My Day at the Damiano Center

Experiential Activity Paper
ACTIVITY

For my Experiential Paper, I chose to volunteer at a soup kitchen. For approximately 5 hours on a Sunday, I cleaned, cut, diced, sliced, and served food at the Damiano Soup Kitchen in Duluth, MN. I chose this activity because I have been very fortunate in my life to never have to utilize a facility like this one. I have always been very curious to see what I would learn about the process, the customers, and myself. Plus, I have always wanted to volunteer at a soup kitchen and I thought this would be a great time to actually do it, instead of procrastinating like I have been doing for the last ten years.

PEOPLE

I was actually a little nervous about my day at the Damiano Center. The people being served were the first thing on my mind prior to going, and what made me most hesitant. I really didn’t know what to expect, especially when it came to the demographics of the people. I had conjured up this vision of a lot of families and a lot of homeless people, but definitely not any acquaintances of mine. I expected my experience would prove that these people “did something” to be in their current situation and that I could never be on the flip side of the coin. I am ashamed to admit this, but before my visit I looked down upon the people that used this facility because they were less fortunate. I imagined that they would be uneducated and conduct themselves in an unruly manner. It was intimidating to have feed these people and try to socialize with them. I believed that the customers would be too different from me and I was worried that I would be extremely uncomfortable around them.

Upon my arrival at the Damiano Center, the people that were going to eat were the furthest things from my mind. It took a lot of slicing, chopping, de-boning, knife sharpening, and patience to get all the food ready before there was any customer action. I found it somewhat
amusing that I was so worried about the people we would serve when we ended up having the least amount of contact with them throughout the day. While chopping and cleaning feverously, I asked the paid workers a lot of questions about the Center and especially about the customers. I heard a mixed bag of explanations for a wide variety of people to come to the Damiano Center. The reasons ranged from physical, mental, and economical hardships to just needing a hot meal. So, once serving time came around I tried to look at everyone I served to see if I could even guess why they were there. Not a single one of them had a stamp on their head telling me all I needed to know. The customers were a very diverse crowd, everything from small children to late seventies and everyone was extremely racially diverse. The dining hall was filled with average people that could easily get lost in a crowd. They were normal people just making the best out of whatever situation they were currently facing.

One of the most interesting things I witnessed was a customer talking to one of the volunteers, and they knew each other by name! The volunteer said to the man, “Last I knew you had a job, what happened?” And the man replied with, “I had a great job and I liked my work, but because the company instilled unrealistic quotas a bunch of people got let go. If you couldn’t meet the quota, you were gone. I went two weeks without meeting it and got fired.” It stunned me to hear this because I think any person in the workforce could see this happening to them. It was a huge eye opener for me because this man was very articulate, dressed quite well, seemed very intelligent, and yet was at the Damiano Center getting a hot meal! His story hit way too close to home and really made me see that, although I have been lucky so far, I could end up in his shoes. He made me remember that I am lucky to have a job and lucky to have all that I have. He made me aware that I am two missed quotas away from needing assistance to get through every day.
JUSTICE, EQUITY, and FAIRNESS

I had a hard time not feeling bad for these people, but I think that it is difficult to determine if a situation is just or fair in only one meeting. Of course, as a human, I don’t ever want to see another person struggling nor in pain, but it is hard to assume the reasons why people are dealt lemons in life. Some people were there because they made poor decisions. Others were there because they were dealt a life altering card like cancer. Does this really make either situation fair? Does any reason really make getting nourishment in a soup kitchen deserving? No. Is it fair that I can have two cars, a house, a dog, food, etc. while these people have next to nothing? Not really, but I have worked hard for what I have and think I deserve nice things. This doesn’t mean that other people haven’t worked hard and don’t deserve nice things, but I think that everyone has a path in life and I got lucky. My Dad always used to tell me, after my brother beat me up and they didn’t see it so he didn’t get punished, “life isn’t fair, get used to it.”

The nice part about living in America is that people that are down and out, like most people at the Damiano Center, have a lot of options to get back on their feet. The US Government gives everyone an opportunity for assistance to get by until a new job or opening arises. There are tons of job placement companies that are willing to place people in a wide variety of jobs. There are places like the Damiano Center that will feed people until they can afford to feed themselves. The world may not be fair, but in the US we work hard to make sure everyone has the life essentials, even in the toughest of times.

PERCEPTIONS

There were plenty of misconceptions realized during my day at the soup kitchen. Things that surprised me included; the people I worked with, eating habits, fashion, and politeness. First, I don’t really know what I was expecting for the people I was going to work with, but I
guess I thought they would all have their different reasons for volunteering. What I wasn’t expecting was that the only reasons the majority of the volunteers were there was because they had to volunteer at the Damiano Center for membership in their Church. In the five hours I worked there were two shifts of Church volunteers because only half a shift was mandatory for them. I know I had a reason to be there too, but I guess it was disappointing to truly see that most people have an underlying motivational factor to volunteer. I had a paper to write and they had a church membership to keep up. I always used to believe that the people that volunteered all the time were truly selfless, incredible, giving people and now I realize that that may not be the case.

Second, I was a little shocked with the eating habits of the customers. Even in their current situation, they were still picky about their food. Some were vegetarian, some didn’t want salad, and some wouldn’t eat beans. My perception was, if they were coming to the Center for food they would and should take what they could get. To the contrary, I found that a lot of people still pick and choose what they want out of the food offered. I don’t know why I thought that they wouldn’t have these very human traits of choice and personal opinion, but for some reason I had put the “soup kitchen people” in a different category.

Fashion was another striking part of the experience. Out of the two or three families that were there, all of the kids were dressed fashionably. If I could have put those kids in with a group of their peers, no one would be able to tell the difference. Most adults were dressed just like I would be if I was on my way to a hockey game and stopped off for a quick bite to eat. I guess culture and movies paint this ugly picture of people that are homeless or go to a soup kitchen. They make us think that they will be dirty, with dirty cloths and straggly hair. In reality, it is much different; they look like the rest of us.
Another characteristic of the people I found great was that every single one of them were thankful to have us there working. They all said please and thank you and some even used the words sir and ma’am. Like I said earlier, I guess I had just assumed that the customers here wouldn’t be sophisticated or well mannered or even polite. Again, I think that this predetermined outlook on soup kitchens is caused by movies and television. Most times people that frequent a soup kitchen are portrayed as scum of the earth and that just isn’t the case.

I do often wonder how many of the people at the Damiano Center are long-term visitors. As I preached above, the US has great programs to get people back in the workforce, but I wonder how many people take advantage of systems like Welfare or the Damiano Center to get by instead of searching for work and increasing their quality of life. One guy that was there seemed to know everyone by name and be very comfortable in his surroundings. I don’t know if this is just another one of my misconceptions, or if there is truly a problem, but I would like to find out some day.

I will definitely visit the Damiano Center again soon to cook up another concoction and learn some more about the less fortunate community in Duluth. I really liked helping and found the work to be very rewarding. I am disappointed in myself that I didn’t work up the guts to do this prior to this paper, but think that I will make amends in the months to come. Thank you Dr. Castleberry for the push of motivation I needed to become a more generous member of society.

**SUMMARY**

My day at the Damiano Center was one of the most eye opening experiences of my life. Most ideas I had thought to be true of the “soup kitchen people” turned out to be wrong or misguided. I learned that people are just people; everyone has their own characteristics and wants even at the most basic level. I have been shown again that not everything you read or
watch on television is the truth. It is unfortunate that eating in a soup kitchen is such a shunned activity in American culture. If I were to ever fall into hard times I hope that facilities like this would take me in and give me the leg up I would need to get going again. This experience made me realize that I should take the time to help those less fortunate because some day it could be me. The biggest gift this experience gave me was to be thankful every day for the things and people I have in my life. It is hard to believe, but everything can be taken from you or lost in an instant.