I was instructed to tabulate the totals and write the corresponding names and numbers of people who bought something from the cafeteria. Can you imagine, ripping individual sheets of two-inched squares per each day in November? In addition to, I needed to document these three times for particular groups. There are thirty days in that month. This is what another lady from a department had demonstrated. I was convinced that there must be a quicker and more efficient solution to this task. Eventually, I formed three main receipts that corresponded to categorized groups and annotated the notes along the sides of them. Nevertheless, I finished. When I had returned my work, Karen, who gave me the project, was grateful. Bless her heart! Accuracy, efficiency, and most of all determination were lessons learned for the day.

To my dismay, I barely shared any quality time with the children. Some interaction was integrated when I acted as hostess for a Saturday event. I woke up at seven o’clock that morning to meet Ms. Wachspress at eight. She gave me a list of things to do. In addition to various mailing, I greeted and welcomed the International Lyons Club to Shriners, then assisted them with all their belongings. Ms. Wachspress said to act as if I owned the place. I was the Queen of
PR (Public Relations). That was my favorite day. I escorted the Lyons members to the cafeteria and mall. We discussed our advocacies of volunteerism.

For the last twenty-six years, the Lyons have come with adorning presents for the children of Shriners. They would bring snacks, various trinkets, and Santa Claus would distribute the gifts. Also, Shriners of the actual “Shriner Fraternity” that established the series of hospitals participated in the event. They dressed in full Scottish attire and played a solid repertoire of songs. I am pleased to express that this was the first time I had seen a live bagpipe and drumming ensemble. The bagpipes are somewhat of a peculiar instrument; nevertheless, the Shriners played with charismatic pride.

In between my activities, I spoke with Syrus, a retired secondary teacher who works part time as a security guard of Shriners Hospital. He reminisced about his experience during the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s. When he was about my age, Rosa Parks had been stirring controversy. He frequently participated in bus boycotts and other protests. Fortunately, he was able to receive college education on a full scholarship. Especially as African-American at the time, this phenomenon was stringently limited. In exchange, I shared my discoveries of contemporary African-American oppression that I was forming into a research paper. The conversation eventually bubbled over to other fascinating discussion. When I returned the following day, Ms. Wachspress had indicated that he left such a positive review. Syrus had recommended me as the permanent Public Relations Director. At this time, Ms. Wachspress and I were engrossed in laughter.

I have learned so much from this brief service learning activity. These inspired individuals of Shriners Hospitals for Children-Chicago have taught me compassion, diligence, and most of all commitment. Everyday the Shriner community interacts with kindness to each
other. They have genuine hearts that brightening the smiles of the children. The Shriners family truly excels at making a difference. Just recently, Ms. Wachspress has invited me to become a permanent volunteer in her department. I will be writing articles for some of the publications. I am excited and cannot wait. Through this experience, these ambassadors of kindness not only inspire me to carry out the dedication and discipline of a student, but to live as a person with integrity and compassion.