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Despite its common perception, community service is not just about serving others, extending a helping hand to someone in need, or performing a random act of kindness. Community service, I have come to learn, is much more. Through volunteering with an open mind and ability to empathize, a barrier of ignorance toward humanity can be broken, and a better understanding of your neighbor can be achieved.

Though the lessons that I've learned from volunteer experiences over the course of this year are innumerable, three values that have undoubtedly made the greatest impact on me are developing patience, confirming my career ambition to pursue a Doctor of Pharmacy Degree, and realizing that through volunteering with an open mind, a superiority imbalance between those serving and those being served will not be generated.

Through volunteering in the Emergency Room at the Madison Medical Campus, I have had the pleasure of meeting new people on a daily basis. The problem with meeting new people inside of a hospital however is that they are not always in the greatest mood when you first greet them and later try to work with them. I experienced this firsthand when I tried to help Becky, my supervisor as you can see up on the screen, collect and verify patients' information on a day where the Emergency Room was busy. I went into a man's room with my clipboard of information that he previously had on file as I normally would so that I could ask all of the same questions and see if all information was still the same. If not, I would take note of the updated information and relay it back to Becky so she could enter the updated information into the system. Nonetheless, because the hospital was busy, I was looking to get into this man's room, verify his information, and get out as soon as I could. The man on the other hand, had other intentions. When I asked the man if he had a living will power of attorney, he simply answered, "yes". So I asked the man if his living will power of attorney had a name, and again, he simply answered, "yes". Growing frustrated due to the small amount of patience I possess, I asked the man if he wanted to share the name of his living will power of attorney so that it would be on file in case he ever needed to be contacted in an emergency. The man answered, "yes". Infuriated at this point, I asked the man to share the name of his living will power of attorney. The man answered, "John". With my patience now nonexistent, I asked the man if "John" had a last name. He replied, "yeah, but I'm really not sure what it is. He works up the street though". Aggravated that I had wasted time with this man to get a worthless answer, I scribbled down "John Up the Street" on the phase sheet, and stormed out of the room.

It was not until weeks later that I came to realize that working directly with the public means that they are not always going to cooperate with me, because they are not obligated to follow the schedule that I set for myself. I realized that even though I may have a series of tasks to complete by the time my shift is over, if I am taking the time to make rounds to all of the rooms, I should already have plenty of time set aside for patients in anticipation of them taking a while to work with me for whatever reason. I learned

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., an American jurist of the early 1900's, once said, "A person's mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions". Through this quote, and the time that I spent volunteering inside of the Emergency Room in small-town Madison, as well as a battered women's and children's shelter in downtown Chicago, I have come to the ultimate conclusion that community service possesses the capability of replacing judgment with tolerance through empathy.

In the beginning of my service experience at the hospital, patients would come and go and I would not pay much mind to what it was that they must be going through. It was not until I helped a little old lady who had fallen on a cement sidewalk and completely busted her head and knees open that I realized it was my duty as a volunteer to offer the most welcoming care to her as possible. As the little old lady hobbled up to the window, completely drenched in blood and quivering, I did not hesitate to rush to the doors and take her straight back to a room. I helped the little lady up onto the bed, covering myself in her blood, and made sure that she was all situated and comfortable before anyone came into the room to question her and prep her for care. What I learned through this little old lady was that if it were I that had suffered that fall and was in need of medical care, I would expect only the best from an Emergency Room. I put myself into this little old lady's shoes in an effort to see where she was coming from so I could offer the best treatment, and it was from then on that I did not hesitate to empathize with patients so that I could relate to their pain and thus, provide the best assistance possible.

Before volunteering at Su Casa in Chicago, Illinois, my blatant ignorance had led me to believe that individuals were homeless because they were too lazy to get a job, or too strung out on drugs and alcohol to make anything of their lives. Families were homeless because they were stuck in a cycle of poverty and did not possess the will power to make it out. What I had failed to realize however, was that I had absolutely no idea what the women at Su Casa had experienced or what their children had witnessed, so to judge their reason for homelessness was far from just. One boy, Ricky, was the biggest handful because of how much energy he possessed and how happy he was. While his mother was in recovery in the hospital, and his father was nowhere to be found, Ricky was moving out of Su Casa the night that we had arrived. Ricky, his future dream dog Packy, and his imaginary football were more than enough to keep himself entertained for hours. I was amazed at how happy Ricky was despite his lack of materialistic items, as well as how much he knew when I played trivial games with him. Ricky was not the volatile, temperamental child that could care less about education that I had expected him to be due to the time he spent living on the streets and being a victim of poverty and homelessness. Ricky seemed to not have a single care in the world, and I'm not sure that I will ever see a smile as big as his for as long as I live. Through Ricky and the life that he led, I not only realized that homelessness can affect anyone, but you never know all that a poverty-stricken person, like Ricky, is capable of.

If there is one lesson that I can take away from all of my volunteer experiences this past year, it's that community service does not merely benefit those you are serving. Community service, I strongly believe, is the only gateway that possesses the potential to break down barriers of ignorance and encourage tolerance of the world around you. Dali Lama once said, "I believe all suffering is caused by ignorance. People inflict pain on others in the selfish pursuit of their happiness or satisfaction. Yet true happiness comes from a sense of peace and contentment, which in turn must be achieved through the cultivation of altruism, of love and compassion, and elimination of ignorance, selfishness, and greed". I have come to understand that if you serve with an open mind free of prejudice, you will possess the ability to empathize with whom you are serving, and that is what allows for lessons to be learned and ignorance to be broken. Ultimately, the possibilities of service and the awareness it embodies are endless. It is just up to how you approach community service in order to appreciate all that it can offer.