The Listening House Experience

The community service activity I engaged in was volunteering at The Listening House (TLH), which serves the homeless. TLH is a soup kitchen and more, located in downtown St. Paul. Their mission has several components: 1) provide a place for homeless people to go in between the daytime and nighttime hours at the Dorothy Day center 2) listen to and offer friendship to the homeless people 3) provide the people with limited food and supplies such as hats, gloves and jackets. I chose this activity in large part because my mentor, Donna McCarthy, volunteers there and recommended it. I also chose it because I enjoy connecting with new people and striking up friendships and conversations with all sorts of people, and felt I would be able to serve the people at TLH by treating them with respect and listening to them with dignity. Lastly, I volunteered at TLH because I felt if I was too busy to volunteer and serve others, then I was just plain too busy. I have a very busy, fun schedule with work, classes at Carlson, playing volleyball, socializing and visiting with relatives. There’s no good reason why I can’t make time to serve others, too, so I committed to it and made it happen. I volunteered at TLH three different evenings, going directly after work and staying each night from 5 – 8 p.m. I will now share some of my experiences there.

My first evening there I arrived around 4:45pm and saw a dozen people lined up, waiting to enter. Apparently the doors don’t open until 5, so the homeless people often gather outside and wait. I parked my car across the street and walked up to the door, only to find it locked. One of the guys said pleasantly, “You must be a volunteer.” I said yes, and he informed me the doors were closed until 5 and I should call Jodie – my volunteer contact, if I had to get in before. Since it was my first evening and I had to go through some paperwork and orientation prior to
beginning my volunteering, I did call Jodie to get let in early. When she didn’t answer, I walked back to sit in my car, as it was raining outside. It quickly occurred to me how ironic this was: Here I was coming to serve the homeless, and as soon as I couldn’t get inside, I go back to sit in my car. Meanwhile, the number of homeless folks standing around the front entrance, in the rain, has grown to 20. I realized that my car would be incredibly valuable to any one of them. It would be better than anything they own; it would provide them a shelter; it would vastly improve their conditions. And to me, it’s an old, dingeld-up Dodge Neon. When Jodie called me back a few minutes later, I made my way through the line of people up to the locked front door, where she met and let me in – a second instance of unearned privileged and I haven’t even been there 10 minutes. Inside, Jodie showed me around a large living room with a TV, a sink and kitchen area, a handful of tables and sofas, a front desk, several small rooms and a couple messy back offices. Behind the front desk were several closets and many supplies: vitamins, aspirins, socks, gloves, hats, small bottles of Vaseline, guitars, checkerboards and decks of cards. My job, I learned, would be to distribute the supplies appropriately when various people asked for items. There was a system for how many aspirins a person could get and how they checked out a guitar by leaving some form of identification. It was interesting to hear about, and even more interesting to see first-hand when they opened the doors.

At 5 p.m. sharp, a flood of people rushed through the doors. Most stopped in the living room, which was closest to the entrance, but many came into the back where I was stationed at the desk. The first person I served was a younger woman – I’d guess in her 20s, looked like someone just out of college, like myself – who leaned over and whispered to me, “I need a Tampon.” I turned and asked the TLH staff member who was also at the desk where they were, and she pointed me where to go and retrieved it for her. As soon as I gave it to her, she thanked
me and covered it up in her hand so nobody else would see it. I’d say about 60 to 70 percent of
the people were male. It was interesting how discreet this woman wanted to be about her request.
It makes all the sense in the world, certain things are going to be private to people no matter their
conditions, and it immediately reinforced that all people need and deserve some degree of
privacy. It also made me sad that this woman needed to go through the uncomfortable experience
of asking a stranger to give her a Tampon. She shouldn’t have to be reduced to asking a stranger
to help her with basic personal hygiene. On the flip side, it’s fortunate that she has someone,
ableit a random volunteer, who she can ask. It at least underscores one aspect of the service TLH
provides people.

I learned a little and a lot about the homeless people TLH serves while volunteering
there, handing out food, Vaseline, aspirins (2 per person at first) and cough drops (maximum of 4
per person). In many regards I learned little – I’m no expert on homelessness and I don’t
understand the homeless as a result of volunteering a few evenings; I can’t comprehend what it’s
like. In some ways, however, I learned much. I learned that some homeless people are like me,
and many (a strong majority) are not. I saw a lot of people whose behavior clearly does not fit in
with the norm according to society – people who talked to themselves here and there, had some
sort of disability or drastically different way of carrying themselves. The most common thing I
saw were people whose eyes appeared kind of buggy. But many of the people at TLH looked
very “normal” or appeared like regular folks just a little down on their luck. Some seemed
decently educated; I talked about various books and favorite authors with a handful of folks.
Sometimes I questioned the veracity of what these people told me – I wondered in the back of
my head how many of these people were lying to me as they told me about various things
they’ve done in the past regarding jobs and travels and “impressive” sounding experiences. Who knows? Maybe not as many as I might think.

I felt I gradually warmed up and did a better job of connecting casually with these people – but by no means was I any expert, nor did I ever much leave the “safety” of the desk. I was indeed able to casually learn about people’s background without being obtrusive, but I was not fully cross the barrier into their lives. There seemed an unofficial, understood barrier between the front of the desk and the back of the desk. The TLH staff members moved freely between the lines, visiting with people, shaking their hands, patting them on the back. I stayed behind the desk almost all the time. If I continue to volunteer there, I’d like to change that. In many ways I feel the homeless in St. Paul do not receive justice, equity and fairness; in other ways I’m sure they do. One thing that was interesting was the usage of the telephone. People could use the phone for local or long-distance calls (time was monitored for long-distance). When the phone would ring, I’d answer it to hear who the caller was looking for, then I’d muffle the phone receiver and yell out into the crowd, “Thomas Johnson? Thomas Johnson.” Think if you didn’t have a cell phone; didn’t have a landline (obviously impossible without a house) and if someone wanted to reach you, they tried calling one of the homeless shelters you pass through. How sad. Also, TLH serves as the mailing address for many people. They’d ask me if they got any mail, show me their ID, and I’d check. Again, imagine if you needed an important piece of mail, how easy it would be to get lost. Their lives seem so disorganized and chaotic, like their spinning around without any traction, home base or direction. Very unfortunate, and in many ways, lacking certain principals of human privacy, respect and dignity. I wonder what will happen when serious health problems kick in for those people. Will they go to the hospital and receive extensive treatment and expensive medication? If so, will I still think they’re the ones suffering
from injustice, or will I be paying for their medical bills because they don’t have insurance? Will they remain jobless indefinitely and collect welfare checks? If so, will I still think they’re the ones suffering from injustice, or will I feel like I’m paying taxes for all these people to flock to Minnesota, a state where it takes longer to qualify for a residential fishing license than it does to qualify for welfare? If they do remain jobless, will it be their fault for not educating themselves and learning the proper skills, or will the interviewers discriminate against them and not give them a fair shake? And could I rightfully blame the employers for not hiring them? Would I as a on businessman hire a homeless person? Depends on how they looked. If I don’t think that’s the case, I’m not being honest with myself.

Overall, volunteering at TLH was a very positive experience for me. I hope to continue to volunteer there. It removed some misconceptions I had about what life is like for a homeless person. Some fit the stereotype, many do not. And some are young and look a lot like me. I was impressed by TLH and their services. They provide vital supplies and vital support – physical and emotional value. I gained a tremendous amount of respect for the staff members and regular volunteers at TLH. They possess some great abilities and skills, and compassion. I think it’s wonderful there are people out there who are called to serve the homeless in this capacity and that they use their extraordinary talents so well. I also know I am called to serve others in a different way. It is fabulous that the TLH staff have helped so many and have seen many people “recover” and get jobs and work their way back to owning or renting a home and getting off the street. For me personally, though, I wonder what percentage of the homeless people at this shelter ever “succeed” (granted, there are different measures of success) and make it back to becoming self-sufficient. If permanently involved with this line of work, I would struggle with feeling like the people I serve are never truly going to get back on track. How many homeless
people make it? Or is it “too late” for many of them? I am determined to find my niche in serving others, but I would not have what it takes to work full-time at TLH. I feel the best way for me, personally, to make the biggest impact possible on the homeless situation is not to serve the current homeless, but to work with education programs and reach children and the youth.

In conclusion, I found my volunteering at TLH to be a wonderful experience. I would recommend it to anyone, and I’d also recommend the experiential paper at large. The only thing that could make my experience better would be if I could engage in some dialogue with my classmates after the fact. I’d like to bounce my ideas and observations off my classmates, and perhaps they could challenge me to think in new ways about issues and suggest innovative ideas for how I personally can get involved with issues that are important to me.