Safe Haven Shelter

Experiential Activity

MBA 8111 Business, Government and Society
For the experiential activity required for Business, Government and Society, I had the opportunity to volunteer for the Safe Haven Shelter for Battered Women on two occasions. Safe Haven serves women and children who are victims of domestic violence. Their mission is to end domestic violence and provide shelter, advocacy, education and counseling to victims and their children. The shelter was established approximately 30 years ago, can house up to 39 women and children on each night and has been operating at capacity 2009 year-to-date (Safe Haven).

I have been a member of the Board of Directors for the past three years, and am currently the Chair of the Board. I have engaged in various activities over that time. The activities, however, are primarily that of fundraising and strategic planning for the organization. While I consider myself familiar with the organization’s mission, goals and objectives, my experience has been from the outside looking in. My latest involvement gave me the opportunity to “roll up my sleeves” for the first time and actually delve into the shelter’s mission firsthand.

The first opportunity I had to volunteer was at the annual fundraiser in a couple of different capacities. I played a key role in the event as the Chair of the Board. I was a speaker, but also provided assistance in the event execution. I helped prepare for the event by setting up the tables, interacting with staff and shelter volunteers and helping attendees find their tables. I also had the opportunity to meet and thank the “survivors” who spoke that afternoon. In total, I spent two hours setting up for this event and another hour participating in this event.

I volunteered in the kitchen at the Safe Haven cooking lunch for the women and children on a Sunday afternoon. Emily, a volunteer who I had not met before, and I prepared homemade chicken noodle soup for the 30 women and children that were staying at the shelter. We spent approximately four hours preparing, serving and cleaning up after the meal.
Similarities and Differences

There were significant differences between the women I met at the fundraiser compared to those at the shelter. The women that spoke that afternoon were confident, poised and Caucasian. At the surface, they were just like me. They were dressed professionally, they spoke well and, while emotional due to the account of their horrific experiences, they were seemingly secure women. The women at the shelter were timid, skeptical and primarily women of color. I thought I had nothing in common with them beyond being a woman.

The Experience

I found myself feeling nervous uncomfortable at the shelter. At first, I couldn’t wait for the experience to be over. I am typically outgoing and engaging and yet I was at a loss for words. While I didn’t have anything in common with the women, I think the uneasiness simply came from not knowing what to say. I interacted with a couple of the women, but for the most part, they kept to themselves, tending to their children, doing chores or minding their own business. Women made their way in and out of the kitchen, passing by, brushing arms…but didn’t say a word. One woman looked at me, rolled her eyes and walked away. Another woman had two young children and was on the phone almost the entire time I was there. Her young son smiled at me and started to play peek-a-boo with a blanket. When his mother saw the interaction, she grabbed his arm and took him into a different room. Even Emily and I didn’t engage in conversation. We went about the preparation, with very few words to each other. I felt invisible.

One of the women, who referred to herself as the “Grandmother” at the shelter, was essentially the only person who spoke to us the entire time. She was the bitter, talkative sort, questioning who we were, why we were there, and what we were making. “Grandmother” made sure the kids came out for lunch. She also provided insight into the different women’s situations.
It felt a little like gossip. She explained one woman’s situation with a scowl on her face, calling the woman a “lezzy.” I wasn’t sure if she was referring to a lesbian, and I didn’t ask for clarification.

The children impacted me the most at Safe Haven. There were at least ten children under the age of nine, several of them siblings. The eldest girl was clearly the caretaker. There was no mother in sight. The girl ensured her younger siblings were buckled in at the table, fed and cleaned up afterwards. The smallest child was no more than two years old. There was one adolescent boy, the son of another woman, who appeared to be about 14 years old. It made me ponder the complications that must arise with having a young man at a shelter with primarily women and young children.

**The Realization**

After volunteering at the shelter, I felt perplexed. Here, weeks earlier, I had met women who looked and spoke just like me. They were career women, caught up in terrible acts of violence and manipulation. I began wondering whether that was genuine. Were they truly victims, or were they just there to help raise funds for the shelter? The women at the shelter were so different. I found myself questioning whether they were truly victims of domestic violence or if they simply needed shelter. Were they victims of their own circumstance or incessant abuse? Or, in fact, were they just like me too? There was a disconnect.

Guilt began to overwhelm me. I started to realize that I was exhibiting prejudice. Implicit, yes, but prejudice nonetheless. These women had been through horrific, traumatic experiences and were undergoing a transformational process. How could I not understand that, especially with an organization that I’ve volunteered for over three years? I reminded myself that, over the course of their stay at the shelter, women are exposed to many healing and confidence-building
programs, coaching and group therapy. I was witnessing them possibly at their worst (when they enter the shelter) and their best (when they are ready to tell their story) throughout the transformational process. The recognition of my ignorance was embarrassing.

The Justice
After clean up, I went home to my beautiful home and husband. I spoke of my experience, but hadn’t quite come to this realization at the time. Why was I so fortunate? Do I really have any idea how far this fortune extends? Sure, I have worked hard to achieve personal and professional success, or at least what I perceive as success. Who was to say that these women didn’t have the similar achievements, yet had to make the decision to leave it all behind? While I believe I have to work hard to achieve my goals, what about the women who work hard and have it all taken away in the blink of an eye? Was that an issue that Plato considered with the meritarian view of justice? It just doesn’t seem fair. These women have lost their will to trust or confide in anyone, because a person they loved and trusted betrayed them. Not only have they lost their homes and belongings, but they have lost part of themselves in the process. The injustice in that is beyond comprehension.

Lasting Impact
When I decided to volunteer at Safe Haven several years back, I had no idea what impact it would have on my life. I had no inclination that women I knew on a professional level would subtly confide in me that they had been abused by a spouse or boyfriend. While I heard that domestic violence knows no socioeconomic or racial boundaries, I had not really experienced it.

Given the opportunity to volunteer with the women directly at the shelter, rather than at the strategic level, gave me even greater insight into the lives of these women. I am so thankful that this experience came my way. I’m honestly not sure that I would have volunteered inside the
shelter, had it not been for this assignment. I likely would have resigned my Board position in a couple of years thinking I understood the women we serve, that I provided a great service to those women. I would have missed the day-to-day interaction, the looks on the faces of the children I served and the “Thank you,” from the crabby Grandmother. I would have missed the sincerity and authenticity of the women that afternoon. I have decided that a big part of my commitment to the organization, from this point on, will be serving the women. Not only through my time on the Board and through financial commitments, but from inside the shelter. I will no longer only be a volunteer from the outside looking in.