

Student #2

Summary of Project: Goals and Purposes

The idea of my project was to volunteer for two hours every Saturday at the Seattle Children's Hospital therapy pool. During this time, the Inpatient Psychiatric Unit had free swim. I enforced rules, organized activities, and socialized with the patients. The outcome was that I helped these patients ages three to nineteen make a smooth transition back into their daily lives by acting as a peer. This project benefitted the community because I aided in immersing the patients back into society, so that they could reach their full potential.

Reflection #1

As with any new experience, my mind raced as I walked into the Seattle Children's Hospital Therapy Pool. My emotions ranged from fear to excitement as I was briefed on the procedures. When I say briefed, I mean that quite literally. I was told that I would be swimming with the Inpatient Psychiatric Unit, ages three to eighteen. I was never to touch them, and they were never to touch me. I was not allowed to ask why patients were admitted, but if I was told, or a patient opened up to me, I was to be supportive and always positive. Soon, I was in the ninety-four degree, heavily chlorinated water.

At first, I was uncomfortable. Many of the children had been physically harmed, and all were emotionally sensitive. I was so saddened by their struggles, I found being my normal, upbeat self, difficult. Talking with them did not help me very much. Some listed off their names and reason for being there quickly, as if to get this right of passage

out of the way. For example, "John Doe, suicidal" or "Jane Doe, bulimic". Others sat in the corner of the pool, not wanting to be interacted with.

As weeks went by and I got to know the kids, I became more and more comfortable. I saw each person as a peer, not a patient. The only difference between them and me was the struggles we faced. Each week, the kids who normally stayed to themselves would come a little closer and talked a little more. Some even cracked a smile once in awhile. It felt good knowing that I had made someone's day just a little bit but brighter.

One day, a boy about eighteen years old came to the pool. The first thing I noticed was the fresh scars on his neck and wrists. Having seen quite a few physical anomalies over the past weeks, the sight didn't raise a second thought. What did, however, was the boy's behavior. His eyes constantly darted all over the pool and he seemed uneasy. He would occasionally speak softly to himself. Also, I noticed that the IPU attendants paid extra attention to him.

Suddenly, the boy jumped out of the pool, and sprinted for the door dripping wet. He made it to the parking lot, then was caught and brought back to the unit. This event was repeated week after week until just recently. He has not been to the pool for a couple of weeks. This event really opened my eyes. It brought the differences between the patient's lives and my life to the foreground. This time, instead of being saddened, I was inspired. I was inspired to work harder to brighten the days of the patients. I wanted to make the pool a place where everyone felt safe and happy. Not a place they felt trapped. I wanted the pool to be the place they would want to escape to instead of escaping to the unkind world.

The experience that moved me the most is what most people would consider boring. For the past couple of weeks, a boy with very severe anxiety and autism has come to swim. Even though he is about fifteen and tall enough to stand everywhere in the pool, he insists on wearing a life vest. He used to stand with both feet firmly planted on the ground for the whole swim, only about an inch away from the stairs by which he entered. He stood with a white knuckled grip on the wall and an obvious fear could be seen in his eyes through his thick glasses.

I spent hours trying to coax him from the wall with toys and bribes to no avail. I didn't give up though, because by the end of the swim, I could see the fear ease out of his eyes.

After days of waiting, talking basically to myself, and a glued smile on my face, he finally pushed a ball toward me. When I pushed the ball back, I could see a light turn on in his head. He finally let himself relax and have some fun. Though the fear still creeps into his eyes at times, he now holds onto the wall with just one white knuckled hand, and uses the other to gracefully pass the ball to me. He stands about two feet from the entrance now, instead of just a few inches. The pool is no longer silent, because he babbles on about football, his dinner plans, and what he has planned for his next day pass. I listen intently, and try to keep him talking as to take his mind off his anxieties. This may sound like a minor success, if one at all, but to this boy and me, it was huge.

I happily spend the whole swim pushing a ball back and forth with this boy. Sometimes I listen, sometimes I ask questions, and sometimes we play our game in complete silence. Just to know that I have made this boy's life a little less scary and a little more fun is enough to make this project worth while.

Reflection #2

The work that went into the middle of this project was minimal. Basically, I just had to show up and hang out with the kids. “Kids” is definitely the wrong choice of words, however. Some of the patients are older than me. Even more still are larger in size than the two lifeguards and myself. This proved to be quite a problem during one session recently.

I knew from the start that one boy was going to be a problem. He had a few years on me, and about a hundred pounds. He carried himself in a way that gave off arrogance, and walked with a cocky gait. The first thing he did was ignore the supervisor, and go in a restricted area. Though he apologized, it was half hearted. Many of the younger patients thought this was hilarious, and repeated his actions.

After about fifteen minutes of chaos, all of the patients were in the water. Unfortunately, the trouble did not end there. In the middle of the swim, the troublesome boy hopped out of the water and grabbed a basketball. Instead of tossing the ball into the hoop, he threw it with full force at the ceiling. The supervisor asked repeatedly for the behavior to stop, but to no avail. The boy was then told to leave the pool area, and return to the unit. Of course, he was not happy about this. Instead of doing as he was told, he took the basketball and launched it as hard as he could at another patient’s head. Again, the younger patients thought this was amusing and imitated his actions. The pool was utter madness from this point forward.

I was told to take the little girl I was playing with, who couldn’t have been older than four, to the locker room and wait out the confrontation from behind a locked door. Through the vents, I could hear the negotiating. I heard the unit coordinator’s stressed

filled voice reasoning with the out of control boy and his inappropriate responses. His words were absolutely shocking. The words he said were so inappropriate and disrespectful that I cannot repeat them here.

Eventually the pool was silent. I emerged from the locker room with my new little friend to find the relieved staff. The girl was taken back to the unit and it was all over. I was later briefed and trained for incidents where violence breaks out, such as this one. In a nutshell, my job is to take the young ones that aren't involved to safety.

This incident was frightening, but I am very glad it happened. I have learned from this experience and can now move on and grow. Now I am prepared for almost any violent event to occur at the therapy pool.

Reflection #3

The work that went into the end of the project was similar to that of the beginning and middle. I basically had to show up and be myself. One difference however, was my level of confidence and comfort. I found myself speaking up when something went wrong and connecting with the patients quickly and on a deeper level than before.

This past Saturday, I was assigned to a little girl, not older than seven. She had very short, tussled hair and a definite look of urgency on her face. While she waited to get in the water, she tapped her foot nervously and fiddled with the hem of her dress. It was quite clear that she was ready to get in the water and let go of some of this extra energy.

As expected, once she slipped into the soothing ninety-four degree water, her body calmed and a smile grew on her face. Together we threw rubber torpedoes into the

water and dove down after them. We chased those silly things for just about an hour straight. About halfway through, she asked me if I had an extra headband. I said no, but offered her the one holding my mane of unruly hair back. She gladly accepted, and asked if she could keep it. When I said yes, she replied, “I will keep this forever so I can remember how much fun we had today. Thank you for being my friend.” My heart just melted! It felt good knowing that I had made this little girl’s day by simply playing with her and giving her my fifty-cent elastic headband.

When I returned home, my sister was so excited to tell me something, she just about knocked me over. She also volunteers at the hospital, and said on her way out, there was a little girl pounding on the locked Inpatient Psychiatric Unit door screaming, “GET ME OUT OF HERE!” repeatedly at the top of her lungs. I inquired about her appearance and concluded that this was my new little friend.

Though I felt terrible because this little girl was so unhappy in the unit, I felt good because I knew that she had calmed down and enjoyed herself in the pool. This is yet another occasion when I felt that my job had a purpose, and my project was worthwhile.

Reflection #4

This project, without a doubt, taught me the most out of any other I have done. I learned about the world, problem solving, and most of all, about myself. In the beginning of the project, I was timid and shy about enforcing rules. I felt that I was not really a part of the program, but an observer. As the weeks went by, I fell into the routine, and improved immensely. Now, instead of a chore, I look forward to going to the pool, and gladly give up my Saturday afternoons to hang out with my new friends.

There are many outcomes of my project. Every week, as soon as I arrived at the pool, I would survey the crowd to see which kids had come. I smiled when I saw all unfamiliar, fresh faces. This meant that all of the kids that were previously at the pool had been released, and were now back at home. That felt good, because I knew that I helped them get there. I was a small part; they did most of the work. But I was there, waiting for them every Saturday to be a friend. To be someone that they would encounter once they got out of the walls of the unit and back into society.

One thing that I learned about myself was that I could come out of my shell, and enforce rules. This will help me for the rest of my life. In the near future, I will be able to be a better lifeguard at my summer job. Later in life, I will not allow others to walk all over me, and stand up for thoughts and beliefs.

The biggest thing I will take away from this project is what it means to be a citizen. I learned that citizenship means being part of something that is bigger than myself. Citizenship means helping out others when they need you, even if it means making sacrifices. At some point, everyone needs help. If you have been an honorable citizen, and done your part, help is more likely going to find it's way to you when your time of need rolls around.