

Margaret Slechta

Groninga

College Writing and Research

30 April 2009

Pouring, Rinsing, Scrubbing, Sanitizing: Volunteering

For my volunteer service project I volunteered at the Hartman Reserve Nature Center Maple Syrup Festival. This event is a two-day celebration where homemade syrup is honored as a miraculous topping for pancakes. People of all ages attend the festival: young children with their parents and old farmers with their wives share in the festivities. I helped at the festival both days, each day a different task. On the first day, my main mission was cup duty. I would serve people drinks and refill their glasses. On the second day, I tackled dishes in the kitchen and learned how to run the old faithful “sanitizer”. It was quite an experience and I was able to share in the happiness of people simply enjoying themselves in the small, communal environment.

When I arrived on the first day, I walked into chaos. People were scattered about in one long line, eyeing the pancakes and drooling as they waited for their turn to eat and indulge in the delicious syrup. Volunteers madly ran around trying to keep everything organized and clean as people came and went in the dining area. A park ranger who was in charge told me I would be taking over cup duty. When I heard that, I was ecstatic. I didn't really want to bus tables and I am definitely not a fan of doing dishes. The previous volunteer for cup duty left and I took over. It was an easy task; I just filled drinks of choice for those in attendance. There was the occasional milk and water spills or the hand scalding from the coffee or hot cup, but nothing was

life-threatening. It was rewarding to see everyone talking and laughing. It made me feel happy and carefree. I let go of the stress from school and focused on being cheerful, one cup at a time.

After the first day, I was looking forward to returning to my job on cup duty. However, I wasn't that fortunate. On the second day I was assigned to kitchen duty. I entered the kitchen with a bad attitude and prepared myself for the worst. I worked as "the rinser" rinsing the syrup and pancake leftovers off the plates. Then I became "scrubber" scrubbing the sticky gunk on the plates, and finally I loaded the "sanitizer", a beast of an old dish washer that steamed and leaked water everywhere. When I first began, I didn't think the day would end. However, to my surprise, my attitude changed. I actually had fun working in the kitchen. Rather than interacting with people who came for the pancakes, I interacted with people who came to help.

Many of the people in the kitchen were volunteers so immediately we all shared a common bond. One old gentleman, named Gene, talked to me the entire time. He was a grandpa-like figure and we talked about college, family, and volunteering. He said he volunteers everywhere just for fun. He even knew the Cedar Valley volunteer website by heart. I was amazed that this old man wanted and was able to give so much back to the community. There needs to be more people like him in the world, and he inspired me to volunteer even more. For example, one day I was out on a run and passed two elderly ladies bending over in their yard raking and picking up leaves. I ran past, but then ran back, and offered to help them. They were both a bit shocked and surprised, but they accepted my help. I refused the money they offered, and I gained the simple satisfaction of helping another. The feeling of helping someone creates a drug-like euphoria that feels amazing.

Working at the maple syrup festival was a rewarding and fun experience I would definitely do again. I didn't save a life or even change a life, but I did put smiles on all the faces of those who celebrated a commonality: their love of pancakes and syrup. I also really liked the interaction I had between the other volunteers who were there just to help because they love to help others. I have come to realize how much work goes into organizing events like this, and I want to continue my assistance at other public events. This summer I will volunteer at a unique event in my home town. Also, in the future I want to volunteer with projects in my career as a speech pathologist for elementary students. By volunteering my services at schools and hospitals or by just working with children in play activities, I will gain a significant and rewarding life skill: the importance of giving of self for the benefit of others.