

The Disillusioned Volunteer

by Fred J. Dorn

Tommy had anticipated working as a volunteer at Memorial General Hospital for some time. He participated eagerly in all of the training sessions conducted jointly by his high school and the hospital; he frequently read about health careers in the school library; he often spoke to his friends about his plans for working in the hospital.

The experience did not turn out to be what he had expected.

The work at the hospital frightened him. First he had to take the pulse of the man in 107 who had had both wrists operated on. Tommy felt extremely uncomfortable touching the man's foot while he slept. He woke just as Tommy finished his reading and cried out in pain.

Then there was Mrs. Rodele in 109. Her husband had deserted her when she was diagnosed as terminally ill with cancer. Her children, all of whom lived out of state, felt it was too inconvenient to come and visit. Often she would cry out for someone to comfort her. The nurses wavered from hour to hour, first sympathizing with her and then being moved to words of frustration. Wide-eyed, Tommy secretly wished that someone would go in there and soothe her, keep her quiet.

Tommy also was perplexed by the reactions of his partner, Jimmy, who never talked about anything but how great it was to work with the staff to help the patients.

Each time Tommy said something it was with a crack of fear in his voice. All he ever thought about was why someone wasn't around to make all the pain go away.

When he met with his class, he would start to talk about his experiences. As soon as he found himself beginning to

Students who falter in community service assignments often require assistance in dealing with anger, frustration, and a sense of failure.



condemn what he saw, he would pull back, saying that things would get better.

Sometimes he would cry himself to sleep. By the end of the first week, he was looking for excuses not to show up at the hospital. By the end of the third week, it was all he could do to go to his teacher and ask to drop out of the program; he vowed never to step into another hospital.

Tommy is only one example of the situational shock many high school and college students experience in any service-learning program, be it in a hospital or any other setting. Though many of these students choose to drop out, an educator's responsibility does not end there. It is as important to help a student adjust to leaving a program as it is to assist those who stick with it.

Students' No-Win Decisions

Tommy's response to his volunteer experience was not atypical of someone facing a decision in which he had two undesirable choices: Stay with the pro-

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gram or leave. Because both outcomes were not to his liking, he waged a continuous inconclusive battle within himself. For every reason he developed for leaving the program, he found another one just as legitimate for staying.

One could not ask for a better climate to nurture a good case of stress. Without a great deal of coaxing, all the symptoms emerge: anxiety, which Tommy tried to quell by talking; a desire to fight conditions (though he did not possess the resources that he hoped would make things better); and the seesaw struggle of hoping things would get better while believing it was a virtual impossibility. Eventually the fight or flight cycle evolved into his desire to be totally removed from the situation.

After leaving a program, most students will feel a temporary relief. Soon arises a variety of feelings that cause the student to feel a bit agitated and depressed. This agitation usually comes from the realization that the reasons for joining the program still exist and many of these now are not being fulfilled. Tommy, for instance, found the opportunity to belong to a group involved in helping others very appealing. Volunteer work was going to offer him an opportunity to bolster his self-confidence, to gain status, to have a work experience that might lead to a career, and to meet some new and interesting people. In addition, service-learning would give him a chance to find a new outlet and perhaps allow him to have some impact on the world around him. These hopes have been dashed.

The pervasive feeling of total failure subsumes all others for the disillusioned volunteer. Unable to shake the perception of having been less than capable, the student will seldom express any feelings for fear of rejection and soon begins to view other risk-taking opportunities as futile since they, too, will result in failure. This fear of failure will manifest itself in a cyclical pattern of self-reproachment, and the student will withdraw from all activities for some time.

The feeling of being separated from the mainstream of events has become a reality. The student avoids any situation in which others may discuss their success. Often this compounds the feelings of failure and depression. Most likely it is in itself an offshoot of the individual's in-

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ability to assess his or her own performance or feelings in relationship to others.

Anger is involved also. Often anger stems first from one's feelings of being unable to control the situation—in Tommy's case, the pain and suffering of others—and eventually anger at oneself for being unable to accept things as they are and for having given up.

Most students in this position fail to realize that not being interested in doing everything and putting up with something need not be a negative reflection on them. This is one reason an educator needs to emphasize to students that volunteer work is a learning experience.

Realistically speaking, when a series of events such as those experienced by Tommy occur, the student gives little time or consideration to assessing exactly what has happened. If students did, many would realize that they have little past experience to draw on that can help them adjust or cope with the present.

It is easy to see why a pattern emerges where the student is withdrawn, depressed, and basically disinterested in participating in something new. In most instances the educator will need to take the first step to counteract this behavior; generally after students drop out of a service-learning program, they are reluctant to reappear, fearing that the educator is disappointed in them.

Educators' Effective Responses

The responses a service-learning educator makes to a student like Tommy are important, not so much because they will be long lasting or significant in the future but rather because they can be valuable for the moment. A well-placed comment can do wonders for students because it allows them to put their experiences and behavior quickly into perspective.

Any students who decide to drop out of a service-learning program initially will view themselves as failures. Everyone

else is a winner and they are the losers. In reality, making a choice not to continue in a program, a career, or a relationship often takes a great deal of initiative. Trying to make yourself satisfied with less than you expected offers no rewards. Thus, leaving a community service program is no different from quitting a job because you decide that there are better ways to spend your time than being miserable every day. But logic never seems to work very well when a person is feeling out of sorts.

The educator may get a foot in the door more quickly by recounting some personal experience than by using logic. The experience need not be similar in setting but should focus on the fact that the educator didn't function up to self-proclaimed standards or that the setting itself was less than anticipated. Counselors call this technique self-disclosure. Basically it draws educators closer to the student's world and makes them more approachable. It gives students a chance to see that their expectations are unrealistic.

Self-disclosure not only will initiate discussion between the educator and the student but also will develop some semblance of trust. Trust, of course, is the key ingredient in any substantial relationship, and interpersonal relationships may be the overriding reason many students opt to join service-learning programs.

From self-disclosure the educator may begin to focus on expectations. Most students who want to do community service have high expectations. Tommy, of course, hoped to play the role of helper and healer. Though his intentions were admirable, he had failed to consider the fact that health care personnel do not always make the pain go away. This failure to consider possibilities or consequences is the same process that occurs for many of us when it comes to selecting a career. Initially, one believes that certain professions possess specific qualities, and it is only by experience that one learns about a career and personal likes and dislikes.

When dealing with expectations, the emphasis should be on helping students become better acquainted with their own feelings. For instance, as the student speaks, the educator begins to detect feelings behind the words that are used. It

is appropriate to identify these feelings, to make a point of showing the student that the listener does indeed understand the speaker's shock and confusion. The educator strives for empathy. The student then begins to realize that his or her feelings are natural, not unusual, and that it is appropriate to express them.

As time passes, the educator will notice that conversations with the student are easier, not as stilted or filled with periods of silence. Rapport has been established, and perhaps it is time for a comment to someone like Tommy along the lines of, "You know, I can see you doing lots of different things in the future, but I don't suppose you will be working as a nurses' aid to pay your way through medical school."

This attempt at being humorous should break the ice, for humor is effective when anyone is reflecting on or is facing an anxiety-provoking situation. One must be sure, however, that attempts are spontaneous and natural; otherwise they may be interpreted as ridicule.

Encouraging a student to write about personal feelings or experiences—perhaps in a log—may be helpful. In *Therapy in Writing*, Alice Glarden Grand writes: "It may be said that because writing refines cognition, the writer becomes more capable of enjoying subtle experiences. Problem solving on paper becomes salutary as writers learn methods that can be applied to situations of daily living. Fluency in communication may facilitate equivalent gains in self-confidence. At a deeper level, writing enhances awareness; it helps individuals reorganize their inner selves; it contributes to personal integration and self-affirmation. And of course, writing has its cathartic effect; it supplies emotional release." Thus, the student and educator may want to discuss some of these things that have been written.

The educator must judge what degree of assistance to give students, depending upon whether they are high school or college students, dependent or self-reliant. Decisions must be based on experience and judgment, and the realization that a service-learning educator need not take responsibility for anything and everything. When an educator feels uncomfortable, it is usually wise to suggest that the student seek help from a counselor or

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psychologist, and to go as far as setting up an appointment.

Preventive Measures

All organizations would like to be proactive rather than reactive to the problems they encounter. Some can achieve this, while others find it a virtual impossibility. Some of the following ideas may be useful in situations that are not impossible.

The use of peers in training has opened up new avenues for service-learning educators, especially since peers' comments are considered more often than an adult's instructions are. Present or past volunteers may assist in determining the levels of success some new ones are capable of attaining. Additionally, peer trainers can assist in realistically exaggerating the conditions under which most volunteer work occurs. This is a good technique because all too often students have some very naive and idealistic images of what is going to occur. A little exaggeration of difficulties is a sure-fire way of lessening the shock that usually occurs with first-time volunteers.

Emphasizing the task that one is to perform is another way to help novices overcome their initial shock. Focusing on performance during training sessions will assist many in preparing themselves for what is to come.



Emphasize the concept of withdrawal or failure in the program prior to placement. Here, again, peer trainers will be most helpful. Some are sure to have anecdotes about their own experiences. Remember that too often students who wish to do community service perceive themselves as being capable of changing everything around them. This perception often sets the student up for taking full responsibility for anything and everything. Research has shown that if prior to undertaking a task, individuals are given the opportunity to attribute the possibility of failure to the environment they will be placed in, or to imagine how a friend or peer would react to the setting they are about to go into, the stress reaction is less intense should failure occur. If this is to be effective, it must be done prior to the experience.

Keep an eye out for signs of stress. Any marked change in a student's behavior is something the educator should not ignore. Be sure to give students an opportunity to ventilate during the class sessions. If no response occurs initially, emphasize it a bit more with something exaggerated, such as, "You mean everyone here has the ideal setting, the kind of place you'd like to work in for the rest of your life." Comments like this certainly stir things up a bit.

It also may be advantageous to plan alternative courses of action for students who decide to withdraw from their initial assignment. This may be in the form of another less intense assignment in the same agency, or perhaps in a setting that is entirely different from the first one.

The world of community service can be physically and emotionally taxing. Some champion the opportunity to serve others while many begin to regret it. Suffice it to say that some of us like Brussels sprouts while others prefer cauliflower. Service-learning educators play a vital role in helping students determine what is most palatable to them.

Should an educator's attempts to assist a student like Tommy go beyond the educator's level of comfort and responsibility, it is not only expedient but also intelligent to seek assistance from a professional helper. After all, educators, too, can become disillusioned and perceive themselves as failures if they don't call for help when they need it. □