I chose a community service project for my Experiential Activity. I decided this would be the best because I would benefit by gaining an awareness and by getting my assignment done and an organization would benefit because they would have another body and set of hands to help with whatever they do. I help with the annual United Way campaign at work and was browsing their brochure for agencies; I found the number for the local Salvation Army. There are two nearby, both serve a meal Monday through Friday and both take volunteers. I first called the closer but the soonest they were taking volunteers to help in the kitchen was in three weeks. I wanted to get going sooner so I called the further and they were able to get me in that week. Doing this has been on my To-Do list for months before it became a class assignment, but always got neglected and rolled over to the next month. This was the forced motivation I needed. I told the woman taking my name I needed four hours of work so she had me start at 1:30 because the meal wraps up at 5:30. I think volunteers are normally asked to come in at 3:30 because the meals aren’t served until 4:00, but this worked in my favor because I got a closer look at the regular kitchen staff.

The kitchen is run by an attractive blonde, soon to be 25-year-old woman who looks much older than she is. She started her career at the Salvation Army in the retail store next door. She has two kids and a wedding ring and has worked in the restaurant business most of her life, from local bar and grills to summer resorts. She’s tough, but has a warm sincere smile when she shows it. Everyday she has new volunteers to put to work. There are however, a few regulars. A black woman in her 20’s, full of energy and likes to give it away, has been helping there for the past seven months; a man in his late 40’s whose son lives in Pennsylvania; and a crabby elderly woman, an Armistice Day
baby. They all work together well in an almost thankless job. When I arrived I was first tasked to bake cookies; the project was already underway. The dough was made and ready to be rolled and cut into Halloween shapes. Hairnets are the most unattractive accessory a person can wear and the plastic gloves were one size fits none. But what can you expect when you never know who is going to walk through the door and want to dig their hands into the food. One burnt ring finger later and the cookies were baked and ready to be frosted. When that was completed the tables had to be set, the coffee pot turned on, and drinks made. It didn’t take long until we were looking for stuff to do. I guess this is why volunteers aren’t asked to come until 3:30.

The nightly meal is served from 4:00 to 5:15, but people started to trickle in around 3:30. First was a man in his mid-30’s who checked the time on his cell phone. Next was an elderly couple, followed by a Native American man who wasn’t quite mentally there. People would browse the selection of donated day-old bread to take with them, take a seat in the dining hall, and say hello to their “dinner friends.” Apparently the dinner crowd was mostly regulars of about 50 people, but tonight there were only 37. The thought was that because the first of the month fell on a weekend, people would “get their paychecks” on the Friday before which happened to be that night. My first impression when I heard this was a bunch of “welfare cases were blowing my, excuse me, their money downtown in restaurants and bars.” I knew better than to jump to those conclusions, but instinctively did so anyways. I reminded myself that everyone has a story and to not let ignorant close-mindedness influence my thoughts and judgments.
At 4:00 we started serving Rigatoni, leftovers donated by the local Elks lodge. I dished the main course onto teal-blue plastic plates and as a result saw everyone who walked through the line. Most were very polite and thankful, some asked for “not too much,” and some asked for seconds. It quickly became clear that most needed more than the financial assistance I, excuse me, the government provides.

I wanted the full effect. After the crowd went through the line, I went through. I sat at a table so I could eaves drop. I heard an older man in his 40’s tell a younger man in his 20’s about his former CIA security clearance level and as the conversation went on the younger man tell the older in a serious tone how he only works for the fun of it, and how well off he and his family are. If this is true, you couldn’t tell from the looks of him. Through conversations and demeanors, one could see most of the people didn’t choose to come to the Salvation Army because the food was so good; they chose to go there because it was the only way they could get a hot meal, or may be any meal.

I believe it is more than a money thing or an ambition thing. Some people can’t function in a way to better themselves from where they are; they can’t do it mentally, and or in some cases, physically. Maybe some have been born that way, maybe some have aged out of the foster care system and had no where to go, maybe some of it is mental illness, or maybe some of it is self-inflicted through too many parties and “good” times. I don’t know. But I do know many can’t better their current state by themselves. I have grown up in a loving, supportive household. My parents are intelligent people who have no physical or mental illnesses or addictions. I have never been beaten or molested. I have had everything I needed, and most things I have wanted. I have always had a support network under and around me. I have been taught and have had good enough
sense to stay away from drugs and other bad habits. I am fortunate. All of us at one time was somebody's child. For at lease some period, we were all loved and raised by someone. When and how Life leads one person to graduate school and another to the free meal line at the Salvation Army every night is hard for me to comprehend. It leaves me humbled and asking why was I chosen to lead a good life; it leaves me with many questions.

The problem of poverty is more than a money thing or an ambition thing. In some cases this may be true, but I believe it is the vast minority. Through conversations with people unrelated to this activity, I think most people choose to believe this is the case because it is easy, and it is up to the poor person to change their attitude and to start to work for what they have. It puts the responsibility on the people affected to change themselves, not on the people who are not poor. This belief is an easy way out and a way to separate oneself from the world of poverty. This experience has shown me firsthand this isn’t the case. The problem of poverty is huge and far more complex than most people realize. Some people can’t do it. They don’t have the capacity. For them, it is far greater than a money thing or an ambition thing.

This experience has affirmed my belief that those who have the ability to do Good have the responsibility to do so. I have learned it is easy to jump to conclusions, separate yourself because it is more comfortable, and ignore problems if they don’t directly affect you. But if you do, you dishonor the gifts you been given because gifts are meant to be shared. I am scheduled to do this again in mid-November.