Experiential Activity

Volunteering at the Damiano Center ‘Soup Kitchen’
The Damiano Center is located in Duluth, Minnesota and has been serving those in need of assistance since 1982. The center comprises of six programs designed to reduce hunger, provide clothing, reduce homelessness, and offer social services. All of these programs are offered free of charge and without discrimination or judgment. The Center’s mission is described as follows:

We welcome people in need and, without judgment, serve them in the least intrusive way possible. We promote respect for all people in our workplace practices and in our services to individuals. We strive to meet the needs of the people we serve by getting to know them personally and responding to their changing needs. We are a good steward of resources. We demonstrate honesty, integrity and accountability in the use of those resources and in all relationships, dealings and transactions. http://www.damianocenter.org/

I volunteered to work in the Damiano Center Soup Kitchen on November 15, 2008. I have thought about volunteering in this capacity for quite some time but simply had not put it into action. This is an activity that I felt I could easily perform by contributing my time and basic cooking skills while helping a large number of people. Writing an experiential paper for this class was the perfect catalyst I needed to engage in such a worthy and necessary cause that truly demonstrates the values within the mission statement described above.

During my inquiry by phone, it was explained that the soup kitchen had a need for volunteers on the weekends, as organizations such as church groups regularly volunteer during weekdays. Volunteers are required to work in five hour shifts; 8:30 am – 1:30 pm or 1:30 pm – 6:30 pm. I was initially surprised that an all or nothing approach was implemented for volunteer hours but after participating, it became clear that anything less than five hours would be a waste of training staff resources and would actually impede food preparation. I chose the
morning shift and as I arrived, a self serve breakfast was being offered and lunch preparation was under way. Volunteers were asked to peel and chop vegetables, fruit, and meat for the noon menu:

- Beef Stew (meat, potatoes, carrots, onions, celery, and peas)
- Salad (lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, and dressing)
- Buttered Rolls
- Cantaloupe and Apples
- Various Desserts

I was impressed to learn that the majority of the food is donated through local grocery stores, restaurants, and a Minnesota correctional farm. The food is fresh and nutritional value is a priority. The needs of patrons are also carefully considered during meal planning as many patrons have dental issues that make chewing hard fruits or vegetables difficult and painful. We were mindful to chop vegetables into painstakingly small pieces. Meal preparation for a large group is quite labor intensive and, even with six other volunteers, required the majority of the time during our volunteer shift.

We began serving lunch at 11:30 a.m. and a line had already formed outside of the dining hall. Admittedly, I had my preconceived notions of what people in need looked like, thanks to television and movie characterizations that couldn’t be more stereotypical or mistaken. After only a few seconds I realized that there was truly no distinction between myself, who was serving food, and those with the plates. These “normal” faces could be anywhere and one truly never knows for certain of the struggles that others face solely by judging appearance alone. I learned that difficult times do not discriminate as all ages, race, and both genders were well represented in the dining room. Senior citizens talked about how
rising prices as compared to their fixed income created a need for assistance. Families with small children were also present and appeared to have their hands full in more ways than one. I quickly realized that not being able to financially survive during these hard economic times could happen to anyone and is more common than most recognize. A few individuals with mental illness and physical disabilities were among those served and it was noted by Loretta, the Kitchen Supervisor, that they are most often long term clients. Even though dining hall behavior rules are posted and surely enforced, I felt that everyone was sincerely grateful and respectful. I did not encounter anyone that exuded a “deserving” attitude or appeared to be taking advantage of the Center’s generosity.

An older, soft spoken, but outgoing gentleman came through the line. This was a face I had seen before and it took me a moment to remember him as Bobby, the father of a junior high classmate. My heart warmed to see someone from my past but quickly saddened to know that he was still struggling financially as his family had so many years ago. Much to my surprise, he seemed quite content and possibly had a more positive outlook on life than I did. He had a smile as he talked about his faith and I was looking at living proof that money truly does not equal happiness. This encounter set me back on my heels and I began to question my perception of the “haves” and the “have-nots”. The line between the two certainly became blurred as it became apparent that he had an inner peace that perhaps I had not. I wondered if some individuals, such as Bobby, really viewed themselves as disadvantaged, especially if they haven’t known any other life.
I also wondered whether or not some would be in this position of need if afforded the same opportunities in life as me. My family may have been close to experiencing a similar hardship needing outside assistance during my childhood that had periods of financial strife due to strikes and lock outs in the grain industry where my father worked. We always somehow had shelter, food, and each other, however, and I feel that a consistent family unit is one of the most important attributes that allow the ability to succeed in school and employment. I am very thankful to have had that stability in my life. I also have always had health and dental insurance which, in my opinion, is imperative to proper mental and physical growth. What chance for success do individuals have if these basic foundations are not available or attainable and how did I become so lucky to have had these important elements in my formative years?

The solution to ending hunger is not an obvious one and it is difficult to identify exactly whose burden it is to bear to ensure the hungry are fed. Does responsibility to provide sustenance lie at the level of an individual, community, government, or a combination of these resources? Individual ability can be limited, government assistance is not all encompassing, and community programs, such as those offered by the Damiano Center, are left to fill in the gaps. I feel that the Damiano Center does just that by implementing methodology to utilize food rescue, donations, grants, and volunteers to ease our local hunger affliction and is working at maximum potential. Unfortunately, the label “soup kitchen” is quite a simplistic term that doesn’t do the incredible effort put forth in providing hundreds of nutritional and reliable meals per week justice.
Overall, I learned that there is a definite need to provide assistance in this capacity and a definite need for volunteers. Hunger is a daily battle that will sadly never be won and the facilities that provide food for those that cannot provide for themselves will be forever necessary. This was a humbling experience that helped me to realize that I am more like the people I served than I am different and we are all only a crisis away from finding ourselves in need. I am fortunate to live the life I have but I lose sight sometimes that material happiness is not true happiness. True happiness can only come from within and I have certainly witnessed this through my volunteer experience. I will undoubtedly volunteer at the Damiano Center again in the future. I have gained such respect for this organization and would like to further contribute to the continuing success of their mission statement.

I would recommend adding the following questions to this exercise if used in future classes:

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Appendix A: Further information about the history of the Damiano Center


The Damiano Center started as an emergency operation to feed people amidst an economic crisis in 1982. It's still going strong, and offers clients a lot more than a free meal now.

By Larry Oakes
Star Tribune Northern Minnesota Correspondent

DULUTH -- The Damiano Center soup kitchen opened in Duluth's Central Hillside neighborhood on March 15, 1982 - bad year in northeastern Minnesota. The taconite mines were in a terrible slump. The local Air Force base and a Jeno's Pizza plant were pulling out. St. Louis County's unemployment rate was close to 15 percent. "This is an emergency operation," Sister Joann Crowley of the Catholic Diocese of Duluth wrote at the time. "It will be closed as soon as it is no longer needed." That time has yet to come. On Friday, the soup kitchen hosted an open house to mark its 20th year of continuous operation, and to thank the community that keeps it going.

All services are free, no questions asked
In two decades Damiano has seen changes in the population it serves, and new reasons for why some people are experiencing hard times. It's also become much more than a place to get a free sandwich. Theses days, unemployment in St. Louis County is less than 6 percent and in Duluth less than 5 percent. Yet Damiano, an ecumenical organization supported by dozens of churches, donors and volunteers, feeds an average of 200 people a day - 15 percent more than in 1983, in a city with a population that is virtually unchanged. "It was very busy back then and it is very busy now," said Jean Gornick, Damiano's executive director for the past 17 years. More jobs are available now, but those jobs don't provide enough hours or pay and benefits, Gornick said. She believes those jobs, welfare-to-work laws, and a shortage of affordable housing in Duluth helped create a population of working poor.

Damiano conducts annual surveys of its patrons. In 1984, more than 80 percent of the kitchen's users reported being out of work. Last month, only 48 percent said they were unemployed. Only about a third of the diners go to the Damiano Center because of some personal affliction, or more than one, has made them destitute, Gornick said. Such afflictions include physical or mental disabilities and illnesses, or addictions.

Noodles and Jell-O
Led by the local Catholic diocese and its bishop at the time, the late Rev. Paul Anderson, a group of churches and citizens opened the soup kitchen in 1982 in the former Sacred Heart Catholic School, an ancient dark-red brick building on a steep hill overlooking downtown Duluth. Meals are served on rows of folding tables in a large, brightly painted, high-ceilinged room in the basement.

Looking for a name that would resonate with people of many faiths, they drew inspiration from
the Church of San Damiano in Assisi, birthplace of Francis, the saint renowned for his work with the poor. Various congregations took turns offering the meals. "You could tell when the Catholic Italians were in charge because they would make noodles," former building coordinator Jim Dwyer said at Friday's gathering. "Then the Lutherans - this is true - would bring buckets of Jell-O."

With help from the Ordean Foundation in Duluth, the center hired its first full-time employee. Eventually, the diocese sold the center its building for a dollar. Now it has 16 employees, including seven who work full-time. Then, as now, tons of surplus or leftover food was donated by bakeries, restaurants and the kitchens of large institutions such as the University of Minnesota Duluth. Steadily, the center grew into something more than a soup kitchen. It added a clothing exchange that last year gave out 40,000 items of donated clothing in a city of only 85,000 people. It began offering advocacy and referrals to people in crisis. Its Clothes That Work program offers good clothing to those who need it.

The Opportunities Cooking program, started in 1998, offers 12 weeks of free training in cooking and food sanitation. Fifty-four students have graduated, with a placement rate of 94 percent. They work in restaurants all over Duluth. One is a manager. Damiano recently joined forces with several other agencies to help "hard to employ" people overcome problems, such as homelessness, addiction or unmedicated illnesses, that have kept them from being productive. Another recent collaboration, Kid's Cafe, provides meals to about 20 kids after school and lunch to about 40 each day in the summer, when they also get instruction in gardening and nutrition.

It's impossible to calculate how many lives have been improved by Damiano these past 20 years. But diners can offer testimonials, like this from Art Kropp, who has come to Damiano for more than a decade. "At one time I came here for nearly every meal," said Kropp, 56. "But I quit drinking 3 1/2 years ago, and I quit smoking." Things got better after that. He now lives on income from a part-time janitorial job and a disability check. He said he's down to two meals a week at Damiano, including one on the day he volunteers in the kitchen, which he has been doing since 1997. "I wanted to at least indirectly earn some of the unearned income I get," he said. "It helps me give something in return. It helps a person feel good about himself."

Appendix B: Information on how to volunteer at the Damiano Soup Kitchen

The Soup Kitchen

Yes, there are hungry and malnourished people living in Duluth, Minnesota! Feeding the hungry was our first mission, and we haven’t stopped serving food since. When someone needs food, the Damiano Center Soup Kitchen is the place people count on for a great meal.

No questions are asked of the people who come for a meal, and everyone is welcome to eat until they are satisfied. In addition we make available day old bakery products for people to take home.

Volunteers assist in the preparation, serving and clean up of all meals under the supervision of a cook and dishwasher. For each shift we need up to 7 volunteers. Each shift lasts approximately 5 hours.

With help and guidance from our staff, volunteers:

1. assist in preparing the meal
2. serve the food
3. clean up after the meal

7 volunteers are needed per 5-hour shift.

Call Maria Greene our volunteer coordinator at 722-8708 x100.

Hours: The Soup kitchen is open Mon, Wed, Fri, Sat, and Sun for the following meals:

Breakfast 8:30 – 9:30
Lunch 11:30 – 1:00
Dinner 5:00 – 6:00 (Sat & Sun only)