Experiential Activity
The Soup Kitchen is one of the services offered through the Salvation Army in Hibbing, MN. It was launched in 2000 by Renee Tomatz who was the director of Hibbing’s Family Investment Center (1). It is operated under Salvation Army whose mission statement is:

“The Salvation Army, an international movement, is an evangelical part of the universal Christian church” (2).

“Its message is based on the Bible. Its ministry is motivated by the love of God. Its mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination” (2).

I volunteered to work in the Soup Kitchen in Hibbing on October 30, 2009. I worked for four hours from 1:30 PM to 5:30 PM. I enjoy contributing my time and skills to good causes that will help individuals in the community. I have volunteered previously with the food shelf in Grand Rapids when I was in high school. I enjoyed putting together food baskets at Christmas time for deserving families. I never got to meet any of the families that the baskets were given to but I heard many compelling stories from others who delivered the baskets or knew the people who received the baskets. The families really appreciated obtaining these food baskets in order to help provide for their families. I learned of the Soup Kitchen in Virginia this past summer when my mother-in-law brought our leftover food from our wedding there. Since I grew up in a different area I was not aware of the programs that were offered through Salvation Army. I was so happy to learn that our leftover food could be put to a good use rather than getting wasted.

After learning about the Soup Kitchen in Virginia I was interested in volunteering. It was important to me to see how my time would benefit others since in my prior volunteer work at the
food shelf I was never able to interact with those receiving the food gifts. I was excited to learn when this class first began that we could have the opportunity to participate in a service activity right away I knew that I wanted to volunteer with a local Soup Kitchen. Through researching the Soup Kitchens in the area for class I learned that Hibbing also had a soup kitchen. It was more difficult to get into a time slot for the Virginia Soup Kitchen then the Hibbing Soup Kitchen so I knew that my help would be more needed in Hibbing that is why I decided to work there.

Through inquiring prior to volunteering I learned that the Hibbing and Virginia Soup Kitchens offer a dinner meal Monday through Friday. At the Hibbing Soup Kitchen volunteers sign up for 4 hour blocks. I was surprised to learn that meals were offered everyday during the week. I think I take for granted having the ability to cook meals and didn’t realize how much a daily meal is needed in our community. I think because I typically do not see homeless people in our community it made me preconceive that there would not be meals offered every day. I guess I didn’t think about the others in the community that may not be homeless but still may not have the ability to get a stable healthy meal. I think it is great that both Hibbing and Virginia have daily meals to help those in the community. From my experience and inquiry I learned that the meals are much appreciated and needed in the local community.

When I arrived I learned that most of the food being served was donated that day. This meant that there was not as much time needed to prep the food because it was already cooked. I then wondered how much my time would actually benefit the organization. Myself and another volunteer (who also was doing his experiential activity for class) were put to work right away making Halloween cookies for dinner. A rigatoni was already prepped and was in the oven for warming. We learned that a tater tot hot dish was to be dropped off ready to go for dinner as well. We also helped slice bread and butter to be served. The whole meal was planned ahead of
time. There were 3 paid personnel also working in the kitchen during our block. We also helped prep the dining room and serving ware before dinner. Though I was skeptical if I would truly be needed that day I was busy the entire time helping prep for dinner, serve and clean-up. The kitchen staff appreciated all of our help and time. I was amazed to know that this was considered a small amount of prep work compared to days when food is not donated.

We were able to learn from those who worked in the kitchen every day. The chef had been working for about 7-8 months in the kitchen. She was in charge of the food, meal and workers in the kitchen. She grew up in a nearby town and had experience in the restaurant business. This meant she had a lot of experience cooking for large groups. She had worked in the Salvation Army Store prior to starting in the kitchen. We learned from her and other workers that food gets donated from churches and other restaurants in the area. We learned that they do not usually find out about the donated food until that day that is going to be given. Most of the time the organization or person donating will call in advance on the day that the food will be dropped off or could be picked up. They will also describe what they would be donating as well. However, sometimes the food gets dropped off without an advance warning. The staff likes to prepare a healthy meal that consists of a vegetable, main course, fruit or fruit juice and a dessert. This is difficult to plan when a part of the meal promised to be dropped off and doesn’t arrive. On the day we volunteered the tater tot hot dish which was to be donated and the chef planned to serve never arrived. This meant that the meal would not have a vegetable to be served with it because there was not enough time. The staff said they like to offer different meals so that it is not the same thing being offered all time. They like to try out a lot of different recipes. I could tell that they put in a lot of effort to make a good healthy meal that the people receiving would enjoy. Since it was so close to Halloween they wanted to serve Halloween cookies to help make it
special for the people that would be eating. We also learned that what does not get donated they purchase for the meals. The staff said that it varies on the number of people that come from twenty to fifty people every night. On the week that we volunteered they had averaged around fifty people all week. The staff also said it is usually the same people that come in to eat. Though it makes it difficult to know how many people to expect so they cook for fifty or more to ensure everyone gets to eat. In addition, the staff explained that everyone who wants a meal gets a meal they just need to sign-in before they eat. We learned from the staff that they usually get new volunteers all the time there are only a small amount of consistent volunteers. They have three paid workers including the chef that works everyday but it varies on the number of volunteers they get in to help. Based on the information from the staff it is not often that they have five people helping in the kitchen. They wished that they had this many people every day to help out. Sometimes church groups come in once a month and take over the kitchen to prepare a meal from the food and supplies that the church donates. The majority of our volunteer time was spent with the staff so we were able to learn a great deal of information from them.

The dinner was served starting at 4:15 PM to 5:15 PM. Since we spent most our time prepping I was excited to for dinner time to come to see the people that would be benefiting. I had obtained some information from the kitchen staff about the people that usually come in to eat otherwise I did not know what to expect. I had thought that there would be a lot of families with children. I learned from the staff that usually there are not many children that come in to eat. It is usually older adults that they serve. There were signs that we put out on the table that stated “no foul language”. I was wondering when I was putting these signs out if people would not be respectful I learned that this was not the case. We learned from our first regular guest that the social security checks would be in the mail that day. This meant that it might be a light service since
people may be eating out since they received their social security check. He was very friendly and eager to tell us about his new job that he just started that day. While we were waiting for service to begin it appeared that it would a very light service of less than twenty people. However, more people arrived later into the service which was great to see. The staff knew everyone that came in by their first name so it was obvious that they came in regularly to eat. Most of the guests were older people. Some came dressed in old distressed clothes while others were dressed in nice clothes. There were some younger people around their late thirties that looked just like me. I would have never guessed they would be regulars at the Soup Kitchen. The majority of the people were so happy and thankful for the food being served to them. They would thank each of us as we placed food onto their plate. A lot of the guests like the Halloween cookies. This brought me back to what one staff person had said about making it special for them. I then understood what she had meant it was not just about providing a meal but a good healthy and special meal. One of the dinner guests was disabled and the staff recognized him right away and brought him a plate. After a certain time they could come up for a second helping. I was surprised to see how many came back up for second helpings. We had a lot of left over cookies I learned that we were not able to let food leave the building. I felt bad telling people who asked that we could not give them cookies in a bag to take home. One lady said how the cookies would help get her through the weekend. This was difficult for me to hear. There was a lot of left over cookies that would be served later. I am guessing that the policy with not letting food leave the kitchen with guests had to do with health reasons if someone gets sick because it was not properly stored or cooked. The people were able to take home bread and vegetables that were on display when they came in. There were also signs by the displayed items. This made me feel better that there were other options for them available.
It was definitely a great experience to volunteer but most importantly to see the people it benefited. I learned more than I thought I would from this experience. I learned that most of the people if you saw them on the street you would have never guessed that they would be regulars at the Soup Kitchen. I realized from our first guest how much I take my employment for granted. Seeing him so proud and grateful for his new job reiterated not to take employment for granted because it does not come easy for everyone. I never realized how many people in our community might depend on a hot meal every day to be provided for them. I wondered what these people did on the weekends when the Soup Kitchen was not open. I often take for granted the ability to provide and be able to cook myself a meal. I also learned that things are not always fair at the Soup Kitchen as well such as not being able to give out meals prepared in the kitchen for people to take home. I learned how much volunteerism is needed and what means to the Soup Kitchen. Overall it was a big realization to me of how much we take for granted in life. A hot meal can make a big difference and bring great joy to those that are not so fortunate.

I did have some misconceptions about the needs of those in our community prior to my experience. I think my misconceptions were formed for what I observed. Not being exposed to those who need assistance I never knew how many people need a hot meal. I just thought of those who were homeless and not those that were disabled, elderly or did not have the necessary resources or ability to get a hot meal. I learned that the Soup Kitchen in Duluth offers breakfast, lunch and dinner before volunteering. I could understand the need with the larger population of people. I think a better awareness of the needs my local community would have helped to change my initial perceptions. My experience has changed the way I look at the organization. Prior to my experience I did not clearly understand what the Salvation Army did for our community. I learned more through researching about the other services that Salvation Army
provides as well. I think it is great what the Salvation Army is doing to help those in our community that need assistance. I would definitely participate with the Soup Kitchen again. It will be difficult due to my day time employment to help out but it would definitely be a good cause to donate a day off to. I would also definitely help out with the other services that the Salvation Army does as well. I love to give back to good causes that help out those who need assistance in our community.

Overall I learned a great deal from my experience volunteering at the Soup Kitchen. I definitely think that I got more out of it than those that I helped that day. I realized how often I take for granted what I have compared to others. Providing someone with the opportunity to work means so much to them and their family it can change their lives. The ability to provide and make meals is something that others are not so fortunate to have especially every day. Small things that I take for granted everyday may mean the world to someone else. You cannot tell by looks the people that would need a hot meal every day. Most are normal looking people just like me that are struggling to provide or do not have the ability to cook a healthy meal. Most importantly I learned how much a healthy meal can bring joy, appreciation and nutrition to those that are not so fortunate. We should not take for granted the small things that we often overlook which can make a world of difference to others in need.

References:
